

SYNODAL ECCLESIOLOGY AND PARTICIPATION: REVISITING THE COUNCIL OF BASEL IN POPE FRANCIS'S CALL FOR A SYNOD ON SYNODALITY

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Abstract

In response to calls for reforms within the Church and a desire for greater participation, Pope Francis has embraced synodality as the preferred approach. He has elevated the concept of synodality to a new level of ecclesiological significance. The 16th Ordinary Assembly of the Synods of Bishops was convened with the broad theme: "From a synodal Church: The overarching themes of the synod are "Communion, Participation and Mission." The synod, which was initially scheduled to conclude between 2021 and 2024, is now expected to conclude in 2025. This synodal ecclesiology posits a vision of the Church as a collective endeavour in which the discernment of the Holy Spirit is a shared process. The Council of Basel, convened in 1431 during the late medieval period, was driven by the imperative for ecclesiastical reform. The strong conciliarist ecclesiology positioned the Council as superior to all other institutions and individuals within the Church, including the Pope. The desire of the late mediaeval Church for unity between the Eastern and Western Churches led the Basel Fathers to pursue a negotiating agenda with the Greeks. The outcome of this negotiation had a significant and enduring effect on the reform efforts and the future of conciliarism within the Church. The Basel Fathers were unable to reach a resolution with the Greeks due to their discord with the Pope despite being equipped with an ecclesiological model and an inclusive participation concept. The Pope seized the opportunity to organise a union council with the Greeks, which effectively diminished the influence of the conciliarists. This study aims to explore the progression of conciliarism, its evolution, and its impact on the late mediaeval Church. It will also investigate the circumstances that led to its downfall and emphasise the accomplishments of the Council. Ultimately, it seeks to highlight the significant relevance of Basel to the current synodal Church movement and the importance of drawing lessons from this Council.

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1. Introduction

The Catholic Church is navigating through a complex terrain of societal changes. There are clamours for greater participation and dialogue within the Church. For his part, Pope Francis appears committed to inclusivity and reforms. He has elevated the concept of synodality to the status of what now seems to be a new ecclesiological concept. He convoked the 16th Ordinary Assembly of the Synods of Bishops and tagged it with this broad theme: “From a synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission.” The synod was originally meant to last from 2021 to 2024, but it is now expected to round off in 2025. It was hoped at its inception that the synod would draw from the rich history and tradition of synodality of the Church for inspiration to usher in a synodal model of church governance that favours greater communion, participation, and mission.

The Council of Basel holds some significance in understanding the principles of synodality. It was convened in 1431 amidst ecclesiastical and political unrest. It came to be regarded as the symbol of conciliarist thought due to its emphasis on the collective discernment by bishops, clergy, and laity in matters of doctrine and governance. The conciliarists expressed readiness for the proper reform of the Church as directed by the previous Council. It is regrettable that the anticipated reform, which could have benefitted the Church and facilitated the needed union between the East and West, did not materialise due to the ecclesiological model of the conciliarist, which allocated authority to a council above that of the Pope. This resulted in a lack of unity between the two.

Furthermore, the conciliarist concept of participation diverged significantly from the Church's idea of Council. That notwithstanding, the Council of Basel was not altogether a failure. Its achievements provided a road map for subsequent councils.

The objective of this study is to reassess the Council of Basel and its Conciliarist ideas, with particular attention paid to the negotiation of the Council of Union between the East and West. The success and failure of this negotiation were instrumental to the gradual decline of conciliarism, thereby demonstrating the extent to which the ecclesiological model and the mode of participation of the conciliarist can be taken. What practical lessons can Pope Francis' current quest for a synodal church learn from the Basel ecclesiological and participation model? The work will investigate the origins of conciliarism, its principles, its evolution, and its relationship to the Council of Basel. The study will examine the enduring

impact of the Council of Basel on the development of a synodal Church. The analysis will illuminate the ecclesiastical and political contexts that shaped its achievements and limitations.

2. Conciliarism: Its origin and meaning

Church historians tend to agree that the Great Western Schism during the late Medieval period was one of the most significant challenges that confronted the medieval Church. The schism resulted in various factions within the Church. It led to the elections of three rival popes who vied for the chair of St. Peter in Rome. Each of the rival popes had their followers and supporters.² Several attempts to resolve the impasse were abortive until the convocation of the Council of Constance in 1414. At the gathering in Constance, the council fathers introduced an innovative solution through a decree called *Haec Sancta*. The *Haec Santa* placed the Council above all in the Church. It decreed thus:

This holy Council of Constance declares that lawfully coming together in the Holy Spirit, being a general council and representing the Catholic Church, it holds authority directly from Christ, which authority everyone of whatever status or dignity, even the papal, is bound to obey in those matters concerning the faith, the ending of the schism, and the reformation of the Church in head and body.³

