

## THE SYNOD'S FINAL REPORT: ORIENTATIONS AND SUMMARY

### INTRODUCTION

With the publication in Italian of the final document of the 16<sup>th</sup> Synod of bishops, the Synod on Synodality has reached its conclusion. Pope Francis has accepted the document in full and in exemplary synodal manner has chosen not to follow it up with the customary papal Apostolic Exhortation. The document therefore is now part of the Ordinary Magisterium of the Church and clearly teaches that synodality must be accepted as constitutive of the Church.

This is an important ecclesiological development the theological implications of which will gradually emerge over time. Starting now, however, all local Churches and Conferences are urged to embed this synodal way of consultation and discernment in all their affairs. The document states that there should be regular evaluation of the progress made in the inclusion of all the baptised in the synodal process. Personnel and resources must be assigned to this evaluation with regular liaison with the Synod Secretariat in Rome (Final Document 9) While the document doesn't prescribe how this is done, one can imagine each diocese and Conference setting up a Synodal Commission for this purpose.

It is abundantly clear in this final text that synodality is not for its own sake but for the purpose of mission. All the baptized individually and collectively are called to engage in the missional purpose of the Church. (FD 4) "Mission throws light on synodality, and synodality drives mission." (FD 32) This is a Church no longer closed in on itself or concerned with her rights and entitlements, but a Church going out in service to the world.

Time and again reference is made to the sexual abuse crisis in the Church. Synodality is presented as the Church's response to this crisis. It is the concrete manifestation not only of deep sorrow and apology but also of the deep conversion that the Church is undergoing in her way of doing things. This link must never be broken. Indeed, to reject this teaching on synodality is to argue that the Church's way of living and working has no need of change.

Each section of the document begins with a scripture reflection thus showing that its teaching is rooted in the Word of God. The conclusion offers a beautiful reflection on the theme of banquet described in John 21 and Isaiah 25. "As we walk together in a synodal manner, in the interplay of our vocations, charisms, and ministries, we go to encounter everyone with the joy of the Gospel. We live out that Communion which brings salvation: communion with God, with the

whole of humanity, and with the entire creation. So we begin even now to experience, thanks to this Participation, the banquet of life God offers to all peoples.” (FD 154)

Conversion is the theme which structures the whole document and around which the five chapters are developed. It calls for a conversion which is spiritual, relational, procedural, institutional, and missionary. It is this conversion in all its aspects which will drive the major calls of the Synod: baptism as the basis for synodality, expanded roles for women, lay participation in decision-making, decentralisation of Church authority, and significant structural reform.

### Spiritual Conversion

“Conversion of the feelings, images, and thoughts which are in our hearts happens at the same time as our pastoral and missionary conversion.” (FD 11)

It is baptism in the name of the Trinity which gives the People of God its identity, its call to holiness, and its mission to all people, most especially the poor, with the gift of salvation. (FD 15, 19) “There is nothing greater than this dignity given equally to everyone which clothes us in Christ.” (FD 21)

Synodality is the spiritual disposition which must permeate the individual lives of the baptised and the entire mission of the Church. The constant deepening of personal and community spirituality allows the primacy of God’s grace to be the driving force of all the Church does.

Sharing in the divine nature, all the baptised receive an “instinct” for the truth of the Gospel. Collectively, they intuitively understand what conforms to Revelation and so cannot err in matters of faith or morals. (FD 22) This “instinct” grows through the reception of the Sacraments, most especially the Eucharist, and the listening to the Word of God. There is a deep connection between the liturgy, synodality, and personal and community conversion.

