

Attitudes to be learned and questions of method

Communitarian discernment in a Synodal Church

Piero Coda

With this essay, the Secretary General of the International Theological Commission offers a valuable aid for the diocesan phase of the worldwide synodal process launched by the Catholic Church in October 2021. Coda suggests points for reflection around communitarian discernment and focuses on three issues: where the synodal process began; spiritual and theological attitudes crucial for communitarian discernment; and the dynamics driving this discernment.

1. The context of the synodal process

Pope Francis has announced that a Synod is not about a specific theme. Rather, it is a call to the Church's conscience to rediscover its synodal vocation. It is not a response to a crisis, then, but a welcoming of a grace that puts us in an ongoing evangelical crisis which constantly invites us to spiritual, pastoral, and structural conversion.

Francis hopes for an authentic event of the Spirit, one involving as many as possible in this period of 'reform, purification, discernment', in relation to 'a new stage in proclaiming the Gospel' (cf. *Evangelii gaudium* [EG] 287 and 30).

The goal is "Towards a synodal Church". But is this realistically possible? We obviously need to be realistic – obstacles, criticisms, resistance, the inertia of doing nothing, the risks – are certainly there and weigh heavily. We must take them into account, face them and enact appropriate measures. But it would be unforgivable to extinguish the fire of a process lit by the Spirit in the heart of the Church.

1.1 *The International Theological Commission document on Synodality*

In 2017, the International Theological Commission (CTI) published an in-depth study on the theme of synodality in the Church's life and mission. It highlighted the meaning, history

and relevance of the synodal dimension as constitutive of the Church in the *kairós* we are living now, reiterating what Pope Francis has repeated from the beginning of his ministry as Bishop of Rome: 'What the Lord asks of us is, in a certain way, is already contained in the word synod.'

Taking the lead from the ITC document's framework, the key points derive from a biblical ecclesiology that is clearly synodal: the notion of a Church convoked by God, actuated in the event of Jesus Christ, charismatically and ministerially structured as communion through the action of the Holy Spirit, sent forth on mission and eschatologically oriented. The New Testament's description of the Church comes into relief: It is both one and many – the community of those called together by Jesus as a people of God's new alliance with humanity in their differences of place and time. They are the seed and beginning of the coming Reign of God, a prophecy of the new heavens and the new earth, to bind up humanity's wounds and give hope to all. It is the Church to which we are all called to give blood, flesh and life, thanks also to the grace of this process. Using an expression of Yves Congar, Francis speaks of 'not a new, but a different' Church, a journeying church, one of encounter, of listening, of companionship and service, a church capable of discerning in the light of the Gospel those (formidable!) needs and challenges facing the human family.

1.2. A decisive step in implementation of the Council

Vatican II was the providential start of what led to the synodal process proclaimed by Francis. I am inclined to say that perhaps we are being called to live the most important event – and strategically most decisive – since Vatican II. Because of the ecclesiology of Vatican II, it constitutes its most genuine and challenging expression.

Still, despite the thousands of evident contradictions, God's people have learned to live happily and fruitfully the varied expressions of the face of the Church as delineated by the Council. These include the liturgy renewed by the faith community's listening to the Word of God, episcopal collegiality, rediscovery of the co-essentiality of charismatic gifts in the Church's life and mission, recovering and revaluing of the equal dignity of all the baptized, the indispensable nature of the ecumenical journey, the universal vocation to holiness, the role of Christians in social and public life as leaven and salt for dialogue in every field of endeavor, and so on.

Rediscovery and actuation of a synodal Church is both the convergent fruit of all that is necessary, and a coherent bringing forward of what gives place, expression and missionary zeal to the work of renewal promoted by the Council. Otherwise, it would lose its power and fade away.

Yes, synodality is what God expects of the Church in the third millennium, as Pope Francis repeats, and not just in the coming few years or decade. What we are engaged in is a long, demanding, and unprecedented process requiring trust, courage, creativity, generosity and perseverance.

1.3 Keyword: Participation

The central word in starting and carrying out the synodal process is participation, meaning 'to take part.' That is not to take merely 'a part' of the inheritance left to us by Jesus, but for

all to take part in all. Each according to his or her own charism, ministry, vocation or specific competence, and always in collaboration with others and at the service of every brother and sister. This is the activity of the Church in communion that is asked of us.

