



A Polyhedron Model of the Magisterium's Authority

ABSTRACT

As the global Church continues to evolve into a more heterogeneous and non-Western unit, this paper explores the possibility of a decentralized exercise of magisterial authority using a polyhedron model. In the context of church authority, the figure of the polyhedron represents an expanded vision of unity that reimagines new connections between the local and global Catholic Church, but more importantly, places the local church in a unique position as locus of hierarchical teaching authority. The main question that will be addressed by this paper is the following: 'How can the local church participate in and/or contribute to the exercise of the magisterium's authority?'

INTRODUCTION

In its service to the people of God of teaching and governing authoritatively, the magisterium of the Catholic Church grapples with issues of theological epistemology,

as well as the realities and tensions of making this authority more accessible to all the faithful by which all members can actively participate. Since the Second Vatican Council, the exercise of magisterial authority has always emanated from a centralized authority of the church located at the pope who possesses that distinctive supreme teaching authority as bishop of Rome. This papal primacy frames the ecclesiology of communion that governs the church today, particularly the collegiality among bishops that places all local churches in communion with the universal church. While one apex in an ecclesiastical pyramid ensures and protects unity in the church, it also becomes problematic as the global church continues to evolve into a more heterogeneous and non-Western unit. On this basis alone, it would be surprising not to find the church with a new center outside of Rome.¹

In view of this, the paper explores the possibility of a decentralized exercise of magisterial authority using a polyhedron model. In the context of church authority, the figure of the polyhedron represents an expanded vision of unity that reimagines new connections between the local and global Catholic Church, but more importantly, places the local church in a unique position as locus of hierarchical teaching authority. The main question that will be addressed by this paper is the following: *How can the local church participate in and/or contribute to the exercise of the magisterium's authority?*

¹ See Thomas Rausch, *Global Catholicism: Profiles and Polarities* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2021).

MAGISTERIUM AND UNITY OF THE CHURCH

As the pastoral teaching office of the Church, I would like to focus on the authoritative character of the magisterium that is borne exclusively, in contemporary understanding, by the church hierarchy particularly the bishops. Grounded in their episcopal consecration, this authority is exercised in the name and authority of Christ² by which the episcopate act as “*authentic* teachers and interpreters of the word of God” (emphasis is mine),³ realized in three modes: a) the ordinary magisterium, b) extraordinary magisterium, and c) ordinary universal magisterium.⁴ All these expressions of magisterial authority rest on a specific understanding of unity that principally stems from Christ, and manifests in professed faith,

² Vatican II Council. Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum* (November 18 1965) §10, at the Holy See https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html; Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* (hereafter LG), (21 November 21 1964) §31, at the Holy See https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.²⁵

³ The word ‘authentic’ here has been criticized by Francis Sullivan as an incorrect translation of the Latin word *authenticus*, and instead suggests retrieving an obsolete translation as “authoritative” or “entitled to obedience.” Therefore, an “authentic interpretation” of the gospel by the living magisterium must be read with this context in mind, and not be misconstrued as bishops to be the only genuine interpreters of the word of God. See Francis Sullivan, *Magisterium: Teaching Authority in the Catholic Church* (New York: Paulist, 1983), 27.

⁴ In the first instance, this pertains to multiple ways by which the pope and bishops, whether individually or in groups, can use their teaching authority. The second and third instance speaks of an authority that is taught with the charism of infallibility, with the former enforced by the College of Bishops in an ecumenical council and the other belonging exclusively to the Bishop of Rome (as head of the College of Bishops) by issuing a solemn definition *ex cathedra*; the latter holds a definitive judgment on a particular teaching while the College of Bishops are dispersed throughout the world. See detailed discussion in Richard Gaillardetz, *By What Authority? Foundations for Understanding Authority in the Church* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press Academic, 2018), 135-153.

sacramental worship, and pastoral government,⁵ by which the entire faithful takes part in virtue of one's baptism.⁶ The Roman Pontiff as the holder of the supreme teaching authority of the church contains that perpetual and visible principle and foundation of unity between the bishops and faithful, and extends to the hierarchy (as successors of the college of apostles) this guarantee of unity which local churches then carry out.⁷ The communion of churches to one another testifies to a global and dynamic notion of unity that traces back to Christ.⁸ We can see that papal primacy frames the ecclesiology of communion that governs the Church today, particularly the collegiality among bishops that places all local churches in communion with the universal church.⁹

⁵ Avery Dulles, "The Church as 'One Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic.'" *Evangelical Review of Theology* 23, no. 1 (January 1999): 11–23. <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.kuleuven.e-bronnen.be/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0000984392&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

⁶ Gal. 3:26–27; cf. 1 Cor. 10:1–4; 12:13; Vatican 2. Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis Redintegratio* (November 21, 1964), §4

⁷ *LG*, 23

⁸ The universal Church is not to be understood as the sum of all local churches. A local church (alternately referred to as particular church) in itself is the Church universal actualized in a particular place and culture. See Michael Buckley, SJ, *Papal Primacy and the Episcopate: Towards a Relational Understanding* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 56 ; "The doctrine in which the Church is seen as a *communio* and which therefore determines the relations which exist between the particular churches and the universal Church, and between collegiality and primacy." See John Paul II, *Sacrae disciplina leges*, in Code of Canon Law, Latin-English Edition (Washington, D.C.: Canon Law Society of America, 1983), xv.

