

Editor's note: This article was originally seen in an earlier edition of our newspaper earlier this year. Therefore, the references to the late Pope Francis have changed to be in the past tense. In light of the recent controversy surrounding what direction the new Pope Leo XIV will take Synodality, putting synods in their proper historical place is more important than ever.

By Phillip Campbell

Pope Francis certainly loved his synods. The year after he ascended the Chair of St. Peter, we saw the 2014 Synod on the Family, which produced *Amoris Laetitia*. The year 2018 saw the eminently forgettable Synod on the Youth, wherein an assemblage of finger-wagging octogenarians told the Church to “get with the times.” The following year was the Synod on the Amazon, the scandal of Pachamama, and the memorable tossing of the idol into the Tiber. Not content with his achievements thus far, Francis next launched the multi-year Synod on Synodality. Lasting from 2021 to 2024, this final synod seems destined to become history's longest meeting about a meeting.

Of course, these general synods did not begin with Pope Francis. Benedict XVI held five synods; John Paul II presided over a whopping thirteen synods during his twenty-seven-year pontificate, some of which gave us memorable documents like *Familiaris Consortio*, the post-synodal exhortation of the 1980 synod. The permanent Papal Synod of Bishops has been a fixture of the Church since 1967, when the first Ordinary Synod of Bishops was summoned, calling for the revision of the 1917 Code of Canon Law. Since 1967, there has been an Ordinary Synod on average every three and a half years—not counting the three Extraordinary Synods held in 1969, 1985, and 2014. In 1959, Melkite Patriarch Maximos IV advocated for a permanent synod of bishops to surround the pope, a position he argued for at Vatican II when, in 1963, he proposed that “a relatively small group of bishops...with rotating membership would always be in session in Rome to assist the pope. They would work with the pope in collegial fashion.”[\[1\]](#) Paul VI would establish the Papal Synod of Bishops in 1965, an institution, he said, which was meant to be a continuation of the work of the Second Vatican Council:

It was also the Ecumenical Council that gave Us the idea of permanently establishing a special Council of bishops, with the aim of providing for a continuance after the Council of the great abundance of benefits that We have been so happy to see flow to the Christian people during the time of the Council as a result of Our close collaboration with the bishops.[\[2\]](#)

Pope Francis is thus not wrong when he characterizes the post-Conciliar Church as “synodal,” for this was the vision of Paul VI in instituting the Synod of Bishops to begin with.

My guess is that most readers are sick and tired of hearing the word *synod*; I know I am. For the last decade, it has been little more than a euphemism for *mischief*. But the modern fad of synodality has little to do with the synods held from time to time throughout Church history, which were of very great benefit to the Church in former days. In this article, we will review the history of synods in the Catholic Church, studying their use in earlier centuries to understand how this valued institution was utilized in better days.

Scope and Terminology

Prior to the Second Vatican Council, there was no permanent synodal body of bishops at the universal level. Pre-conciliar synods were regional affairs convened to address local issues. They filled the administrative space between the individual governance of a particular bishop and the universal governance of the Roman Pontiff.

Tradition recognizes three distinct types of synods: national, provincial, and diocesan, each distinguished by their scope. The scope of a synod's action was relative to the geographical representation of its participants. Let us consider each in turn.

At the highest level is the national synod, a convocation of the metropolitans of a country and all their suffragans, under the presidency of the national primate. This is sometimes called a "plenary" synod, as the national synod represents the plenitude or fullness of a nation's episcopate. A national synod legislates for the entire nation. An example of this is the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore in 1884, which saw fourteen archbishops and sixty-one suffragans convened under the presidency of Archbishop James Gibbons of Baltimore.