Haec Santa "...is considered the basic document of late medieval conciliarism, and more than any other Council decree, it has shaped the

²The Great Western Schism occurred in the Western Church from 1378 to 1417, resulting from political manoeuvring, corruption, and the relocation of the papacy to Avignon. The scandalous division led to three antipopes, Benedict XIII (1394-1417), Gregory XII (1406-1415), and John XXIII (1410-1415), all vying for legitimacy as the rightful Pope towards the end of the schism. See, Lina Murr Nehme, *1453 Fall of Constantinople: Muhammad II imposes the Orthodox Schism*, Translated by Alfred Murr and Michael Nehme (Paris: Francois-Xavier de Guibert, 2003), 85. Joseph F. Kelly, *The Ecumenical Councils of the Catholic Church: A History* (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2009), 106-107.

³Norman P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, Vol. 1 (London: Sheed & Ward, 1990), 408-409. Brian Tierney, *Foundations of the Conciliar Theory* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1955), xxii. See also Thomas Prögl commentary on *Haec Sancta*, Thomas Prögl, „Kontrolliertes Papsttum: Zur Rollenverteilung von Papst und Konzil in den konziliaristischen Debatten des 15. Jahrhunderts“ in: Stefan Weinfurter, Volker Leppin, Christoph Stohm, Hubert Wolf, Alfried Wiczorek eds., *Die Päpste und ihr Amt zwischen Einheit und Vielheit der Kirche: Theologische Fragen in historischer Perspektive*, (Tübingen: Schnell & Steiner, 2017), Vol. 1, 150-153.

ecclesiology of the last 600 years." This decree, formulated in the wake of the flight of Antipope John XXIII, sought to address a perceived void that challenged the legitimacy of the Council Fathers' assembly. The decree was met with considerable approval from the Fathers, as it avoided a clear definition of conciliar authority and employed ambiguous language that was acceptable to both those who supported the 'papalists' and 'conciliarists.'⁴ Prügl argued that the decree was intended for "papalists" to emphasise the exceptional situation of the schism, which gave rise to legitimate doubts as to whether the Church had a real head at all in that confused time or whether it should rather be considered *Sede vacante*. "Therefore, all the disciplinary measures listed in *Haec Sancta* were not directed against the real Pope, but at most against a pretender." The "conciliarists", on the other hand, saw in *Haec sancta* the fundamental privileges of a general council.⁵ Because of its desires to appeal to everyone, *Haec Sancta* as a decree carried some cloud of uncertainty regarding its nature and intent.⁶ Brian Tierney argued right when he suggested that its lack of clarity can be attributed to the schism crisis during which it was enacted.⁷ The decree left several questions unresolved. For instance, was *Haec Sancta* intended to act as a guide for the Church in times of crisis? If it were to become the standard for church governance, what would be the Pope's role in ecumenical councils? Did the decree envision a Church where members and the Pope could come together in general councils, or did it establish a system in which members' decisions superseded those of the Pope?⁸ The opaque language of *Haec Sancta* leaves us uncertain how much its creators understood its implications and impacts on the Church, particularly the place and role of the Pope.

To ensure the enforcement of the decree, the Council deemed it necessary to convene regularly. Consequently, the Council of Constance promulgated another significant decree, the *Frequens*, which provided that general councils were to convene on a regular basis.

By a perpetual edict, the sacred general Council of Constance, being lawfully assembled in the Holy Spirit for the praise of almighty God and for the glory and honour of the universal Church and for the salvation of the whole Christian people, decrees and ordains that

⁴Prügl, *Kontrolliertes Papsttum*, 150

⁵Prügl, *Kontrolliertes Papsttum*, 150.

⁶Thomas Prügl, "Synodality And The Conciliar Tradition Of The Church: Mediaeval And Early Modern Experiences Of Synodality," In *The Thomist*, 87 (2023), 204

⁷Tierney, xxiii

⁸Tierney, xxiii-xxv.

henceforth general councils shall be held in the following manner. The first Council shall be held five years after the close of this present Council; the second, seven years after that; and thereafter forever, one shall be held every ten years, precisely in such places as the Pope shall designate, with the advice and consent of the Council or the cardinals.⁹

In his commentary on the decree, Prügl argues that the conciliar fathers saw a predictable and reliable council as the best solution to the various crises and problems. In addition to its practical role, the decree aimed to emphasise the authority of the Council and its function as a body responsible for the supervision of the papacy. For Prügl, "the decree suggested a continuous presence of the Council, advocating regular and manageable intervals between meetings to ensure continuous oversight."¹⁰ These two decrees laid the canonical and theological foundations of late medieval conciliarism.

