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Pope Francis stands up and addresses a group of leaders in Roman Catholic and Orthodox ga

Pope Francis speaks during a meeting with representatives of the Oriental Orthodox churches at the Vatican Jan. 27 2017. The representatives were in Rome for a meeting of the Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches. (CNS photo/L'Osservatore Romano, handout)

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Shared responsibility and the exercise of authority as a service are both essential for the life and unity of the church, said members of the international Catholic-Orthodox dialogue.

"The church is not properly understood as a pyramid, with a primate governing from the top, but neither is it properly understood as a federation of self-sufficient churches," said an agreed statement from the Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church.

After six years of study, dialogue and discussion, commission members approved their document, "Synodality and Primacy in the Second Millennium and Today," at an early June meeting in Alexandria, Egypt, and released the text June 9.

The study followed and built on their 2016 document, "Synodality and Primacy During the First Millennium: Toward a Common Understanding in Service to the Unity of the Church."

The 2016 document described synodality as "a fundamental quality of the church as a whole," exercised primarily through "a gathering of bishops under the guidance of the Holy Spirit for common deliberation and action in caring for the church." However, it added, the term also refers more broadly to "the active participation of all the faithful in the life and mission of the church."

Primacy, "being the first" in the church, belongs to Jesus Christ, it said, but Christian tradition also has assigned a role of primacy, understood as service, to the bishop.

In the Christian church of the first millennium, the new document said, "despite many crises, the unity of faith and love was maintained through the practice of synodality and primacy."

However, it said, "at the beginning of the second millennium, difficulties and disagreements between East and West were exacerbated by cultural and political factors," and the mutual acts of excommunication in 1054 "aggravated the estrangement between East and West."

As the churches of the East and West grew distant from one another and adapted to a variety of political situations, the way they exercised synodality and primacy changed.

Members of the Catholic-Orthodox dialogue said they looked at "the troubled history of the second millennium," trying to give "a common reading" of what happened while also giving members of each church the opportunity "to explain themselves to one another" to further mutual understanding and trust.

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The document, for example, noted that Pope Innocent III, who was in office from 1198 to 1216, "consolidated the view of the pope as the head governing the whole ecclesial body," promoting the position that as the successor of Peter, "the pope had the fullness of power and a concern for all the churches" and that individual bishops were called "to share in his solicitude by caring for their own dioceses."

"At that time, despite the doctrinal development of Roman primacy, synodality was still evident," the document said. "Popes continued to govern the Latin church with the Roman synod, gathering the bishops of the Roman province and those present in Rome. The synod normally met twice a year. Problems were addressed and freely discussed by all participants. The pope as primus made the final decision. There is no evidence that the pope was bound by a vote, but there is no evidence either that the pope took any final decision contrary to the advice of his synod."

After the Council of Trent in the mid-1500s, "the Roman Catholic Church became increasingly centralized with regard to doctrine, liturgy and missionary activity," the document said.

"The papacy was an important focus in the controversy with Protestantism about the true faith, and in the long run papal authority was strengthened in the post-Tridentine period," it said. "The papacy and commitment to it became a marker of Roman Catholic confessional identity against Protestantism."

In the Orthodox world, the political policies of the Ottoman Empire making all Orthodox dependent upon the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople increased his profile, the document said, but "the spirit of synodality was nevertheless preserved" with the ecumenical patriarch convoking councils "to resolve issues in a synodal way."

In modern times, it said, both Catholic and Orthodox have made moves to strengthen synodality and the focus on service in the exercise of primacy, including a willingness on the part of Catholics "to distinguish what might be termed the patriarchal ministry of the pope within the Western or Latin church from his primatial service with regard to the communion of all the churches, offering new opportunities for the future."

"The interdependence of synodality and primacy is a fundamental principle in the life of the church," the document said, and "it is intrinsically related to the service of

the unity of the church at the local, regional and universal levels."

While it is important for Christian dialogue partners to know and understand each other's history, the dialogue commission members insisted that "purely historical discussions are not enough."

"The church is deeply rooted in the mystery of the Holy Trinity," they said, "and a eucharistic ecclesiology of communion is the key to articulating a sound theology of synodality and primacy."