⁹ "*Communio* offers a new understanding of the unity of the Church because, paradoxically, it is a retrieval of a patristic understanding of the Church as a *communio ecclesiarum*." See Buckley, *Papal Primacy and the Episcopate*, 55.

Polyhedron Model

Shifting from a hierarchical model of magisterial authority as grounded in the power of the primacy where there is an apex in the ecclesiastical pyramid, a *polyhedron* model¹⁰ showcases a decentralized magisterial authority by which particular churches are not merely receiving ends of a universalist ecclesiology but espouses an ecclesiology of communion from below that recognizes the particular churches as locus of hierarchical teaching authority. For purposes of definition, a polyhedron is a geometrical three-dimensional shape consisting of flat polygons joined at their edges, converging on multiple vertices or intersection points. In Figure 1, we use a regular solid polyhedron whose faces, vertices, and lines are identical to each other.¹¹ By eliminating the apex in the hierarchical model, each local church is accorded equal status (even to the church of Rome) which magnifies their fullness as a distinct part of a whole, and their communion with other parts as represented by converging vertices.

This means that authority is shared among all particular churches rather than the church of Rome

¹⁰ The inspiration for this model comes from *Evangelii Gaudium* which had used it as a middle ground for tensions between globalization and localization within the ecclesial plane, that reflects the convergence of all parts while preserving and respecting its distinctiveness, in contrast to the image of a sphere “which is no greater than its parts, where every point is equidistant from the centre, and there are no differences between them.” See Francis. Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World *Evangelii*

Gaudium (24 November 2013) §236, The Holy See, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html

¹¹ Marjorie Senechal, “Introduction to the Polyhedron Kingdom” in *Shaping Space: Exploring Polyhedra in Nature, Art, and the Geometrical Imagination*, Senechal (ed) (New York: Springer New York, 2013), 4-5.

dictating the normative magisterial function. This shared authority, however, does not make each local church strictly autonomous, however it makes possible for them to become direct contributors in this authentic exposition and authoritative teaching of the Church, while being in communion with other churches.

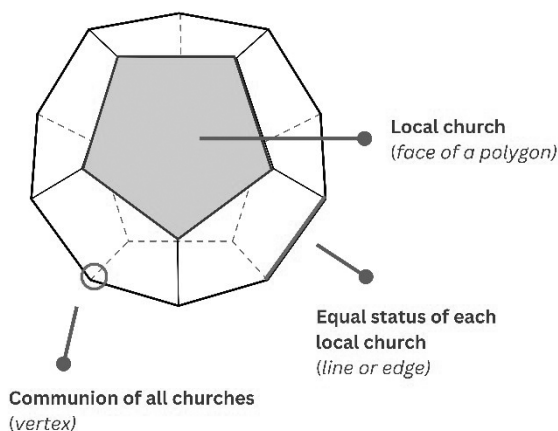


Figure 1. Polyhedron Model of Magisterial Authority

A polyhedral exercise of magisterial authority confronts itself with the following possible implications: a) How can canonical law support a decentralization of magisterial authority? (*juridical*), b) How will this disrupt or enrich unity as foundation of universality in the Church? (*ontological*), c) What concrete guidelines or criteria can be set to legitimize local participation? (*operational*), and d) What image of the church can we derive from this polyhedron model? (*ecclesiological*).

CASE STUDY: THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS FOR THE PAN-AMAZON REGION (2020)¹²

The Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon Region in 2020 will serve as case study to demonstrate the *permissibility* of the polyhedron model.

The aforementioned synod has concretely demonstrated Francis' dream and position on synodality as shown by the fruitful exchange and careful attention provided to the participants regarding pastoral concerns unique to their region, as well as the ways of proceeding exercised throughout the consultation. A critical issue that I wish to focus on would be the Amazon's plea to ordain married men in their territories to address the shortage of ministers across the nine-nation region, with a 128-41 vote result from the attending bishops. Despite this agreement, the Pope rejects this request on the conviction that the exclusive character received in Holy Orders cannot be delegated, and instead digressed the focus of the final published post-synodal exhortation to larger concerns.¹³

This particular example demonstrates how dogmatic teaching responds to cultural changes and new questions or concerns emerging from local contexts. It reveals a way doing theology that insists on tradition rather than the context to be generative of theology. Moreover, it invites

¹² Majority of this section including the footnotes is taken from my research master thesis. See Mendoza, Kim, Peter De Mey, and Stephanus van Erp. "The Teaching Authority of The Magisterium In An Emerging Synodal Church". KU Leuven. Faculteit Theologie en Religiewetenschappen, 2023, 18-19.

