

## Summary Document No 7

### Subsidiarity: extending participation

The term 'subsidiarity' is a clumsy word for a simple principle, derived from the Latin for 'help' or 'support': '*subsidium*': that decisions on any matter should be informed by the people affected; and that decisions should be taken by an appropriate authority as close as possible to the people affected. It is a principle of effective leadership and good decision making, reflecting respect for the rights of people affected by decisions.

Subsidiarity is well entrenched in Catholic teaching but, ironically, not well adopted in Catholic church governance. The term was first used in a 1931 papal encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* (no. 79) by Pope Pius XI when the Church was trying to resist authoritarian ideologies, particularly Soviet communism and Nazism.

Subsidiarity is a social principle that ensures individuals, groups and associations have maximum freedom to exercise personal responsibility as they pursue their goals in light of the common good.

Subsidiarity aims to disperse decision making as widely as possible, so that decisions are made at the most appropriate level, usually a lower level, with the support and coordination of the state and other bodies. It is not to be confused with devolution, the shifting of decisions to a lower level; it can also require decisions to be made at a higher level if needed for the common good.

Subsidiarity is also recognised widely in the secular world as a principle of good governance, and is a founding principle of the European Union in the balance of authority and power between nation members and the new Union, to preserve local rights and informed decision making.

It is not just about distributing power more equitably and effectively in society and economic affairs. It also encourages developing forms of association and skills so people can play a more active and informed role in their social and work lives.

### Subsidiarity and participation

Pope Benedict XVI in 2009 highlighted the link between subsidiarity and participation: "Subsidiarity is always designed to achieve... emancipation

because it fosters freedom and participation through assumption of responsibility” (*Caritas in Veritate*, no. 57).

Catholic teaching has emphasised the right to wide participation in making decisions and putting them into practice. Popes John XXIII in *Mater et Magistra* (no.31-32) and Paul VI in *Octogesima Adveniens* (no. 47) in 1971 urged that people be admitted to greater responsibility in social and economic life.

The 1971 Synod of Bishops on Justice in the World stressed: ‘Participation is a right to be applied both in the economic and in the social and political fields’ (par. 18).

Moreover, the Synod said the right to participate in the Church extended to all Catholics, in accord with the rules given by Second Vatican Council and the Holy See, e.g. by setting up councils at all levels (par. 46). ‘The Church recognises everyone’s right to suitable freedom of expression and thought. This includes the right of everyone to be heard in a spirit of dialogue which preserves a legitimate diversity in the Church.’ (par. 44).

The Synod reiterated ‘that lay people should exercise more important functions with regard to Church property and should share in its administration’; and ‘women should have their own share of responsibility and participation in the community life of society and likewise of the Church.’ (par. 41-42).

Pope Francis has adapted the hope for wider participation in the Church in terms of synodality, which simply means ‘walking together’. Synodality can be seen as an application of the principle of subsidiarity.

Australia has already embarked on the synodal journey with the Plenary Council called by its Catholic Bishops with the support of Pope Francis. He is inviting the whole Catholic world to learn to be more authentic Christians in the way we live and work.

In March 2020, he announced that the next world Synod of Bishops at the Vatican in October 2022 will take as its theme: "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission." Subsidiarity is the key to both the Plenary Council and the next world Synod of Bishops.