In the wake of Vatican II, various places and structures of participation were established both in the local and universal Church. But all too often they seem to lack a soul. It is necessary to reinject life into them at every level, and life in the Spirit. Norms and structures of participation are also needed and is an aspect of what Francis considers to be a decisive objective of the Synod. This does not signify creating theoretical, structural forms on a drawing board but to take off from the lived experience of the people of God.

Are all the baptized ready to live this experience? Probably only a minority. But it is precisely for this reason that, with humility and trust, we must embark on this journey, opening doors and windows to all.

1.4 A three-stage journey

It is the first time that the entire people of God, and not only bishops, have been convoked structurally in a synodal process of this magnitude. The Apostolic Constitution of the Synod of bishops, *Episcopalis Communio* (2018) foresees three stages for the convoked synod: preparation in the local Churches with involvement of the entire People of God; celebration of the Synod of bishops; the creative reception in the local Churches of the fruit of the discernment carried out by the Synod of bishops. This is something very new, not only from an ecclesial viewpoint, but also socially and culturally. What other institution could carry this out? It requires, however, a leap forward by all the local Churches.

It is similar to Vatican II: John XXIII convoked it, but the inspiration came from God with the Holy Spirit as protagonist and the worldwide episcopate throughout its sessions and then the entire people of God in its reception. Now, it is Pope Francis setting the tone, but the protagonists are the Holy Spirit and better than before, the people of God. At stake is not the success of a pontificate: it is the journey of the Church that – by the grace of God – never lacks the tender and strong accompaniment of God and the communion of saints.

2. Necessary attitudes conducive to ecclesial discernment

In the synodal process, communitarian discernment is the proving ground that encourages the maturity of all the components of the people of God, in a symphonic and co-essential exercise of its grace-filled spirit of prophecy (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 12).

Ecclesial ‘discernment’ above all means allowing us to be ‘discerned,’ as individuals and as community, to be assessed by the Spirit of Jesus (cf. Rev 1:4–3:22). Discernment is *the grace to receive* humbly and with docility from God what one is and what one lives as a disciple of Jesus. This is *commitment to act responsibly*, by using practices and method that allow one to walk along the ‘way’ that is Jesus himself (cf. Jn 14:6; Acts 9:2). In tune with the synodal logic of discernment, I will offer a few indicators for reflection, as an initial response to the question: *How is communitarian discernment lived and implemented?*

We begin by remembering that, as individuals and as a body, we must undergo a disarming X-ray of what it means for us to be Church, to be ‘in-Christ’ as Paul speaks of it: ‘For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no

longer Jew nor Greek, there is no longer slave nor free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus' (Gal 3: 27-28). This is the source of three paired attitudes: intention and humility; obedience and frankness; perceiving in the Spirit and synodal thinking.

2.1 *Intention and humility*

What is the intention – the spirit's guiding push -- underlying, animating and orienting my participation in the discernment process? If the intention is not fair and just from the beginning, everything becomes blurred and there is the risk of tainting and even distorting the process.

What is needed, instead, is an *agapic* [*ed.* selfless and spiritual love] intention open to all and reciprocally open, as Jesus was to the very end (cf. Jn 13:1), to the point of his own self-giving on the cross. So, the intention to listen, to understand from within, to make the first step, to become one, to have the capacity to wait, to be able to give one's own contribution at the right time and in the right way. . .

Concretely, this attitude implies humility: purifying thoughts, feelings, emotions and even inner impulses, making them pass through the 'emptying' out of love that Jesus lived in the incarnation and on the cross (cf. Phil 2: 3-5). This is a humility aware that even the most important ministry or charism is received from God and is for everyone and for which we are simple administrators.

2.2 *Obedience and parrhesia*

I place obedience first, because parrhesia [*ed.* frankness, candid expression of a person's relationship with the truth] is both its condition and its result. Obedience is attuned, in the Holy Spirit, to the wavelength of the Father's loving will. It prays, asks, invokes the gift of this attunement. Obedience – from the Greek *hypakoé* – means to listen 'from below,' that is, as sons and daughters – free, adults, creative, yes, but sons and daughters! I do not do what I see is good and we do not do what we see is good. That would be too little. Rather, in and with Jesus, we want to do what the Father wants for the 'common good' of all brothers and sisters. As Pope Francis expresses this: 'The Spirit leads us to detachment from ourselves and in search only of the will of God, because only from this comes the good of all the Church and of each one of us.'¹.

Hence the attitude in tandem with obedience: *parrhesia*, "saying all": with prudence, of course and with sensitivity to the other, but with frankness and trust. Parrhesia is a quality of the free person, one committed to building authentic relationships, to receiving and welcoming the gift of communion (the miracle of the synergy [*ed.* collaboration] between grace and freedom) and based on sincerity and transparency.