### Conversion of Relationships

This section calls for a deep change in how we relate to each other within the Church so as to manifest ever more fully the grace of Christ, the love of the Father and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit (FD 50) Most especially, the relationships between men and women must be grounded in their equal dignity and reciprocity. The document notes the pain and suffering expressed by women throughout the Church caused by their unequal treatment. Indeed, it

powerfully notes that this has led to the creation of a structural sinfulness which affects the way people think and act. (FD 53) The Assembly calls for the full realisation of the possibilities afforded to women even in the governance of the Church. It also makes clear that the question of women and the diaconate remains open to further discernment even if it was not a topic of conversation during the meetings. (FD 60) Encouragement is given, however, for local Churches to reflect with imagination and courage on the creation of new formal ministries for both women and men. (FD 66) Starting now, the Assembly calls for fuller participation of the laity in all the decision-making processes of the local church, greater access to positions of responsibility, and an increase of trained laity in the canonical processes of the Church. (FD 77) They should also have a role in the appointment of their new bishop. (FD 70)

Ordained ministries too must undergo this conversion of relationships. Bishops, priests, and deacons must live and work in a synodal manner, accompanying and sustaining each other in their ministry. (FD 71) The synodal experience will help them re-discover co-responsibility with each other and with the laity. This will also help clarify their specific tasks and responsibilities, make them more able to delegate what does not specifically belong to their ministry, and so avoid clericalism. (FD 74) For instance, the Assembly notes, quoting *Lumen Gentium* 29, that permanent Deacons are ordained “not towards the priesthood but towards ministry” in order to promote within the Church a style of service to all especially the poor. (FD 73)

### Conversion of Processes

The focus here is on the need to move to a new way of how the Church makes decisions. The Assembly is clear that this must be a synodal mode, rooted in the *sensus fidei* of all the baptised. (FD 81) This way of ecclesial discernment is both condition for and privileged expression of synodality in which communion, participation, and mission come together. (FD 82) A distinction is made between decision-making which belongs to all the baptised and decision-taking which belongs to the competent authority. The exercise of authority can thus no longer be imposed in an arbitrary way and the distinction between consultation (*tantum consultivum*) and decision-taking is considered inadequate. “A view which emerges from the consultative process with the appropriate discernment and participation cannot be ignored.” (FD 92) The document calls for a change in Canon Law to clarify this.

This synodal mode of decision-taking calls for transparency, accountability, and evaluation on the part of the entire ecclesial community, bishop, clergy, and laity. This means that each diocese must have a Council of Priests, a Diocesan Pastoral Council, Parish Pastoral Councils, Diocesan and Parish Finance Councils with regular reporting and evaluation. (FD 103) This process of reporting and evaluation should meet the standards used in civil society and especially involve lay people with expertise in these matters. (FD 101) The Assembly recommends the methodology of Conversation in the Spirit to be used in these Councils. (FD 105) Finally, the Assembly proposes that the Diocesan Synod be used more often by the bishop as a way of regular consultation with the People of God. (FD 108) The voices of everyone as far as possible must be heard most especially of those who find themselves on the margins of the Church for whatever reason. (FD 82, 87) The Assembly urges that this way of ecclesial discernment, care for the decisional process, and the commitment to continual reporting and evaluating both the decisions and the decision-takers become part of normal practice. (FD 79-80)

### Conversion of Institutions

A synodal Church recognises the institutions which together bond the Church in communion but also make space for what is particular to each culture. A globalised world calls for deeper links between and among parishes, dioceses, and Conferences in what the Assembly calls “an exchange of gifts.” (FD 120-123) The dynamic between “all” (the People of God), “some” (the college of bishops) and “one” (the bishop of Rome) will change and grow in this world and be reflected in the synodal manner of the Church’s life and mission.

The Church is rooted in particular places but the deep socio-cultural changes of our time enlarge our understanding of place so that it is no longer understood solely in specific geographical terms but more in terms of a network of relationships. As traditional territorial links weaken, the boundaries of parishes and dioceses become less defined and a missionary creativity in new forms of pastoral activity become needed. (FD 111) Migrants and refugees, for example, can change the face of the local church as they bring with them much of their own culture and maintain links with their Church of origin. A synodal Church should encourage this and adopt a pastoral practice which integrates these different spiritual and cultural links. (FD 112, 117)

Social media also influence the institutions of the Church as it reconfigures relationships, networks, and boundaries. Young people especially are

encouraged to reflect on how these media can promote encounter and dialogue, offer peer formation, and create the sense of belonging which are all part of a synodal Church. This highly connected world offers the Church new opportunities to experience its synodal dimension. (FD 113) Both the increased mobility of people and the high inter-connectivity of this generation make much more fluid previous ecclesiastical boundaries and offer new opportunities for the Church in this new socio-cultural territory. (FD 119) This highly interconnected world has decreased distance but not yet fostered closeness. This is a space for a synodal church to work in.