The concept of 'Conciliarism' or the Conciliar Theory can be essentially defined as the idea that a general council holds authority over all in the Church, including the Pope. Scholars first delved into this notion in the early thirteenth century as they pondered the course of action if a pope were to stray into heresy. A faction of these scholars concluded that the Pope does not wield absolute dominion over the Church as he is not superior to it.¹¹ Conciliarism arose from the belief that ultimate authority in any society resides with its entire membership. According to this view, an ecumenical council represents the highest form of governance in the Church, as it embodies the whole body of Christ and operates under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Conciliarists sought to reform and restore the papacy as a unifying force within Christianity. While they acknowledged the divine origin of papal authority, they believed that, as a perfect society, the Church

⁹ Among their other successful decree was the Decree of *Frequens*, requiring the frequent convening of general councils. After Constance, conciliarist ideas began circulating in the West. In obedience to this decree, Martin V called the first of such councils and was held at Pavia in 1423. It was moved to Siena because of the plague outbreak and then dissolved in March 1424 due to low attendance. See Tanner, ed., *Decrees*, 422. Joseph Gill, *The Council of Florence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), 45-46. See also Tierney, xxii.

¹⁰ Prügl, *Kontrolliertes Papsttum*, 145.

¹¹ The idea that ultimate authority in any society must rest with the whole body of its members was a fundamental element in the thought of other well-known publicists such as John of Paris and William of Ockham. See Brian Tierney, "A Conciliar Theory of the Thirteenth Century" *The Catholic Historical Review*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (Jan., 1951), 415.

must have mechanisms for addressing its internal issues, even if that meant taking action against the Pope. In the eyes of Conciliarists, the Pope is merely one member of the universal Church and ultimately accountable to a general council representing the entire community of believers.¹² In a certain manner, conciliarism emerged as a solution to the Western schism and the restoration of Church unity. It was considered the best theological or canonical solution to the problems of the three popes and Church governance. The councils of Pisa, Constance, and Basel were established as constitutional mechanisms in furtherance of conciliarism. The aim was to create a more stable and reliable form of Church governance and to transform papal monarchy into a conciliar aristocracy. It was believed that this arrangement would ensure a collaborative and inclusive approach to Church leadership. Conciliarism is based on the idea that ecumenical councils, gatherings of bishops, clergy, and sometimes laity represent the highest authority in the Church.¹³ This contrasts with papal supremacy, which asserts that the Pope has ultimate authority in the Church. The theology of conciliarism is rooted in the belief that the Church is a communion of believers guided by the Holy Spirit. Conciliarists argue that ecumenical councils represent the fullest expression of this communal discernment. Therefore, decisions regarding doctrine and governance should be made collectively, with input from a broader church community.¹⁴

3. The Council of Basel and Conciliarism

The Council of Basel, which was already announced at the Council of Siena, was called by Pope Martin V in 1431 in adherence to the decree, *Frequens*, promulgated by the Council of Constance.¹⁵ Just like the Council of Constance, agitation for reforms came firstly from university professors who argued that church authority prevented reforms, especially clerical reforms.¹⁶ Cardinal Julian Caeradini was made a cardinal by Eugene IV, who entrusted him with the task of

¹² Tierney, "A Conciliar, 415-416.

¹³ Thomas Prögl, "Dissidence and Renewal: Developments in Late Medieval Ecclesiology", in: *Bulletin du centre d'études médiévales d'Auxerre | BUCEMA Hors-série n°7* (2013) Les nouveaux horizons de l'ecclésiologie : du discours clérical à la science du social, 3.

¹⁴ Thomas Prögl, "Geschäftsordnung und Theologie: Synodale Verfahrensweisen als Ausdruck ekklesiologischer Positionierung auf dem Basler Konzil," in Bernward Schmidt and Hubert Wolf, eds., *Ekklesiologische Alternativen? Monarchischer Papat und Formen kollegialer Kirchenleitung, 15.-20. Jahrhundert*, (Münster: Rhema, 2013), 77.

¹⁵ Pope Martin V died at the high point of the Conciliarists movement. He died and left many problems unresolved. The conciliarists were still waxing strong and enjoying the victory they won at the Council of Constance. Pope Martin announced the date of another Council in Basel 1431 before the dissolution of the Council. Cf Gill, *The Council*, 45-46.