Parrhesia reveals the maturity of faith and love of a person and of a community because it describes – in Francis' words -- "the fundamental quality of the Christian life: to have one's heart turned to God, to believe in his love (cf. 1 Jn 4:16). 'This is the root of parrhesia from which flows the freedom of the sons of God that' – again Francis – 'casts out every false fear, every temptation to hide ourselves in a quiet life, in conformism or even in a subtle hypocrisy.'

2.3 *Perceiving in the Spirit and synodal thinking*

If the director of this community discernment process is the Holy Spirit, what is *the compass* that points us and guarantees that we are attuned to him in discerning and deciding? Of course, there is a series of objective criteria guaranteeing our travel along the Way: The Word of God first and foremost, faithfulness to the Church's living Tradition, the magisterium, charisms of the Spirit, the *sensus fidei* of the people of God...

Along with these, there are also decisive inner criterion: perceiving in the Spirit. This is a personal perception, shared, in Christ, with the objective presence, illumination and action of the Holy Spirit, in and among us. And to be receptive to this, as a gift of God, maturation, purification, formation and practice.

This perceiving in the Spirit requires being accompanied by what has been called synodal thinking². It is a way of seeing, discerning and acting that involves our whole humanity, starting from our mode of thinking, judging and deciding.

We must know and study the situations and problems we are called to discern, but with a transfigured thinking. It is not by chance that the key New Testament word, *metanoia*, literally means, transforming our mind. St Paul invites us to this: 'Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, that you may discern what is the will of God - what is good and acceptable and perfect' (Rom 12:2).

How can we attain this transformation of our mind in thinking and thus face problems and questions? Paul speaks of the grace of thinking according to the 'mind (*noûs*) of Christ' (cf. 1 Cor 2:16). Not thinking 'before' or 'outside' of being made one in Christ by his grace - as if *koinonia* were only a spiritual reality which has no effect on thinking. Rather, it is to live the thought of Jesus in the *Sentire cum Ecclesia in unitate* [ed. *to feel in unity with the Church*].

Surely, we must learn - in the Risen Jesus present among his people - to carry out this synodal reasoning. Whoever reasons in a synodal or 'perichoretic' way [ed. as in the relations between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit] - where thinking is of one with the other, in dialogue nourished by mutual love - will tend to attain the grace of thinking one in the other in Jesus.

3. The dynamic that rhythms community discernment

What is the dynamic, the rhythm that articulates communitarian discernment? It is a matter of seeing it in its historic perspective, with a coherent practical methodology that unfolds the shared in-Christ journey through specific emphases and contexts.

3.1 A "perichoretic" process of seeing/judging/acting

Certainly, Joseph-Léon Cardijn's method of see-judge-act has a specific and always valid relevance: to know the situation, to discern what is required and possible - the 'signs of the times' and the 'signs of the Spirit' - and to take the decisions and carry them out.

Now - and this is essential - all three moments are bound together. They are brought into action where each one keeps the others in mind, in a virtuous or 'perichoretic' circle. For example, we cannot see the true meaning of a situation or problem from the viewpoint of

the Kingdom of God, if we do not draw on the right judgment criterion by which one looks at it. As Pope Francis has said, we must decisively overcome the temptation 'to seek a hermeneutic of evangelical interpretation outside the message of the Gospel and outside the Church'. An example? The Latin American Bishops' Conference that took place at Aparecida at one point suffered from the temptation of a way of "seeing" which was completely 'antiseptic', detached and unengaged, which is impossible. The way we "see" is always affected by the way we direct our gaze. The question was, rather: How are we going to look at reality in order to see it? Aparecida replied: With the eyes of discipleship".³

3.2 *The decisive criterion of discernment: the paschal Christ*

It is necessary to look at situations and problems and to open oneself unarmed and courageously to the new paths required, focusing our heart and mind on Christ and on Christ crucified and risen.

It is a matter of seeing the world *as* he sees it, to see it with a loving glance, in him, in order to set free from below and within, the light of redemption and resurrection. A seeing, then, flowing from listening, because what comes from the crucified Christ is a cry, 'the' cry of humanity and of the cosmos, 'of the poor and of the earth' (Pope Francis), sometimes shouted and penetrating, sometimes silent and hidden. Again, Pope Francis: 'Let us ask for the gift of listening, listening to God, until we hear with Him the cry of the People; listening to the People to the point of breathing in the will to which God calls us.'⁴

3.3 *Decision-making, conflict management, verification*

To concretely describe the dynamics of communitarian discernment, the individual structural moments that gives rhythm to the process, and the resolution of discernment with decision, conflict management and verification need to be emphasized. A brief word on each:

a) *Decision* implies – as the origin of the word says – '*to make a cut,*', that is, not to become stuck in the quicksands of uncertainty, postponement and compromise. But, at a certain point (the right, mature moment) it signifies cutting the knot.

