

## Training course on Synodality 2023/2024

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### Sources for evangelisation: a synodal approach

Mission is inherent in the Christian faith, ignited by love. This is why the current synodal process has evangelisation as its objective. I will indicate five sources, not alternative but complementary, that nourish and enliven this task.

#### 1. Prayer

- The Synod is an event of the Spirit

Pope Francis was very clear: 'Synodality requires and presupposes the irruption of the Holy Spirit' (*Letter to the People of God on Pilgrimage in Germany*, 29 June 2019). We are thus faced with an event of the Spirit, who continues to act in history and to manifest himself, "" a giving life, soul-like, to ecclesiastical institutions and instilling into the hearts of the faithful the same mission spirit which impelled Christ Himself (*Ad gentes*, 4). In this way, new languages of faith and new ways blossom, capable not only of interpreting events from a theological point of view, but also of finding in the midst of trials the reasons to refound the path of Christian and ecclesial life (cf. *Preparatory Document*, 7).

- Synodal discernment takes place in the realm of prayer

In order to discern what the Lord wants from us as the Church today, to get out of our comfort zone, understood in a broad sense, to proceed to the sowing of the Good News, two attitudes are essential: silence and listening. And, therefore, the development of the praying dimension. Only if we live in prayer will we be able to listen to one another and to the Holy Spirit. "For there to be synodality, the presence of the Spirit is necessary, and there is no Spirit without prayer" (*Document for the Continental Stage*, 72).

- Prayer opens us to unity in plurality

The Pope insists on the need to evangelise cultures in order to inculturate the Gospel (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 69) and specifically emphasises the importance of popular piety, as the fruit of the inculturated Gospel, as an actively evangelising force (cf. *Ibid.*, 126). The variety of ritual traditions of liturgical prayer, as well as the symbolic forms in which different cultures express themselves, is certainly a richness. A renewed love for spirituality and a commitment to care for the beauty and synodal style of celebrations support the radiance of a missionary Church (cf. *Document for the Continental Stage*, 97).

#### 2. The People of God

I do not intend to develop here a theology of the People of God. I just want to emphasise that it is the Church that evangelises. When we speak of co-responsibility and participation in the Church, also with regard to evangelisation, we are indebted to the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council, reflected above all in the constitutions *Lumen gentium* and *Gaudium et spes*, as well as in the decrees *Unitatis redintegratio*, *Ad gentes* and *Apostolicam actuositatem*.

- Baptism as a fundamental sacrament

Before any distinction on the basis of particular vocations or charisms and ministries, all the baptised share the fundamental equality of being members of the one People of God. However, it is only in Christ that we become the People of God. Therefore, the Church's being and mission do not revolve around the hierarchy, but all functions and ministries revolve around the task entrusted to all the baptised. In fact, as the International Theological Commission recalls, "in the Church all have the same dignity by virtue of Baptism (cf. *Galatians* 3,28; *1 Corinthians* 12,13) and all must all make their contribution to carry out the plan of salvation "according to the measure of Christ's gift" (*Ephesians* 4,7)" (International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, Vatican 2018, 22).

- Plurality as richness

The Synod (communion on the way) brings us back to the essence of the Church, to the baptismal dimension of the People of God, which involves everyone in living out their vocation and charism. Earlier we spoke of inculturation. We must evangelise as a whole and "in a network", not as isolated groups or individuals, but as Church, starting from the experience of its own charisma and its own cultural peculiarities, overcoming clericalism and also any temptation to assembly.

The *Instrumentum laboris* (cf. no. 12), citing the constitution *Lumen gentium*, warns that the shared reference cannot be anything other than the vision of Vatican II, based on the catholicity of the People of God, in virtue of which "each individual part contributes through its special gifts to the good of the other parts and of the whole Church." (*Lumen gentium* 13).