¹⁶ Prögl, "Synodality, 206.

presiding over the Council. The Council of Basel proceeded with strong conciliarist advocacy that brought its leaders into a bitter conflict with Eugene IV. The Pope made efforts to have the Council dissolved in December of that year but without success. He cited reasons other than political factors in calling for the dissolution of the Council. One of such reasons included Basel's hostility, which might have impeded the possibility of reaching a union with the Greeks. Pope Eugene claimed that such difficulties warranted the need for the quick dissolution of the Council.¹⁷ The participants at Basel opposed the idea of dissolving the Council on the conviction that their authority at the Council came directly from Christ. It was a battle for supremacy.¹⁸ The conciliarists at Basel even summoned the Pope and threatened him with excommunication should he go against their demands.¹⁹ The conflict came to a head in the attempts at reforms of abuses in the Church and clerical reforms as well as in the negotiation for a possible union with the Greeks.²⁰

A significant event that illustrates the challenges of conciliarists and papal authority in the governance of the Church occurred at the Council of Basel during the negotiations between the Eastern and Western Churches for a possible union council to end the long-standing division in the Church.²¹ A brief study of these events will provide insight into how their ecclesiological perspectives and participation helped the conciliarists and papal authority and their possible future.

Thomas Prügl has shed light on the complex negotiations between the Greeks, the Pope, and the conciliarists at Basel. According to Prügl, the Greek envoys Demetrios Metochilis, Abbot Isidore of Kyiv, and John Dishypates arrived

¹⁷ Gill, *The Council*, 47.

¹⁸ Gill, *The Council*, 48.

¹⁹ Gill, *The Council* 54.

²⁰ Gill, *The Council*, 54.

²¹ The Council of Ferrara-Florence in 1439 aimed to reconcile the long-standing conflict between East and West and was negotiated at the Council of Basel. In the 15th century, the Western Church faced challenges, including the Great Western Schism, the Hundred Years' War, frequent riots and power struggles between secular Western princes. On the eastern front, the threat of the Turks loomed large as they conquered neighbouring cities and sought to invade Constantinople. Faced with this dire situation, Emperor John VIII of the Byzantine Empire concluded that seeking help from the Western world to save Constantinople was necessary. The Council of Union became a necessity for the Byzantines and a desire for Rome, given the precarious state of both East and West at the time. See, Charalambos Dendrino, "Reflection of the failure of the Union of Florence," in: *Annuario Historiae Conciliorum*, 2007; Vol. 39, 135. Donald M. Nicol, *The last centuries of Byzantium 1261-1453* (Second Edition) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 350-351. Gill, *The Council*, 13.

in Basel in July 1434 because of the correspondence between the conciliar fathers and the Greeks.²² The “*fundamentum*” of the Greeks was that “the Union must come about through an ecumenical council.”²³ As far as the Greeks were concerned, an ecumenical council must be participatory, with the leaders of the two churches involved. This participation was necessary to avoid a repeat of the failure of the Second Council of Lyon (1274), which did not have a true representation of the Eastern Church.²⁴ The presence of the two Churches, represented by their leaders, could make conciliar decree binding.²⁵ The fathers of Basel deliberated with the Greeks about their proposal for a location. The Eastern Emperor John VIII Palaiologos proposed funding the Council if it were to be held in Constantinople. On the contrary, “if the Council was to take place in the West, however, the Greeks only considered a few places: most likely a town in Calabria or one other Italian town like Ancona, Bologna, or Milan. Outside Italy, the Greeks could only imagine Buda, Vienna and, if necessary, a city in Savoy.”²⁶ This first agreement was reached in the 19th session on September 7th, 1434, and formalised in the decree *Sicut Pia Mater*.²⁷ This decree would be the source of problems in the negotiations between the conciliar fathers in Basel and the Byzantines.²⁸

The primary source of misunderstanding between the conciliarists and the Greeks came from their different ecclesiological understanding. The Greeks believed that the Latin Church was still part of the old division of the Church into a Pentarchy, of which the Pope was the leader of the Western Patriarchate. According to this arrangement, the Pope was the leader of the Western delegates and, as such, he had the authority to ratify every decree from the West, including the bull *Sicut Pia Mater*. The conciliarists had a different ecclesiological understanding of the elevation of a council over and above the Pope. For the conciliarists, their gathering was in the name of Christ, and their decisions were sacrosanct, needing no papal approval. In the introduction to *Sicut Pia Mater*, the conciliarists likened the Greeks to the Bohemian supporters of Jan Hus [1370-1414]. They expressed the Council's disposition to bring both back to the fold.²⁹

²² Thomas Prügl, “Ökumenisches Konzil oder Sacrasancta Synodus? Zur Discussion um die Ökumenizität des Basler Konzil, in Johannes Grohe, ed., *Annuario Historiae Conciliorum*, Vol. 40 (2008), 147. Confer also Gill, *The Council* 54-55.