This understanding of the church as local and supra-local must discern, identify, and promote structures and concrete practices to allow it to become evermore a Church in mission. Bishops' Conferences have an important role in this. The Assembly proposes that the theological-canonical status of Conferences be re-examined so that their doctrinal and disciplinary competence be clarified. The role and identity of Continental Assemblies of bishops should equally be reflected upon to see how these can also promote a more synodal Church. These regional, national, and continental assemblies should reflect the variety of the People of God and so permit the bishops more easily to make the decisions required of them. (FD 127)

The bishop of Rome is the guarantor of both the unity of the Church in all its diversity and of its synodality. He is the one who presides over the “all,” “some,” and “one” of the synodal dynamics of the Church. The assembly calls for deeper theological reflection into what matters should be reserved to the Pope (*riservatio papalis*) and what should be restored to the bishops so that a greater decentralisation be achieved. (FD 134) The Apostolic Constitution *Episcopalis communio* transformed the Synod of bishops from being an occasional event to an ecclesial process in which the whole People of God may continue in the future to take part as in this 16<sup>th</sup> Synod.

### Missionary Conversion

A synodal, missionary Church requires formation of the whole People of God in this way of living and working as Church, with special emphasis placed upon the gifts given in Baptism, the foundation of our being Church. (FD 140-142) Formation in discipleship begins with Baptism and is rooted in it. It consists primarily in the promotion of openness, encounter, sharing, and working together. Consequently, this formation must be done together, laity, ordained, religious, and candidates for ministry, growing alongside each other in

reciprocal respect and collaborative ministry. (FD 143). Formation is not something the clergy “do” to the people. “In the Church, no-one is purely the object of formation: all are active agents and have something to give to one another.” (FD 144) Formation must therefore be characterised as an exchange of gifts between people with different vocations and backgrounds (Communion), with a view to service (Mission), growing in co-responsibility and involvement (Participation). (FD 147) A synodal Church will then become ever-more present in those “secular spaces” of education, sport, politics, entertainment etc giving witness to faith in the Lord. (FD 146)

Catechesis will enjoy a renewal in a synodal church. Emphasis should be placed in forming an outward looking community, filled with mercy and compassion, walking closely with others most especially those at the margins of society. The ministry of catechist should be appreciated and respected for itself as part of the gifts of Baptism and not seen as something delegated by the priest. (FD 145)

Candidates for the priesthood should be formed in the synodal style. This will require a significant presence of women in the formation process, a placement of candidates into the daily life of communities, training in working together with everyone in the Church and in the practice of ecclesial discernment. The Assembly calls for a revision of the *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* so that priestly formation becomes more adequate to a synodal Church. No less important is the formation of bishops so that they understand the authority given them in a deeply synodal way, especially in safeguarding matters (FD 148, 150).

## CONCLUSION

The remit of this second session of the Synod was to discern *how* to become a synodal church in mission. The Assembly members were urged to avoid abstract thinking and non-relevant theologising. They have been successful in both respects. The report is filled with the concrete and practical steps to be taken in order to flourish as a synodal Church. The crucial implementation phase now lies before us. If synodality is a “constitutive dimension of the Church” then it is incumbent upon parishes and dioceses now to decide upon the structures and processes which must be put in place to foster this synodal Church. “Synodal” now becomes one of the marks of the Church alongside One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic. Just as we would never dream of denying any one of those classical marks, so we cannot view synodality as a personal choice, or a passing fad, or something “we don’t do here.” The commitment of

bishops and priests will be crucial to establishing and implementing this new way of being Church. Transparency, accountability, and on-going evaluation cannot be seen as threats but rather as doors opening up the riches of the Church to more and more people, shining light on her missional purpose, and illuminating the baptismal dignity of all. There still remain “hot-button” doctrinal and ethical issues to discern and resolve but it this way of living and working as Church which will give more space and time for the voice of the Holy Spirit to be heard.