- New cultures as a challenge

The Pope, referring to large urban centres, warned that Christians today are often not promoters or generators of meaning, but receive other languages, symbols, messages and paradigms that offer new orientations of life, often in contrast to the Gospel of Jesus (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium* 73). And the *Instrumentum laboris*, in order to help discern the extent to which the Church today is prepared and equipped for the mission of proclaiming the Gospel with conviction, freedom of spirit and effectiveness, recognises that the digital environment is shaping the life of society today and asks how the Church can carry out its mission more effectively in it (cf. *Instrumentum laboris*, B 2.1).

### 3. Signs of the times

- Evangelising here and now

This term, which has gained strength especially in the post-conciliar period, refers to historical events in which we can find a meaning that refers us to the divine salvific plan worked in Jesus Christ and which require a response from us. Inspired by the work of the theologian Marie-Dominique Chenu (1895-1990), it expresses both the positive vision the Church wants to have of the world and the historical perspective of the Church and evangelisation, avoiding intellectualism and spiritualism. The Word becomes incarnate. And to continue the work of Christ, the Church must necessarily scrutinise the signs of the times and interpret them in the light of the Gospel, "in language intelligible to each generation, she can respond to the perennial questions which men ask about this present life and the life to come, and about the relationship of the one to the other. We must therefore recognize and understand the world in which we live, its explanations, its longings, and its often dramatic characteristics" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 4).

- The scope of discernment

Reading the "signs of the times", as the Council states, implies both a collective discernment and a response, a commitment of the Church through its members. This discernment is only possible in prayer and community. Only then can we truly know the real challenges of our time and perceive God's presence and action in it. Thus, in this synodal experience, the members of the People of God "are responding to the summons of the Lord, listening as a community to what the Spirit is saying to the Church through the Word of God which resonates in their situation, and interpreting the signs of the times with the eyes of faith. In the synodal Church the whole community, in the free and rich diversity of its members, is called together to pray, listen, analyse, dialogue, discern and offer advice on taking pastoral decisions which correspond as closely as possible to God's will", (International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, Vatican 2018, 68).

#### **4. The Holy Scriptures**

- New listening to the Word and new evangelisation

The decree *Ad Gentes* states that "Those who are sent to different nations in order to be good ministers of Christ, should be nourished with the "words of faith and with good doctrine" (1 Tim. 4:6), which they should draw principally from the Sacred Scriptures, studying the mystery of Christ, whose heralds and witnesses they will be." (*Ad Gentes*, 26). In this regard, I would like to highlight the work of the Twelfth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in 2008 on the theme 'The Word of God in the life and mission of the Church'. In the final list of proposals to be presented to the Holy Father, the third part focuses on the theme of the Word of God in the mission of the Church and offers interesting suggestions. Making many of them his own, Benedict XVI links the new listening to the Word of God with the new evangelisation (cf. *Verbum Domini*, 122).

- Gospel and life

Pope Francis said very well that the words of Holy Scripture are not written to remain trapped on papyrus, parchment or paper, but to be received by a person in prayer, making

them flow into his heart. For the word of God goes to the heart (cf. *Catechesis*, 27 January 2021). In the wake of what is indicated in *Verbum Domini*, it is worth remembering that every form of proclamation must first of all bear in mind the intrinsic relationship between communication of the Word of God and Christian witness, because the very credibility of the proclamation depends on this. "On the one hand, the word must communicate every-thing that the Lord himself has told us. On the other hand, it is indispensable, through witness, to make this word credible, lest it appear merely as a beautiful philosophy or utopia, rather than a reality that can be lived and itself give life." (*Verbum Domini*, 97). There is no evangelisation until Jesus of Nazareth, Son of God, his name, his doctrine, his life, his promises, his kingdom and his mystery are proclaimed (cf. St Paul VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi*, 22), we must not forget that this is only possible if there is an authentic experience of Christ on the part of every Christian.