¹³ See Joshua McElwee, "Francis declines to answer Amazon synod's requests for married priests, women ministers" (National Catholic Reporter, February 12, 2020), <https://www.ncronline.org/vatican/francis-declines-answer-amazon-synods-requests-married-priests-women-ministers#:~:text=Pope%20Francis%20has%20not%20granted,across%20the%20nine%2Dnation%20region.>

the hierarchy to conceive of pastoral solutions that are contextually shaped where tradition and the cultural dimension mediate each other, modeling a dialogical relationship between the universal and local church.

Secondly, it also illustrates the dynamics and complications on the consultation process (as mediated by synods and regional episcopal conferences) and deliberation from the local church to the universal church.¹⁴ It exposes the role of the pope as holder of supreme teaching authority and compromises for how this is exercised. Richard Gaillardetz writes that “Extraordinary circumstances may require the pope to intervene in the affairs of a local church for the sake of the unity of faith and communion of all churches.”¹⁵ Based on the development of what transpired in this synod, the reversal of Francis’ decision can be used to show how the supreme teaching authority possessed by the pope may be used arbitrarily and therefore, questioned whether his action was indeed a conclusive exercise of communion of churches resulting from a specific disruption of unity of faith; contrary to his conviction in *Amoris Laetitia* where Francis underscored that not all discussions of doctrinal, moral, spiritual, and

¹⁴ Consultation from all levels of the Church is the primary element in Pope Francis’ synodal Church, which is made present as the *modus vivendi et operandi* (mode of living and working) of the Church that exceeds juridical expression. However, it is also underscored that “decision-making” (a joint exercise of discernment, consultation, and co-operation) is a synodal task among the People of God while “decision-taking” rests on the competence of bishops and deemed a ministerial responsibility. See International Theological Commission, “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church” (2 March 2018), §6, 43, 69 ; http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_201803_02_sinodalita_en.html ; Larger than the power to deliberate is the supreme power possessed by the Pope whose impact is visibly felt by the entire Church. Papal primacy dominates not only the ranks of apostolic ministry (authority) but also the scope of power with full prerogative on how it will be expressed and used (power).

¹⁵ Gaillardetz, *By What Authority*, 48.

pastoral by nature need to be settled by interventions of the magisterium.¹⁶ Similar to the function of the hierarchy to preserve and protect this unity of faith, it would also be necessary to identify conditions that warrant the exercise of this supreme authority.¹⁷

Following a polyhedron model of magisterial authority, the votes reveal that there is a communion among bishops (representing their churches) present during the deliberation. Moreover, it also highlights that while this may be the contextual response for a pastoral need of the Amazon region, it need not be actualized as a general solution for other faces of the polygon (as represented by other local churches) that emerge from variegated contexts.¹⁸ The participation of local churches in the authoritative teaching authority is made possible through conceiving a communion of churches that diffuses the power of the papacy, and enacts a mutually enriching relationship between the local and universal Church. While the college of bishops becomes that visible expression of the communion of churches (but always in communion with

¹⁶ Francis. Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* (March 19, 2016), §2-3, https://www.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf

¹⁷ We can inquire further: If “the primacy of the pope is a primacy *within* [the episcopate] and not *vis-à-vis* this college [of bishops],” how is this primacy exercised that maintains its episcopal character? Or would the exercise of the Pope’s supreme authority be conditional to be in communion with the College of Bishops? What are the theological implications in the universal communion of churches in the exercise of this supreme teaching and deliberative authority? (Quote from Karl Rahner, “On the Divine Right of the Episcopate,” in *The Episcopate and the Primacy* (Herder, 1962), 77-78.)

¹⁸ Some limitations of the polyhedron model are as follows: 1) Does a polyhedron approach remove papal primacy (pope’s supreme teaching authority)?, 2) Given the demographic shift of Catholic members towards the global south, would it still be justifiable for the Church of Rome (consequently, the Bishop of Rome) to retain that distinctive primacy among all churches? Further, for whom does the primacy of the church of Rome actually serve?

the pope), the study has shown how papal primacy becomes a continued impediment to the decentralization of this teaching authority.

CONCLUSION

The view of the church hierarchy (and by extension, the modalities of its authority and power) has historically evolved with the pervading image of the church. In view of this correlative relationship, any new vision of the church requires us to refashion the magisterium that aligns with this image. The figure of the polyhedron allowed us to reconceive the power lines of magisterial authority that directly involves local churches as agents and not only subjects of this authority, by which the universal Church can be benefit from the particularities and pastoral solutions for each local church. Moreover, it has expanded the vision of unity that reimagines new connections between the local and global Catholic Church, advancing a qualitative understanding of Catholicity that transcends uniformity, exclusivity, and dogma, and serves as a concrete example of operationalizing a decentralized synodal Church envisioned by Pope Francis.

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