²³ Prügl, “Ökumenisches Konzil, 147.

²⁴ Prügl, “Ökumenisches Konzil, 147.

²⁵ Prügl, “Ökumenisches Konzil, 147.

²⁶ Gill, *The Council*, 55.

²⁷ Gill, *The Council*, 56. Prügl, “Ökumenisches Konzil, 148.

²⁸ Prügl, “Ökumenisches Konzil, 149.

²⁹ Prügl, “Ökumenisches Konzil, 150.

As for the Greeks, this disposition was disrespectful and a scandalous prejudice for the Greek Church.³⁰ The Greeks did not sufficiently understand this conciliarist disposition, which gradually became characteristic of the Church in the West. The Greeks recognised the Pope as the legitimate head of the Western Church. This recognition was beyond compromise. The conciliarists, in insisting on the supremacy of the Council over the Pope, resolved not to submit the *Sicut Pia Mater* for any ratification by the Pope.

Equally important to the Greeks were the ideas of participation and representation, which were conceived differently by both them and the conciliarists at Basel.³¹ For the Greeks, the validity of a council rested upon the participation of the leaders of the different Patriarchates, either present or through their representatives. In sharp contrast, the fathers in Basel “were not interested in giving the synod a predominantly episcopal character” while at the same time “retaining the right of participation of the middle clergy....”³² The Greek idea of a council, which is like the early church model of councils, was oblivious to the many reforms that have taken place in the Western Church. Naturally, the Greek idea was hard for the conciliarists to accept.³³

³⁰Prügl, “Ökumenisches Konzil, 150.

³¹There have been some debates about the Council of Basel and its mode of participation. While some scholars, such as Walter Ullmann, contend that the Council excluded laypeople from active involvement, “the lower clergy and educated laymen were, so to speak, knocking at the gate, and were refused entry.” Scholars like Prügl, Jürgen Miethke, and a few others argued that lay University professors played a significant role in advocating for reforms, participated fully in the Council, and voted in the Council. Interestingly, as Alexander Russell posited, even critics of the Council, such as Juan de Torquemada, claimed that individuals of lower societal status, such as tavern keepers and domestic servants, were present and held the same voting rights as bishops and cardinals. See, Walter Ullmann, *A History of Political Thought: The Middle Ages* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1965), 224. Alexander Russell, “Popular Authority In Conciliar And Canonistic Thought: The Case Of Elections” in: *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, 2, 2014, 322. Jürgen Miethke, “Die Konzilien als Forum der öffentlichen Meinung im 15. Jahrhundert”, *Deutsches Archiv für Erforschung des Mittelalters*, 37 (1981), Werner Krämer, *Konsens und Rezeption: Verfassungsprinzipien der Kirche im Basler Konziliarismus* (Münster, Aschendorff, 1980); Thomas Prügl, *Die Ekklesiologie Heinrich Kalteisens OP in der Auseinandersetzung mit dem Basler Konziliarismus* (Paderborn, F. Schönigh, 1995). Prügl, “Synodality, 206.

³²Prügl, “Ökumenisches Konzil, 151.

³³Prügl, “Ökumenisches Konzil, 151. John Meyendorff also argued that the Greek's lack of knowledge of the Western Church's many reforms put them at a disadvantage during the negotiation for the Council and their debate at the Council. John Meyendorff, “Was there an Encounter Between East and West” in Alberigo, (ed.), *Christian Unity*, 162.

The conciliarists were undercut by the parallel negotiations between Pope Eugene IV and the Greeks, which were conducted by the papal diplomat Cristoforo Garatoni.³⁴ He was given a free hand by the Pope to negotiate with the Greeks. To outdo the conciliarists, Garatoni appeared willing to accept most of the demands of the Greeks. In the presentation of his negotiation with the Greeks, Garatoni confused the fathers in Basel with the Greek conceptions of a synod and a general synod alongside their notion of participation. He appeared less bothered by the fact that “an ecumenical council on the one hand and a synod limited to the Eastern Churches on the other seemed to be mutually exclusive.”³⁵ The proposition that the union of the two churches could be realised at an ecumenical council did not accommodate the conciliarists' ecclesiology since it undermined the very principles of conciliarism. The conciliarists, in trying to analyse Garatoni's thoughts, became divided among themselves. One group accepted his proposal; the second group rejected it outrightly, while the third advocated for a middle ground to avoid a scandal. This middle way was to allow the Pope to hold a synod with the Greeks. At the same time, the Conciliar fathers continued their Council in Basel but with the condition that whatever was discussed should be reported to the Conciliarists, who still believed they had the power to rectify whatever decree that would come from the Pope's synod with the Greeks. Some influential fathers represented by Cardinal Cesarini were sceptical about the so-called middle ground. They argued that any agreement with the Greeks was practically impossible in consideration of the Greek understanding of an ecumenical council. Cesarini understood a *synodus universalis* to be a real ecumenical council that brings together representatives of the Eastern and Western Churches. He cited the rights of the Apostolic See at such councils since the the first Council of Nicaea established the custom that a *concilium generale* could not be held without the Pope.³⁶