Beneath the national synod is the provincial or regional synod, a synod composed of the suffragan bishops of a region convened under the presidency of their metropolitan archbishop. The provincial synod is meant to address issues within an ecclesiastical region. A good example of a provincial synod is the 1860 Council of Cologne, in which bishops of the ecclesiastical province of Cologne gathered under Cardinal Johannes von Geissel, Archbishop of Cologne. The Council of Trent mandated that provincial synods be celebrated every three years, though the Holy See was quite flexible in its enforcement of this decree.[\[3\]](#)

Finally, we have diocesan synods, which are convocations of a diocese's clergy under its bishop. Examples of such are plentiful throughout Church history, but we might note the example of Martin John Spalding, Bishop of Louisville (1850-1864) and later Baltimore (1864-1872). Spalding was one of the American Church's great legislators and held five diocesan synods during his tenure as Bishop of Louisville. The objects of Spalding's synodal

legislation were parochial matters, such as procedures for the publishing of marriage banns, management of parish cemeteries, and the duty of catechetical instruction.^[4] The Council of Trent mandated that diocesan synods be held annually, but the vicissitudes of life in those days made this unrealistic, and most dioceses fell short of the letter of the law. It should also be noted that some authorities do not consider diocesan synods to be true synods, as a synod denotes a deliberative assembly among ecclesiastical peers, but in a diocesan synod, the bishop is the only vote and lawgiver and has no peer among his clergy.

Throughout much of the Church's history, synods at the national and provincial level were summoned by kings or at least in conjunction with them, as the Church often depended upon the secular arm to maintain the good of the Church in a given realm. While kings might occasionally take an active role in synodal judgments (such as the Synod of Whitby, which we shall examine below), they were generally content with exercising their influence indirectly through their favored bishops.

Before we move on, a word about terminology—you may have noticed that several examples of synods given above are called “councils.” Synod comes from the Greek *synodos* (“assembly”), which corresponds to the Latin *concilium*. The words *synod* and *council* are therefore synonymous; Ecumenical Councils, for example, are sometimes referred to as “Sacred Synods.”^[5] While we will employ the word “synod” throughout this essay, know that many of the assemblies referenced are generally called “councils” in common parlance.

How Synods Were Used

The earliest synod could, perhaps, be considered the gathering of Apostles described in Acts 1:12-26 under the presidency of St. Peter, where Matthias was elected to replace Judas. A more notable example in scripture is the Council of Jerusalem mentioned in Acts 15, where the Church decided that Gentile converts would not be required to keep the Mosaic Law. From the very infancy of Christianity, we thus see the precedent of prelates gathering in assembly to hash out matters pertaining to the good of the Church.

It was in the 2nd century that what we might call the synodal structure of these assemblies was formalized: a gathering of bishops from a specified region, deliberating on a specific set of problems, and arriving at a consensus-based solution enacted by the promulgation of norms or standards for ensuring the rule of faith, or “canon” (from the Greek *kanōn*, meaning a rule or a standard).^[6] By the time of the Council of Nicaea (325), we see the word canon being used to denote a specific decrees. Future councils emulated Nicaea in encapsulating their decrees in these disciplinary canons, which were considered binding on the faithful in the regions over which the council had jurisdiction. The Church's

canon law emerged out of the collections of these canons, interpreted and synthesized over centuries.

What sorts of subjects were addressed in synodal canons? Synods could be quite broad in scope, pertaining to a host of matters. Let us consider four of the most common types of synodal convocations from the Church's history.

Matters of Faith

Synods were often convened to pass judgment in matters of faith. This was generally occasioned by the presence of some preacher in the region whose ideas were controversial. The synod was the ecclesiastical body summoned to determine if such novel ideas were heterodox.

An excellent example is the Synod of Vercelli, held in the northern Italian city of the same name in September 1050. The Synod of Vercelli was convened by Pope Leo IX at the request of King Henri I of France to address the teaching of Berengar of Tours. Berengar had taught that Christ's presence in the Eucharist was purely spiritual without any substantial change. The Synod of Vercelli examined Berengar's teaching in light of tradition and condemned his propositions as dangerous novelties. Berengar's doctrines would be condemned by eight separate regional synods between 1054 and his death in 1080.[\[7\]](#)

Another example is the 1382 Synod of Westminster, held in London's Dominican priory under the presidency of William Courtenay, Archbishop of Canterbury. The Synod of Westminster examined the teaching of John Wycliffe, founder of the proto-Protestant Lollard movement. Twenty-four of Wycliffe's theses were examined; ten were condemned. Interestingly, the synod was interrupted by an earthquake that shook the city of London during its meetings. For this reason, it was known as the "Earthquake Synod."[\[8\]](#)



John Wycliffe (1328-1384) was a 14th century heretics that inspired later heretics such as Martin Luther and Jan Hus.

