

Synod says bishops' conferences apply, not create doctrine

written by Catholic News Service |



While some media reported a move at the Synod of Bishops to allow every national bishops' conference to make Catholic doctrine, Cardinal Joseph W. Tobin of Newark, N.J., said that was not precisely what he heard.

"I think there's a general feeling in the hall, at least from where I sit, that absolute doctrinal teaching does not belong to a bishop's conference," he said. "Now that doesn't mean to say they don't have something to say about doctrine (and) the pastoral application of the doctrine of the Church" in a particular country.

In fact, the application of doctrine "should be a real interest of the bishops' conference, and we should be able to listen to each other about how we would apply the teachings of the Church," he told Catholic News Service outside the synod hall Oct. 18.

Members of the synod, including Cardinal Tobin, spent Oct. 15-18 discussing the "places" where synodality is and can be experienced in the Church. One of those places was the national bishops' conference.

The synod working document said that after the first synod session in October 2023, proposals emerged for a "recognition of episcopal conferences as ecclesial subjects endowed with doctrinal authority."

The line set off a debate and even some alarms by bishops who were concerned the statement basically meant a nation's bishops could create Catholic doctrine and it could differ from what was taught as Catholic truth in another country.

Cardinal Tobin noted that in 2025 Christians will celebrate the 1,700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, the origin of the Nicene Creed.

"No bishops' conference should ever tinker with the Creed," he said. "That's what holds us together."

But the cardinal said he hoped bishops' conferences, including the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, would listen more to people in their dioceses and to each other to "apply the doctrine to the concrete situations" of the church in their country.

"We have to listen, certainly, to the Word of God and the tradition of our Church, and we have to listen to each other," he said.

Synod members, he said, have found "a consensus that without the support of the bishops' conference, synodality will not really enter the life of a national church."

The national and regional conferences of bishops blossomed after the Second Vatican Council, but their stature and influence began shrinking in the late 1990s, when St. John Paul II and his closest aides tried to rein in the conferences' perceived power over the authority and ministry of a local bishop for his diocese.

From the beginning of his pontificate, Pope Francis has given a higher profile to bishops' conferences and their teaching authority and has underscored that by frequently citing the teaching of different national conferences in his own encyclicals and apostolic exhortations.

In his 2013 apostolic exhortation, "The Joy of the Gospel," Pope Francis wrote that the Second Vatican Council affirmed that "episcopal conferences are in a position 'to contribute in many and fruitful ways to the concrete realization of the collegial spirit.'" But, he said, "this desire has not been fully realized, since a juridical status of episcopal conferences which would see them as subjects of specific attributions, including genuine doctrinal authority, has not yet been sufficiently elaborated."

Synod preacher urges members to be at peace with results

written by Catholic News Service |



Even if some members of the Synod of Bishops end up feeling disappointed by the results of the synod, “God’s providence is at work in this assembly, bringing us to the Kingdom in ways that God alone knows,” the spiritual adviser to the synod on synodality told them.

“The triumph of the good cannot be frustrated,” and “we may be at peace whatever the result” of the synod’s monthlong second session, said Cardinal-designate Timothy Radcliffe, offering his reflection in the Vatican’s Paul VI Audience Hall Oct. 21.

The Dominican theologian’s reflection opened the final week of the Oct. 2-27 assembly. The members were working on drafting, amending and voting on the final document to be presented to Pope Francis Oct. 26.

“Christ has set us free,” he said, and “our mission is to preach and embody this freedom.”

This freedom, however, has two features: “It is the freedom to say what we believe and to listen without fear to what others say, in mutual respect,” he said, and it is the freedom of knowing that God always works for the good of those who love God.

“God’s providence is gently, silently at work even when things seem to go wrong,” Cardinal-designate Radcliffe said.

“If we have only the freedom to argue for our positions, we shall be tempted by the arrogance of those who, in the words of (Jesuit Father Henri) de Lubac, see themselves as ‘the incarnate norm of orthodoxy.’ We shall end up beating the drums of ideology, whether of the left or the right,” he said.

“If we have only the freedom of those who trust in God’s providence but dare not wade into the debate with our own convictions, we shall be irresponsible and never grow up,” he added.

“God’s freedom works in the core of our own freedom, welling up inside us.”

“The more it is truly of God, the more it is truly our own,” he said, pointing to some lessons offered by two theologians who had been silenced and shunned at one point by the Catholic Church’s hierarchy — popes and Vatican officials — in Rome.

The late Dominican Father Yves Congar wrote “that the only response to this persecution was ‘to speak the truth. Prudently, without provocative and useless scandal. But to remain — and to become more and more — an authentic and pure witness to what which is true,’” he said.

This shows, he said, “we need not be afraid of disagreement, for the Holy Spirit is at work even in that.”

The late Father de Lubac, who also “endured persecution,” wrote that “far from losing patience,” the one who is being persecuted “will try to keep the peace” and strive “to retain a mind bigger than its own ideas,” the cardinal-designate said.

A Christian must cultivate the freedom to transcend himself and avoid “‘the terrible self-sufficiency which might lead him to see himself as the incarnate norm of orthodoxy,’ for he will put ‘the indissoluble bond of Catholic peace’ above all things,” he said.

“Often we can have no idea as to how God’s providence is at work in our lives. We do what we believe to be right and the rest is in the hands of the Lord,” he said.

“This is just one synod. There will be others. We do not have to do everything, just take the next step,” he said, and those who come after will “go on beginning. How, we do not know. That is God’s business.”

What is the synod?

The second and final meeting of the Synod on Synodality at the Vatican was held Oct. 2-27, focusing on understanding and exercising synodality in the Church. The Synod on Synodality was a three-year process of listening and dialogue that began in 2021.

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