Vatican
Vatican News



Participants take part in a theological and pastoral forum organized by the General Secretariat of the Synod Oct. 9 at the Jesuit Curia in Rome. (NCR photo/Camillo Barone)



by Camillo Barone

NCR staff reporter

View Author Profile
cbarone@ncronline.org

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Rome — October 14, 2024
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

The Catholic Church can no longer function as a monarchy: It must rethink its internal power dynamics, share its decision-making processes with laypeople and reform canon law, a canon law professor told a Vatican synod forum Oct. 9.

Donata Horak, who teaches at the Collegio Alberoni in Piacenza, Italy, and two other theologians, spoke at a theological and pastoral forum organized by the General Secretariat of the Synod and open to the public. More than 100 international synod delegates attended the forum.

Four months ago, Horak and two other female Catholic scholars spoke about the democratization of the church and the inclusion of women with Pope Francis and the "C9" commission. That's the group of nine cardinals the pope summoned in 2013 to help him bring about reforms in church structures of power, and to study a plan to overhaul the curia at the Vatican.

Horak, who is not an official member or delegate of the synod, addressed the substantial changes that followed the Second Vatican Council, recognizing that these transformations introduced multiple novelties into church law. However, she said, the depth of these changes has also led to certain "contradictions," particularly concerning ecclesiology, which she described as the theological interpretation of the church itself.

"Too many canons still refer to the faithful as 'subjects,' " Horak noted. This terminology, she said, reflects an ecclesiology that feels outdated, one where power is concentrated within the clerical hierarchy, leaving laypeople in a subservient role. She pointed out an inherent tension between two ecclesiologies that appear to coexist within the church, particularly in how authority is distributed and exercised.

"The code is not clear," she said, pointing out that some norms seem to reserve all power exclusively for clerics, while others suggest that the power exercised by laypeople is based merely on a simple administrative act, known as "*missio canonica* ." For Horak, this is problematic: "The action of the faithful in the church cannot have

as its source simply an administrative act. Empowerment is sacramental," she said.

> '[Laypeople] expect to be heard when the future of the church is up for debate.'
> —Thomas Söding
>
> Tweet this

Horak also highlighted the process of decision-making within the church. She expressed concerns over the limited role of consultation of laypeople in church governance, especially within synods and councils. According to her, the church's current discipline reveals a "minimalist view" of consultation, where participatory bodies, such as pastoral councils, often lack clear, democratic procedures for electing members and are left only to advise a solitary, monarchical authority.

"Synods are always only consultative, thus functional for decision-making by a single, monarchical authority," Horak said. She criticized the rigid binary system that separates synods as consultative and councils as deliberative, arguing that this opposition is not rooted in the ancient Christian tradition. She also cited 13th century's Pope Boniface VIII, who she quoted as saying, "What touches everyone, should be dealt with and deliberated by everyone."

"The church cannot be a monarchy," she insisted, though she was quick to clarify that this does not mean the church should adopt a fully democratic model, either. "The church cannot be an organization where one vote is worth one," she explained, pointing out that such a system would undermine the bishops' responsibility. Instead, Horak called for a rediscovery of a "shared, deliberative vote," distributed across various church bodies according to their competencies, where everyone feels included according to each decision's subject matter within the church.

At the same forum, Thomas Söding, professor of New Testament Studies at Ruhr University Bochum in Germany and theology consultant of the German Bishops Conference Faith Commission, emphasized the enduring relevance of Jesus' mission for both the young, rapidly growing churches of the Global South and the more traditional churches of the West.

Söding observed that Catholic theology in recent times has placed significant emphasis on the ordained ministry, especially the role of the pope. While he

acknowledged the fundamental importance of this ministry in proclaiming the Gospel, he argued that it alone is not enough to fulfill the church’s missionary calling. "Their ministry is necessary, but it is not sufficient in a missionary church," Söding explained.

He pointed to two significant developments in the church. First, theological competence is no longer confined to priests and bishops. Across the globe, well-educated believers — both men and women — have become leaders in theology, church governance and lay ministry. Members of religious orders, consecrated communities and lay volunteers bring valuable expertise to the church's mission. According to Söding, while this shift has caused uncertainty in some quarters, it has also opened the door to new forms of lay cooperation and participation.

Advertisement

Söding also highlighted the growing demand for better pastoral leadership. Laypeople, he noted, increasingly wish to contribute their expertise in all areas of church life, not just in peripheral matters. "They expect to be heard when the future of the church is up for debate," he said, stressing that the faithful are calling for greater transparency and participation.

"Faith cannot be taken for granted," Söding said, pointing to a range of global challenges that require fresh approaches to evangelization. He noted that faith communities in different parts of the world are navigating vastly different circumstances. Some churches, for example, continue to grapple with the legacy of communism, while others confront rising populism. Many have recognized the liberating power of the Gospel within oppressive systems of injustice, while others face the spiritual dangers of rampant consumerism. In each context, he said, the message of Jesus remains essential.

Söding made a case that mission and synodality are inseparable. He argued that any reform of synodality must strengthen the entire "people of God as the subject of the church’s mission." For him, this means embracing the gifts and talents of all believers, lay and ordained, and fostering a spirit of collaboration that reflects the "communal nature" of the church.

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