To Establish the Church in a Realm

In the early days of medieval Christendom, synods were often summoned to organize the Church in a newly converted realm. The Christianization of a kingdom was a moment of tremendous import in the local Church, signifying the transition from the irregular conditions of a mission territory to the more regular administration proper to Christian kingdoms. These sorts of synods dealt with matters of Church hierarchy, organization, and discipline.

Examples of these types of synods of plentiful. A notable example is the Spanish Third Council of Toledo, held in 589 upon the conversion of the Visigothic King Reccared I

from Arianism to Catholicism. The conversion of Reccared occasioned the mass conversion of Arians to Catholicism, thrusting the Church into a newly dominant position within the Visigothic kingdom. The canons of the Third Council of Toledo show us a Church attempting to organize itself to deal with its new status. We see canons regulating clerical marriage and cohabitation, the ownership status of church properties, the establishment of ecclesiastical tribunals, the relationship between Christians and Jews, and officiation of Christian funerals.

In France, Christianity became established with the conversion of King Clovis the Frank, around the year 496. In 511, Clovis summoned the First Council of Orleans to establish the role of the Church in Frankish society. In the canons of Orleans we see several decrees attempting to clarify the governmental structure of the Church, specifically pertaining to the role of the bishop. The bishop's authority over his clergy is affirmed, as well as his complete discretion over the distribution of offerings. Importantly, the relationship between abbots and bishops is established, with the canons declaring that the former must be subject to the latter. The boundaries of particular dioceses are also clarified.

Synods to organize a local church might also be held in order to bring them into conformity with broader ecclesiastical norms. The Irish synods of the 12th century are excellent examples of this. The Synods of Cashel (1101) and Ráth Breasail (1111) reformed the organization of the Irish church by establishing the standard diocesan system, doing away with the older abbatial organizational model of the Irish church left over from the early Middle Ages; the 1152 Synod of Kells clarified the number of metropolitans in the island and settled the long disputed issue of primacy by declaring the Archbishop of Armagh the Primate of Ireland. The Second Synod of Cashel—held after the Anglo-Norman conquest in 1172—sought to bring the disciplines of the Irish church in line with those observed in England.

Synod as Ecclesiastical Tribunal

Synods also functioned as ecclesiastical tribunals to examine clergy accused of ecclesiastical delicts and pass judgment upon them. The case of the famed St. Athanasius of Alexandria is a prime example. In 338, the Arian Emperor Constantius II charged Athanasius with usurping his episcopal see and banished him from Alexandria by imperial diktat. In protest, the Church of Alexandria convened a special synod in the year 340 to examine the charges. The synod fathers examined the charges laid before the bishop and judged him innocent of Constantius's accusations.

A synod at Lisieux in 1058 under the papal legate Hermanfrid of Sitten put Mauger,

Archbishop of Rouen, on trial for his loose morals and scandalous debauchery. Mauger was deposed from his see and later, according to legend, made a pact with the devil, after which he went insane.

In medieval England, bishops routinely made tours of their dioceses and convened regular diocesan synods for the purpose of judging and punishing clerical crimes. These synods were so numerous that King Henry II would consider them a threat to royal sovereignty. Similar juridical synods were held regularly in the Diocese of Augsburg. The first, convened in 952 under Otto the Great, condemned simoniacal clerics and others deemed guilty ecclesiastical crimes.

And how could we fail to mention the famous Cadaver Synod of 897 in Rome, when the corpse of Pope Formosus was dug up and put on trial by Pope Stephen VI for allegedly violating canon law and perjuring himself while alive? While the Cadaver Synod is certainly not a model to be emulated, it is nevertheless an example of how synods could be utilized as ecclesiastical tribunals.

Settling Matters of Church and State

Finally, synods were also used to hammer out questions pertaining to the Church's relationship with the secular authorities. The Synod of Orleans in 511 legislated heavily in such matters, eager to delineate the ecclesiastical boundaries over which Frankish royal authority could not trespass. Hence we see canons establishing the right of sanctuary, the immunity of donations from royal taxation, clerical immunity from royal courts, and the conditions under which a man might be ordained. The purpose of these canons was so that the Church might define and insist on its autonomy in matters pertaining to its own governance.

