Opinion

NCR Voices



Theological advisers to the Synod of Bishops lead a forum organized by the Synod of Bishops on the role and authority of the bishop in a synodal church held in Rome Oct. 9. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



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Even the bishops had to stand in line and surrender their passports.

They lined up alongside theologians, laity and the media to procure the simultaneous translation headsets for the panel discussion on "The Role and Authority of the Bishop in a Synodal Church." Much of the evening's discussion focused on how to move away from a monarchical exercise of episcopal authority.

So of course the bishops were not exempt from the requirement that everyone leave a driver's license or passport at the desk, to ensure that they return the headset!

Moderating the discussion on Oct. 9 was Durham University Professor Anna Rowlands, widely regarded for her theological acumen — and ability to herd cats, both of which are essential skills as she worked at the synod secretariat during this synodal process.

A professor of Catholic social thought at the U.K. university, Rowlands explained that most of the evening would be dedicated to unpacking No. 38 of the *instrumentum laboris* (working document), which focuses on seeing the role of bishop develop in terms of relationships.

The idea behind No. 38 of the *instrumentum laboris* is not just to update the church to a more democratic age. It is also to recenter the role of the bishop within the community, and to do so in a way that is not managerial but ecclesial.

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The participation that is called for in the synod is rooted in Vatican II's recovery of the idea of baptismal dignity — the very opposite of democratic theory. The Christian has rights by reason of his or her baptism, not their birth, and baptism entails a loss of self and rebirth in Christ. Indeed, the very idea of the laity is already

an ecclesial concept.

Fr. Carlos Galli of the Catholic University of Argentina began his presentation with a joke that had a point. He recalled that the Second Vatican Council, in the 1964 constitution *Lumen Gentium*, said that bishops should consider priests as "children and friends" but that one year later, in the 1965 decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, bishops are told to consider priests as their "brothers and friends." Galli said he preferred the latter. The room chuckled.

Galli was subtly reminding the bishops that the church's self-understanding of the role of bishops was not set in stone. At Vatican II, that self-understanding had developed, even within a single year, and more development was needed.



Company of Mary Sr. Gloria Liliana Franco Echeverri (CNS/Lola Gomez)

"The bishops' 'I' is always situated in an ecclesial 'we,' the baptized on a common mission," Galli said, linking to the theme of a missionary church that is so central to the synod's focus.

Company of Mary Sr. Gloria Liliana Franco Echeverri, the current president of the Latin American and Caribbean Conference of Religious (CLAR), began by quoting St. Paul's First Letter to Timothy (1:12): "I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service."

The apostle reminds us, she said, that "ministry is rooted in grace" and it is grace, not any human power or skill set, that opens us up to the transcendent.

It is that same grace that sketches the contours of a distinctly Christian missionary leadership for the bishops. The "Trinitarian ground of [the bishops'] ministry" suggests a leadership that is rooted in relationships, and relationships of love and service, she said.

Franco told the bishops to never let their position put them above others, for that would contradict their role as a "determined servant." The "mission exceeds your strength" and so collaboration with others is an essential dynamic of the bishops' leadership.



Fr. Gilles Routhier (CNS/Lola Gomez)

This is not Management 101. This is mission-oriented, grace-filled Ecclesiology 101.

In his talk, Fr. Gilles Routhier highlighted the way the celebration of the Eucharist helps the bishop understand his position in relation to the local church. The bishop is "in the people of God, with the people of God, for the people of God, in the midst of the people of God." The bishop presides over and guides the eucharistic assembly, he is not separated from it.

Routhier, a professor at the University of Laval in Quebec, highlighted the words with which the bishop announces the Eucharistic Prayer at Mass: "Pray, brothers and sisters, that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God, the almighty Father."

The bishop does not pray in his own name, Routhier said, but in the name of the whole Church.

Archbishop Roberto Repole of Turin, Italy, linked his remarks to the ecclesiology of Vatican II. Episcopal ministry, said Repole, who was recently named by Pope Francis to become a cardinal, "can't be monarchical, an accumulation of powers."

He was echoed by Fr. Matteo Visioli of Parma, Italy, who said "the fullness of the sacrament of orders [conferred on the bishop] does not require a monarchical form of government."



Cardinal-designate Roberto Repole of Turin, Italy (CNS/Lola Gomez)

In the question-and-answer section, it became clear these formal presentations were part of an ongoing discussion in the synod hall, which is closed to the rest of us. Questioners wanted to know, "Where does the rubber hit the road?"

The answers were adumbrative, allowing for different applications of the ideas being discussed in different local churches.

At Vatican II, there were regular panels like this one, to help the bishops think through the challenges they faced.

That same spirit was in the air at the panel.

At the pastoral-theological forum, the synod delegates, bishops and non-bishops alike, were invited to deepen their understanding of the issues being debated at the synod. What that ongoing discussion will yield will be known by the end of the month, when the synod issues its final document.

Whether the reforms it proposes will be received is a different question altogether.

This story appears in the **Synod on Synodality** feature series. View the full series.