For decisions to be made as *sentire cum Ecclesia*, the Trinitarian interplay between *exercise of authority and achievement of consent*, must be intensified. Obviously, we must distinguish situations and cases. The general rule is the resolute commitment to have the Risen Jesus, the living Jesus in the midst of those gathered together in his Name (cf. Mt 18:20), Interpreter in the Spirit of the will of the Father, Guide and Teacher. And this, as we have said, we should 'perceive.'

For this to happen, the ministry of authority (*exousia*) should be carried out in a Trinitarian way, serving unity in equal and perichoretic relations among all – without authoritarianism or groupthink.⁵ It is a matter of carrying out the ministry of governance by figuratively not 'floating' above the waters, but not 'drowning' in them either. On the one hand, this means not hovering diplomatically 'above' or keeping oneself paternalistically 'outside' the process. On the other hand, not drowning one's own specific grace, authority, and ministerial responsibility in the process either.

Two useful clarifications on the discernment process⁶:

- the distinction between a *consultative* and a *deliberative* vote, in terms of which the people of God is called to offer all the needed evaluations for the final deliberation made by those who have ministerial responsibility.

- the correlative distinction between elaborating a decision (*decision-making*) and the taking of a decision at the end of the discernment process (*decision-taking*). For the decision not to remain a mere wish, it is necessary to provide for the conditions that make it practicable and to provide in practice the resources that allow it to be implemented.

b) *Conflict management*. We cannot delude ourselves. Conflicts, even painful ones, happen. For the health of ecclesial life and for every synodal journey, it is essential to discover as much as possible the true reasons for the conflict, which are often hidden.

There is certainly a strategy to be prudently considered, with *parrhesia*, in managing conflict according to the spiritual and social paradigm of *koinonia* in-Christ. This strategy is not a Hegelian or Marxist dialectic (eliminating the antithesis), or simply the democratic dialectic (positive compromise between the various theses), nor a mere creative dialectic of integrating polarities at a higher level of equilibrium.

There are no exceptions or derogations from *koinonia* in-Christ – it must not be broken. At all costs we must remain there, resist, and explain to one another various points, until there is mutual understanding of one another's reasons... making all aware of this inescapable requirement to live in-Christ. The exception is when there is a lack of the sincere and objective intentions that allow ourselves, individually and together, to be shaped, by being, in-Christ.

Pope Francis spoke of this principle, saying that 'unity always prevails over conflict' (cf. EG 226–230). We need to have the courage be clear and – once the reasons for conflict are clear – attain or return to a solution. It may signify passing all through the crucible of Christ's Paschal Mystery so as to become a reflection of *synodal thinking* and *perceiving in the Spirit*.

c) Finally, *verification*. To verify is *verum facere*, putting the fruits of discernment to the test, through the facts and achievement which flow from the decision. A tree's fruit expresses the goodness of the tree.

And we must always be open to the surprise and creativity of the Holy Spirit who, in the implementation phase, can open new horizons and ask us to attend to the unexpected which the Spirit can give rise to, even suddenly *ex novo* – 'because 'he blows where he wills' (cf. Jn 3:8).

¹ Francis, 'Discourse to the participants of the General Chapter of the Legionaries of Christ and to the General Assembly of Regnum Christi's consecrated and lay members,' 29 February 2020.

² Cf. K. Rusthofer, *Synodale Vernunft wagen*, in «Herder Korrespondenz» (2019/11), pp. 47-50; C. Bauer, *Macht in der Kirche. Für einen postklerikalen, synodalen Aufbruch*, in "Stimmen der Zeit" (2019), pgs. 531-543.

³ Francis, 'Address at the meeting with the bishops responsible for the Latin American Episcopal Council (CELAM) on the occasion of the general coordination meeting.' Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 28 July 2013.

⁴ Francis, *Address on the occasion of the Prayer Vigil in preparation for the Synod on the Family*, 4 October 2014.

⁵ Cf. the point-by-point explanation in the ITC document, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (2018), nn.17-18

⁶ *Ibid.*, nn. 67-69.