An interesting synod dealing with affairs of the state is the Manila Synod of 1582, convened by Domingo de Salazar, the first Bishop of Manila. The synod was called to address the abuses of the Spanish *encomenderos* (colonial land holders worked by native labor) against the Filipinos. Complaints examined by the synod were legion: *encomenderos* demanding labor and tribute far beyond what the law permitted, robberies of Filipinos by Spanish soldiery, unprovoked attacks on peaceful villages, and Spanish demands for free labor from Filipino peasants. These abuses were roundly condemned, but there were other issues whose resolutions were not so clear: To what extent did the government or *encomenderos* have a right to collect tribute from Filipinos? What was a just amount of tribute to be paid? What were fair wages that Filipinos must be paid by Spaniards? To what extent were Filipinos obliged to work on government projects or those of

the *encomenderos*? There was also the problem of restitution for injustices committed. Who was obliged to pay whom, and to what extent? The nitty-gritty problems slogged through by the Manila synod reveals the great thought the Church gave to issues concerning temporal government.[\[9\]](#)

An Eclectic Institution

It would, however, be incorrect to assume that synods focused only on one set of matters at a time. In fact, many synods dealt with all four categories of issues simultaneously. A single regional synod, for example, might examine the theses of an alleged heretic, pass judgment on corrupt clerics, decree reforms to organize the local church and regulate affairs with the civil authorities all within a single gathering.

There were also synods that defied any easy categorization. One such example is the Synod of Whitby, held in Northumbria, England, at Whitby Abbey in 664 under the auspices of King Oswiu of Northumbria. The Synod of Whitby was summoned to settle what had begun as a monastic dispute that had subsequently become so bitter that the entire Church of Northumbria was polarized. While most Anglo-Saxon kingdoms had been colonized by Benedictine missionaries from the south, owing allegiance to Canterbury, Northumbria had also been evangelized by Irish monks from Iona under St. Aidan, a missionary from the monastic establishment of St. Columba in the Hebrides. Coming from two different traditions, the Benedictine and Irish monks observed different customs, including different monastic tonsures and different liturgies, but most notably, different dates for the celebration of Easter. There were thus two different Christian traditions coexisting within Northumbria. Concord was maintained so long as the saintly Aidan was alive, but the divisions became acrimonious after his death in 651. The divisions even reached the royal family, with King Oswiu and Queen Eanfled observing different Easters, such that while one was celebrating the Resurrection, the other was still fasting for Lent. It was to resolve this ritual dissonance that Oswiu summoned the Synod of Whitby, and, after hearing arguments from the Irish and Benedictine monks for their respective customs, decreed that the Roman calculus would be used in his kingdom.



The Ruins of Whitby Abbey, dissolved by King Henry VIII

Many Catholics today bristle at the word synod, and understandably so. Events like the Synod on Synodality of the heterodox “Synodal Way” of the German church give us a palpable distaste for such spectacles. The Synod on Synodality in particular reveals a self-referential Church obsessed with talking. The muddled, bloated report of the Synod—with the very memorable title “Final Document”—commits the Church to even more such synodal snooze fests. The impression we get is of a Church that is fully aware of the historical efficacy of synods but lacks the vision or wherewithal to employ them effectively. In the hands of wise prelates and monarchs, synods have proven a remarkably eclectic institution for governing the Church. Today, of course, we have no monarchs and of wise prelates even fewer, so the synods of our own time are highly unlikely to be the silver bullet Pope Francis thought they were.

For more articles like this subscribe to our monthly paper!

[**E-Edition**](#)

[**Physical**](#)



Catholic Family NEWS

April 2025

Vol. 32

Issue 4

\$3.50US / \$3.50CDN / \$2.00UK

The Authority of Saint Thomas

Turn to page 5



Decisive Cardinals

Turn to page 9



Motherhood

Turn to page 16



"If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me." (Matthew 16:24)

Understanding the Crusades Part One – The Islamic Aggression

By Phillip Campbell

The Crusades are a topic of perennial debate. Despite ending more than 750 years ago, they still provoke passionate discussion among Catholics and non-Catholics alike. For some, the Crusades are a sign of the vibrancy and strength of medieval Catholicism at the pinnacle of its influence. For others, the Crusades are reprehensible acts of religious violence – a blot on the Church's legacy that Catholics should be ashamed of.