The resultant effect of all these was increasing polarisation among the conciliarists. The division produced two opposing camps, for and against the Pope. It was difficult to reach a union with the Greeks at the Council of Basel. It meant that a change of location was necessary. Garatoni and the papal envoys took advantage of the polarisation. They convinced the Greeks that the Pope and the Council had agreed on a change of place in fulfilment of the provision of *Sicut Pia Mater*. According to Joseph Gill, given the power play in Basel, the Pope, for his part, was “determined to remain as the supreme authority in the Church.”. At

³⁴Prügl, “Ökumenisches Konzil, 154.

³⁵Prügl, “Ökumenisches Konzil, 155.

³⁶Prügl, “Ökumenisches Konzil, 159.

the same time, the conciliarists "were afraid to leave their seat of Basel for a city nearer to Papal influence."³⁷ In defiance, although without success, the conciliarist made efforts to convince the Greeks to come to them in Basel.³⁸ Cesarini and some others voted in favour of any city as provided for in the *Sicut Pia Mater* or any location chosen by the Pope. These conciliar fathers decided that the best option would be to join the Pope in a Council with the Greeks because of the lack of cohesion in Basel between the influential and moderate members of the Council to declare support for the Pope.³⁹ While convoking a union council to be held at Ferrara, Pope Eugene IV declared the dissolution of the Council of Basel and also ratified *Sicut Pia Mater*.⁴⁰ His decree for its dissolution was accompanied by the threat of excommunication in case of any rival gathering under the guise of a council that might take place outside Ferrara.⁴¹

4. Achievements of the Council of Basel

As clearly demonstrated in the negotiation between the East and West, the conflict between the Pope and the Council was due to different ecclesiological conceptions. The Council met on the basis of the provisions of *Frequens*. The decree was a product of compromise that was fashioned out to resolve the Western schism that saw three claimants of the papal throne. This background led the fathers at Basel to demand the implementation of the ecclesiology of the Council of Constance. As far as they were concerned, *Haec Sancta* was binding as a church law, and its assertion of the superiority of the general Council over the Pope ought to be respected.⁴² This created parallel curial authorities in Basel, where the Council saw itself as an alternative to the papal curia in Rome and even juxtaposed itself with the Pope himself. The conciliarism in Basel brought about a new theological foundation of the Church, especially regarding ecclesiastical power.⁴³ The Basel conciliarists wanted to establish an ecclesiology that incorporated pragmatic and canonistic provisions. However, in promoting their formulated

³⁷ Gill, *The Council*, 83-84.

³⁸ Gill, *The Council*, 83-84.

³⁹ Gill, *The Council*, 84.

⁴⁰ Gill, *The Council*, 83.

⁴¹ Gill, *The Council*, 83.

⁴² Thomas Prügl, "Kontrolliertes Papsttum Zur Rollenverteilung von Papst und Konzil in den konziliaristischen Debatten des 15. Jahrhunderts", in: Stefan Weinfurter, Volker Leppin, Christoph Strohm, Hubert Wolf, Alfrid Wiczorek eds., *Die Päpste und ihr Amt zwischen Einheit und Vielheit der Kirche: Theologische Fragen in historischer Perspektive*, Sonderdruck aus (Regensburg: Schnell & Steiner Verlag), 154.

⁴³ Prügl, "Kontrolliertes Papsttum", 154.

positions, they often asserted their respective claims dogmatically without proper consideration of the organisational and administrative processes of the church structure, which cannot function without a legitimate central point of recourse. The conflict between the Council of Basel and Pope Eugene IV is understood in the words of Prügl as an “escalation of the question of superiority”. The Council viewed Pope Eugene's attempted dissolution of the gathering as disregarding Constance's provisions.⁴⁴ The insistence of Eugene IV on tradition reflected high medieval ideas of papal authority, according to which all power in the Church emanates from the Pope and is justified in the representation of Christ. Both sides demanded “obedience” from each other without denying the legitimacy of the opponent's special claim. A theological understanding of conciliar ecclesiology leaves the following questions open: What roles are to be given to the Council (in papalism), and what roles are to be assigned to the Pope (in conciliarism)?⁴⁵ The conflict between the Pope and the Council highlighted the need for a more precise understanding of the roles and competencies of both parties.