- Listening to the Word and the Eucharistic assembly

In relation to the following point, I would like to quote a suggestive text from the document of the International Theological Commission on Synodality: "In the Eucharistic synaxis we listen to the Word in order to accept its message and let it illuminate our path. We learn how to hear God's voice by meditating on Scripture, especially the Gospel, by celebrating the sacraments, above all the Eucharist, and by welcoming our brothers and sisters, especially the poor. Whoever exercises pastoral ministry and is called to break the bread of the Word along with the Eucharistic bread needs to be familiar with the life of the community, in order to communicate God's message in the here and now of its life. The dialogical structure of the Eucharistic liturgy is the paradigm of community discernment: before listening to each other, disciples must listen to the Word." (International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, Vatican 2018, 109c).

Pope Francis points out that "God's word, listened to and celebrated, above all in the Eucharist, nourishes and inwardly strengthens Christians, enabling them to offer an authentic witness to the Gospel in daily life... The preaching of the word, living and effective, prepares for the reception of the sacrament, and in the sacrament that word attains its maximum efficacy". (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 174).

## 5. The Eucharist

- Source and summit of synodal dynamism

The Eucharist is, par excellence, the sacrament of love, which impels us to commit ourselves for our neighbour. For this reason, it also appears as the source and summit of all evangelisation (*Presbiterorum Ordinis*, 5; cf. *Working Document for the Continental Stage*, 11). Thus, as the *Instrumentum Laboris* emphasises, communion and mission are nourished in the common participation in the Eucharist, which makes the Church a body "firm and united" (Eph 4:16) in Christ, capable of walking together towards the Kingdom and bearing witness (*Instrumentum Laboris*, 20). This is why the Eucharist is in itself the "source and summit" of the synodal dynamism of the Church. Therefore, the synodal Church is constantly nourished by the mystery it celebrates in the liturgy and especially in the Eucharist (cf.

*Instrumentum laboris*, 30; *Working Document for the Continental Stage*, 89). All this is a challenge and a responsibility for us.

- A testimony of joy

Jesus leaves us the Eucharist as the daily memorial of the Church, leading us ever closer to Easter (cf. Lk 22:19). From this reality, evangelising joy always shines against the backdrop of grateful remembrance: it is a grace we must ask for (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 13), because "a Christian who is not joyful in his heart", says Pope Francis, "is not a good Christian". Joy "is the breath, the way of expression of the Christian" because the one who provokes "joy in the heart is the Holy Spirit" (*Eucharist at Casa Santa Marta*, 28 May 2018).

As Christians, we witness this good news, this joy lived and celebrated in the Eucharist, taking the Paschal Mystery as our point of reference: we celebrate the risen Lord, we encounter him and we witness him. In this sense, the passage of the disciples of Emmaus offers us both a beautiful and precise trace of the synodal process and a solid point of reference for the evangelisation to which we are called. Benedict XVI observed that the disciples' hearts were filled with joy when they recognised that the Lord remains in our midst, a faithful companion on our journey (cf. Mt 28:20). The Eucharist makes us discover that Christ, dead and risen, becomes our contemporary in the mystery of the Church, his Body. And, like the disciples of Emmaus, we too feel impelled to share this immense joy with everyone (cf. *Sacramentum caritatis*, 97).

## **Conclusion**

We are on a journey as the People of God, in communion with Christ and with our brothers and sisters (with the Church), in fidelity to the Gospel, listening to the Holy Spirit. We are not in a merely bureaucratic process; synodality refers to what the Church is (the being, the doing, the style), it is oriented towards consistency and is open to authenticity. Referring to the essence of the Church (to the 'we' in Christ), it necessarily results in the evangelising impulse that moves us to communicate the Good News we have received and with which we identify. The purpose of the synodal process is ultimately to open horizons of hope for the fulfilment of the mission that the Lord has entrusted to the Church (cf. *Instrumentum laboris*, 3; *Document for the continental Stage*, 6): "Go into the whole world and preach the Gospel to every creature" (Mk 16:15).

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