A contribution from the evangelical perspective

By virtue of baptism

Stefan Tobler

> *The author is an Evangelical theologian. Born in Switzerland, he completed his theological studies in Zurich, earned his doctorate in the Netherlands and began teaching in Tübingen (Germany). Professor Tobler currently teaches systematic theology at Lucian Blaga University's Institute for Ecumenical Research of Sibiu (IERS), in Romania. He is also a member of the Abba School, the interdisciplinary study center of the Focolare Movement.*

The link between the priesthood of all the faithful and ordained ministry is fundamental for understanding synodality in the life of the Churches of the Reformation. Beginning with his 1520 address, *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, Martin Luther developed the concept that every Christian received, by virtue of baptism, the full dignity and power necessary in order to proclaim the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. According to Luther, the fact that it was permissible only for ordained ministers to exercise this authority publicly was a matter of order, not of (sacramental) quality. Therefore, all faithful are called to participate in the election of ministers, ensure faithfulness to Gospel teachings, and the establishment of ecclesiastical order. A synodal Church governance in which a given number exercise these powers on behalf of all the faithful, is therefore the most appropriate structure.

While this principle was shared by all reformers, its development was different for the Lutheran and Reformed churches.

In the German Lutheran territories, civil rulers (municipal councilors, nobility, etc.) were generally delegated to exercise their authority on behalf of all the faithful. Thus, a close bond between Church and State developed, one of *episkopé* (supervision) exercised by civil governing bodies.

Even in the Reformed territories, civil authorities played an important role in establishing new ecclesiastical structures. But these structures were generally synodal at both the local and national level. This offered much greater autonomy with regard to the State. These synods were always a mix of theologians/ministers and lay people, with the laity being in the majority.

Beginning with the nineteenth century, synodal structures gradually began to develop in the German territories (Lutheran and other) inspired by, among other things, the many Huguenot refugees from France, and this served to reduce the State's influence on Church affairs. Mixed synods were formed between ordained and lay ministers. After 1918, synods were established and entrusted with full governing power regarding ecclesiastical rules, election of bishops and collegial councils of governance (*Kirchenrat*), finances, etc. throughout Germany.

Although this synodal form of governance uses democratic procedures, it is not enough to speak of a "democratic" governing of the Church. Rather, emphasis needs to be on the element of royal priesthood: each member of these bodies who exercises a function on behalf of all the faithful is to be conscious of the dignity conferred upon them through baptism. Therefore, each is a messenger of the Gospel, called to consider and weigh every decision through the Word of God and its interpretation as contained in the Confessions of faith. The synod, if it is authentic, is an expression of Gospel sovereignty over the Church.

Synodal structures are always combined with the collegial and personal elements of *episkopé* (supervision). The combination of these three forms and the weight given to each element vary markedly among the Churches of the Reformation. But ecumenical dialogue has served to reveal the coexistence of these three elements and is most certainly a point upon which progressive approaches to various positions can also be envisioned. There never exists a "synodal system" alone. Thus, democracy is not the question here and "hierarchy" is not the most fortunate term either. It serves little purpose to discuss and contrast these two if we desire that it is truly God in his Spirit who reigns over his Church, and more precisely, reigns in the form of Christ, that is, in *kenosis* (the act of self-emptying).