The Council of Basel played a crucial role in redefining the governing relationship between the Church and the Papacy. Some decrees recognised the Pope's role in safeguarding and upholding the Church's rules and constitution.⁴⁶ *Quoniam salus populi pastor bonus*, for example, was an important reform decree that asked for the restructuring of the election of the Pope and established provisions for the College of Cardinals. The decree emphasised that the Pope's primary duty is to serve as the *primus et summus pastor* responsible for the salvation of the souls of all Christians worldwide. This includes promoting ecclesiastical freedom in various regions, acting as a mediator in times of war, addressing internal issues such as Curia reform, and setting an example for the world by combating Simony and concubinage. The Council of Basel's desire for such reforms provided a clear direction for the actions of the Pope and served as a guiding principle in fulfilling his duties as the Church's leader.⁴⁷

The Council of Basel marked a significant development towards ecclesiastical monarchy. Despite its defeat in the power struggle with Pope Eugene, the Council of Basel strengthened and confirmed the Pope's supreme authority as the corrector of errors. Eugene IV's victory at the Council of Ferrara-Florence paved the way for the union with the Greeks and the papacy's demands for obedience and ideological control over Western authorities. The inability of the conciliarists to establish some sort of permanent control over the papacy led to

⁴⁴Prügl, “Kontrolliertes Papsttum, 155.

⁴⁵Prügl, “Kontrolliertes Papsttum, 155.

⁴⁶Prügl, “Kontrolliertes Papsttum, 155.

⁴⁷Prügl, “Kontrolliertes Papsttum, 157.

Haec Sancta being forgotten and the disappearance of *Frequens* from the Church's programme of reforms. Although it became a source of ideological ammunition for Gallicanism until the 19th century, the failure of the Council of Basel helped reinforce the relative stability of the papacy. Papalism did not let its guard down with this stability. It strengthened its ideas and continuously introduced new claims for the papacy while criticising the ecclesiology developed by Constance and Basel. Conciliarism ended after 1450.⁴⁸

5. Lessons from the failure of Basel and its conciliarist ideas

The concept of synodality has been present in the Church for some time, since the Second Vatican Council. Still, Pope Francis has embraced this method of governance to bring about a shift from a hierarchical model dominated by papal authority to a more collaborative and participatory approach that values the input of ordinary Catholics.⁴⁹ He sees synodality as crucial for the Church in our time. Francis understands synodality as the common journey of the People of God in which the whole Church - bishops, clergy, religious and laity - shares responsibility for discerning God's will and mission.⁵⁰ This understanding of synodality builds on the Second Vatican Council's vision of the People of God, emphasising their common dignity and mission as baptised persons. It aims to create more inclusive and accountable structures to ensure the effective exercise of co-responsibility within the Church. Synodality is a journey together to discern the voice of the Holy Spirit and participate in the mission of the Church. Nevertheless, there are lessons to be learned from the Council of Basel and the conciliar agenda for a better synodal church.

5.1 Ecclesiological Governance

The Council of Basel teaches an essential lesson about the need for unity between the Pope and the bishops in governing the Church. The concept of a synodal Church in Catholicism requires this unity, with the Pope and the bishops forming the governing body. The failure of the conciliarists to achieve their significant reforms without the Pope and the subsequent events of the century following the Council, which demonstrated that the Pope alone could not reform

⁴⁸Prügl, "Kontrolliertes Papsttum, 157.

⁴⁹International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2021), no. 6.

⁵⁰International Theological Commission, *Synodality*, no.7.

the Church without the support of the Council, underscores the need to find a balance between papal authority and the support of the bishops for the good and unity of the Church.⁵¹

Recent events have raised questions about the unity needed between Pope Francis and the bishops to correct errors and maintain discipline within the Church. Some prelates, including Cardinal Burke, Cardinal Müller and the late Cardinal Pell, have vehemently criticised the synod of synodality. They argue that it promotes liberal, confusing ideas that have no basis in the tradition of the Church and that it carries the risk of possible schism.⁵² This criticism represents a significant challenge to the concept of a synodal Church. In response to this criticism, the new Cardinal for the Doctrine of the Faith, Fernández Manuel, argued for the Pope's absolute infallibility in correcting errors and defining new doctrines. He asserted: "The Pope must guard and preserve not only the 'static' deposit of faith, Fernández said, but also a second, unique charism, given only to Peter and his successors, which is a 'living and active gift.'"⁵³

A synodal Church requires unity between the Pope and the bishops, his closest collaborators in the governance of the Church. The lack of unity, therefore, raises questions about the possible outcomes of the synod in a disunited governing body. It prompts us to consider how ecclesiology can be built on the foundation of synodality, which emphasises walking together without unity among its leaders. The reception of synodal deliberations is crucial, for deliberation and voting without reception renders the whole synodal process useless. In view of the conflicting opinions between the bishops and the Pope, the question arises as to how the synodal deliberations will be successfully received in the local Church. Could the lack of consensus that has prevented the implementation of reforms in the Church after the Council of Basel pose a challenge to Pope Francis's vision of synodality? Does the apparent disagreement between the Pope and some bishops not point to the risk of promoting the centralisation of ecclesiastical power and clericalism, which are counterproductive to the intended purpose of the synod?