As with other historical controversies, the truth about the Crusades tends to be overshadowed by partisan bickering; people get so invested in what they think the Crusades symbolize that the actual history becomes obscured. They are less interested in learning history and more interested in using the Crusades as a club to

bludgeon home a point. Today we will begin to rectify this with a series of articles on the Crusades, beginning with the backstory of the Crusading movement, which will give important historical context to the events that unfolded during the crusading era.

Too many histories of the Crusades begin with 1095, when the First Crusade was summoned at the Council of Clermont by Pope Urban II. This is an undesirable starting point, as it deprives us of the important background context that leads up to Clermont. Today we will focus on understanding the history of Islamic-Christian relations in the East up to the eve of the First Crusade, which will set the stage for further study of the Crusades proper in future installments.

The essential point we should understand at the outset is that the Crusades were primarily defensive



Templar Knights, by Giuseppe Rava

wars – they were a Christian response to increasing Islamic aggression in the Middle East. They were also an act of Christian solidarity, witnessing Latin speaking

Christians of the West aiding Greek speaking Christians of the East despite the tragic schism that had split the two churches back in 1054. We should keep these points

in mind when reviewing the history of this period.

The religion of Islam traces its origin to the year 610

Continued on page 7

The Modern Crusade: The Church vs Organized Naturalism

Brian M. McCall

Catholic Family News held its first in person conference since 2019 on March 1 and 2 in Florida. The theme was Christ's Program for Peace v. Satan's Plan for Disorder according to the writings of Father Dennis Fahey. About 100 people attended from around the country. Traditional Latin Mass was offered each morning by our two invited priest speakers, Father Michael McMahon, SSPX and

Father Matthew, OSB. We had a public recitation of the Rosary every day after lunch. For those who purchased the meals, there was a great opportunity to visit with the speakers and to get to know new Catholics from around the country.

Saturday opened with Mass being offered by Father McMahon. We knew the devil was not happy at the goal of this conference to expose his plans. During the Post Communion the hotel's

speakers started blaring pop music. As a few men scrambled to find a hotel worker to shut it down, I realized all the devil could do is lash out with little annoyances and this mean our goal was worthwhile.

The Six Point Plan

After breakfast the conferences opened with an introduction of the overall theme and the six points of Christ's Plan for order, according to Father Fahey:

- The Church is supernatural and supernatural. All people must acknowledge the nature of Christ's Church as the only means of salvation.
- Nations are obligated to recognize Christ's Church and that the Church has the power to intervene in temporal



affairs as guardian of the divine and natural law.

• The Christian family

Continued on page 8



[1] John W. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA., 2010), 191

[2] Paul VI, *Apostolica sollicitudo*, Introduction

[3] Council of Trent, Session XXIV, Chap. II

[4] David Spalding, "Martin John Spalding, Legislator," *Records of the American Catholic Historical Society of Philadelphia*, Vol. 75, No. 3 (September 1964), 136

[5] William Fanning, "Synod," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 14. (Robert Appleton Co: New York, 1912)

[6] First attested in St. Irenaeus's *Against the Heresies*, Book I, Chap. 1, where the saintly Bishop of Lyons speaks of the "rule (*kanōn*) of truth," referring to the Christian faith in general.

[7] See Phillip Campbell, "The Importance of Berengar," *Unam Sanctam Catholicam*, January 23, 2013. Available online at <http://www.unamsanctamcatholicam.com/2022/04/18/the-importance-of-berengar>

[8] "Earthquake Synod." In Cross, F. L. and E. A. Livingstone, eds. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), 437

[9] See Phillip Campbell, "The Manila Synod of 1582," *Unam Sanctam Catholicam*, June 20, 2022. Available online at <http://unamsanctamcatholicam.com/the-manila-synod-of-1582>