

Provincial and Diocesan Councils – Synodal Life in the Local Churches

Symposium, Vienna, February 23–25, 2026

Besides the great Ecumenical Councils, which dominate conciliar historiography and the commemorative culture of the Church, the numerous provincial, diocesan, national, and regional synods shaped the synodal life of the Church in a much deeper way. A closer look at this regional and therefore less well-known events in the history of councils reveals that synodality is not an invention of the 21st century; rather, synods were the backbone of the Church since its earliest centuries.

At the beginning of the synodal life in the early Church, bishops of a certain region gathered irregularly to discuss problems and address crises within their communities. The development of the Church's territorial and hierarchical organization in the third and fourth centuries was accomplished by corresponding synods. In 325, the Council of Nicaea mandated the holding of two synods per year in each province, one during Lent and another in late autumn.

In late antiquity and the Middle Ages, provincial synods were utilized by rulers as instruments of governance and legislative assemblies, as seen in the "lex in confirmatione concilii" of the Visigothic synods or the capitularies of the Frankish kings, which significantly contributed to the development of national churches. The Fourth Lateran Council emphasized the regular convening of councils, now on an annual basis (can. 6). Pope Innocent III drew a connection between Church reform and synods. Regular provincial and diocesan synods were expected to transmit the decisions of the universal synods and report back to it. At the same time, synodic legislation began to compete with the rapidly growing papal law, leading to a decline in the frequency of synods in the late Middle Ages and sparking new calls and visions for reform.

The impulses of the conciliar age and the Council of Trent eventually shaped the modern practice of provincial synods, which, on the one hand, served as an instrument for implementing the Tridentine reforms, on the other hand generated new identities within the local (national) churches. These identities had to be carefully coordinated with the newly established Roman authority, the so-called *Congregatio concilii*. The Tridentine decree that ordered regular provincial and diocesan synods, however, was received unequally across the Catholic globe. While countries with strong national church traditions, such as France, Spain, or Poland, experienced vibrant synodical activity from the 16th to the 18th centuries, synods seemed to have been almost entirely forgotten in the Holy Roman Empire. A closer examination, however, reveals significant differences even within this context.

Synodical life entered a new era in the mid-19th century. National synods, such as those in the Americas, laid the foundations for a rapidly growing Church or, as in Europe, accompanied the Church's intellectual confrontation with the philosophical and political currents of the time. In this sense, the new conciliar "style" associated with the Second Vatican Council, which has inspired the synodical movement of recent years and decades, was in many ways already prepared in the 19th century.

The symposium invites scholars to present new research on particular synods in every period. A first and basic research desideratum consists in gathering, securing, and evaluating the texts and decrees of provincial and diocesan synods, as well as examining the preparatory phases and follow-up measures undertaken by the responsible authorities. Besides the actual agenda and the topics of debate, it is also paramount to examine the interaction of synods with the respective political, social, or intellectual environment. How did the Church respond to religious and societal changes by celebrating synods? How worked the cooperation with secular authorities and how did synods transform or shape the respective local churches themselves?

Further research is needed in examining the canonistic and theological literature that discusses the nature, extent and practice of provincial and diocesan synods. What was the significance of these councils within a larger ecclesiology? What was the role of the papacy in requesting, promoting and approving particular synods? The relationship between papacy and local synods in the modern era has been described as an interplay between "center and periphery" (Fattori). Such exchange, however, was by no means a one-way street only.

Finally, a comparative look at synods in the Reformation churches can also be illuminating. In this new context, the synod was quickly transformed into a permanent state agency, representing the administrative authority of the protestant churches. With the "synodos endemousa" the Patriarchate of Constantinople developed also a permanent administrative office, taking its form and legitimacy from (traditional) synods. In this regard, one might ask whether and to what extent the synodical practices within the different churches were perceived by other churches or and studied by scholars across the denominations.

Many more aspects of the synodal life and new research questions will emerge by taking a closer look at these gatherings and their contexts. The effort to deepen our understanding of particular synods throughout history serves not only the more specific field of conciliar history or the broader study of political representations and organized consensus-building, it may also help the Church in its reform efforts, by taking into account historical experience in past synods.

Proposals for 30-minute presentations may be submitted by October 31, 2025
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