The growing rift between Pope Francis's pontificate and some factions of the episcopate is a cause for concern, especially in view of the necessary reforms. However, the potential for significant reform in the Church is great if the Pope and the bishops work in harmony, avoiding the misunderstandings of the Council of Basel.

⁵¹Tierney, xxiii-xxv.

⁵²Shanon Mullen, "New doctrine chief welcomes debate but warns bishops about schism risks", in *The Catholic World Report*, 11th September 2023.

⁵³Mullen, "New doctrine".

5.2 Participation

Another lesson the synodal movement can learn from the Council of Basel is the idea of participation, which is one of the pillars of the intended synodal Church. The synod posits that participation is predicated on the conviction that all believers are inherently competent and are thus called to provide mutual support through the utilisation of the gifts they have received from the Holy Spirit. In a synodal Church, the entire community, comprising individuals with diverse and unrestricted membership, is called upon to unite in prayer, listening, discussion, analysis, discernment and counsel with a view to making pastoral decisions that align with the Gospel.⁵⁴ Just like the Council of Basel, the synodal movement has granted equal participation and voting rights to bishops and laity, thus eliminating the influence of clericalism. This method of participation proposed for synodality is a method of de-clericalising conciliar participation that has no historical basis in the Church. The notion of participation has been a recurring theme for Pope Francis, as this approach promotes a decentralised and participatory decision-making process similar to the conciliarist approach. However, as important as the concept of participation may be, it should ensure that the synodal process remains true to its intended purpose of fostering dialogue and discernment rather than becoming a superficial exercise or a way to justify preconceived decisions. It is crucial to bear in mind that the notion of participation in the synod must be meticulously handled in order to circumvent any potential misinterpretations. It is not the intention of the synod to function as a representative democracy or as a platform for political battles between different ideological factions. It is, therefore, important to emphasise that the synod is not a forum for voting on contentious issues or advocating contemporary viewpoints that deviate from established Church teachings. Furthermore, there is a concern that heightened expectations about the outcomes of the synod may lead to disappointment. Ultimately, it is crucial to recognise that the Church is not a democracy but rather the people of God led by the Holy Spirit, with the successor of Peter playing a unique role in safeguarding the Church from error.⁵⁵

Synodal participation cannot survive without being reconciled with the hierarchical structure and traditions of the Catholic Church. While the concept of synodality presupposes consultation, synodal decisions reflect the magisterial teachings and authority of the Church. Only this approach would differentiate between discerning the will of the Holy Spirit and succumbing to democratic pressures or popular opinions that may not align with Church teachings.

⁵⁴ International Theological Commission, *Synodality*, no 67-68.

⁵⁵ "The problems with the Synod" *The Catholic Herald*, editorial, October 1st 2023.

6. Conclusion

This article has highlighted the Council of Basel as a significant moment in the history of conciliarism. It has showcased its potential and pitfalls. Conciliarism was initially driven by the desire to reform and unite the Church. It emphasised the authority of ecumenical councils over the Pope, with a resolve to decentralise power and encourage greater participation from all levels of Church hierarchy. The Council of Basel sought to realise the goals of conciliarism through its attempts at ending corruption and promoting doctrinal unity. Regrettably, the Council failed because it entrapped itself in the hair-splitting arguments about the supremacy of the Council vis-à-vis the Pope. Its ecclesiological and participation model is a shift from the tradition of the Church, as reflected in the failed negotiation between the East and West at Basel. The failure of Basel could serve as an invaluable lesson for Pope Francis's Synod on Synodality and the push from some national episcopal conferences to enact reforms against the directives from the papacy. As the Synod on Synodality seeks to chart new paths for governance and dialogue within the Church, it must take heed of the achievements and limitations of conciliarism. Undoubtedly, the predisposition towards embracing transparency, inclusivity, and collegiality is important. It must, however, be remembered that the history of the Church councils has shown that the harmonious collaboration between the Pope and the bishops will be vital in shaping the Church's future. By drawing insights from the Council of Basel and remaining committed to dialogue and discernment, the Synod on Synodality can strive towards a more dynamic and responsive Church rooted in the spirit of synodality.