

A synodal method for walking together

Conversing in the Spirit

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During her talk in Rome, on the first morning of the International Meeting of Parish Priests for the Synod in late April 2024, the undersecretary of the General Secretariat of the Synod illustrated how the method of Conversation in the Spirit has come increasingly to the fore during the recent synodal journey. We thank the author for kindly allowing publication here in Ekklesia of the text from that day, with slight modifications.

In seeking to reap the fruits of the Church's synodal journey traveled from 2021 to 2023, the *Instrumentum laboris* for the First Session of the Synod Assembly (IL 2023) lists distinguishing features of a synodal Church and highlights the realization that a synodal Church is characterized by a specific way of proceeding that was experienced in the first phase of the Synodal Process, and identified as *Conversation in the Spirit*.¹ Thus, a first fruit of the journey is a synodal methodology that elicited joy, missionary impetus, and an awareness of being People of God. Here are some contributions which came up at the General Secretariat of the Synod that addressed this.

The bishops in Puglia (Italy) wrote in their report about the synodal journey: "Among the very first fruits that can be noted by this way of listening using the 'Conversation in the Spirit', was that it was greatly appreciated by the People of God, as was the presence of representatives who attended the synod and who were collaborating with bishops and diocesan/parish councils to help the Churches work in a synodal style."

Students at Fordham University in the U.S. said, "The experience of synodality, through Conversation in the Spirit, arouses a sense of hope for the future of the Church." They speak of being convinced that "conversations in the Spirit can continue to be used in shared discernment by the church and university, even beyond the Spring 2024 listening sessions." Students reiterated: "It is important to use this model both in spiritual and secular settings, as it facilitates intentional listening and dialogue among participants and can be useful in discerning various activities in campus life."

Considering these and many other findings, the Synod's Summary Report for the first Session noted that "the experience of Conversation in the Spirit was enriching for all who took part." In particular, as "a style of communication, promoting freedom in expressing one's views and listening to each other, was greatly appreciated.", with the important effect of "avoiding us moving too quickly to a debate based on the reiteration of our own positions without listening first to the reasoning that supports the position of others." (RdS 15a).

A widely valued, universally disseminated method

In fact, it was the same method suggested for local consultations at the Synod's beginning stages (see the Vademecum description accompanying the Preparatory Synod Document) and then throughout the synod process. It became increasingly valued, as the working *Document for the Continental Stage* noted as early as October 2022, in speaking more generically of "spiritual conversations." The method of spiritual conversation "allowed many to look honestly at the reality of Church life and name the lights and shadows." In fact, the document continues: "This honest appraisal bore immediate missionary fruits. "There is a strong mobilization of the People of God, the joy of coming together, of walking together and of speaking freely. Some Christians who felt hurt and who had distanced themselves from the Church came back during this consultation phase" (EC Central African Republic)." (DTC 17).

As contributions gradually arrived from various continents, it became evident that this was a method destined to spread increasingly in different ecclesial settings, beginning with dioceses and parishes. The Final Document of the Asian continental meetings also testifies to this: " This is a process that needs to filter into every level of the life of the Church. The process of synodality, that is, discernment and spiritual conversations, must be part of the life and ministry of the Church henceforth. Some Churches across Asia have already started implementing the fruits of having listened during the earlier phase of the synodal process." (No. 189).

Where did the method originate?

We are often asked where this method comes from. There are multiple roots.

First, field experience, as the Synod Commission on Methodology was able to note as it listened to best synod practices. The method of spiritual conversation proved useful, for example, in the Australian Plenary Council (2018-22), in consecrated life for community discernment, and in particular for group and organizational Ignatian Spiritual Exercises (Canada, USA) which focused on community discernment experiences with an apostolic purpose.

But the sources also included ancient practices arising from native human wisdom, such as the *talking circles* (circles for dialogue) among certain indigenous peoples or conversations under the tree (*l'arbre à palabre*) in Africa.

We also see that this method has a certain affinity 'with contemporary methods used in the organizational world. In social sciences and management, *generative conversation* according to U Theory, is defined as 'a dialogue established around a topic that a group of people have chosen to explore together. The goal of this dialogue is to understand the topic being explored and at the same time deepen group connection or community. Generative conversation can be seen as the art of listening in a group.'

Theological foundations

Theological foundations include what faith tells us about the Holy Trinity and, more specifically, the ecclesiological and anthropological repercussions of our belief in God the Trinity. Of significant importance then is the Second Vatican Council's contribution. In addition to the ecclesiology of communion found in *Lumen Gentium* and other conciliar documents, *Dei Verbum* offers us a distinctly dialogical vision of Revelation in affirming that "the invisible God (see Col. 1:15, 1 Tim. 1:17) out of the abundance of His love speaks to men as friends (see Ex. 33:11; John 15:14-15) and lives among them (see Bar. 3:38), so that He may invite and take them into fellowship with Himself." (n. 2).

Not to be forgotten, too, is Paul VI's encyclical *Ecclesiam suam*. Starting with God's style of relating to humanity and calling the Church to universal dialogue, it states: "The Church must enter into dialogue with the world in which it lives. It has something to say, a message to give, a communication to make." (no. 65).

Listening to God's way as Christ did

What are the consequences for synodical practice? The Working Document for the continental stage responds with "listening as openness to welcome: this starts from a desire for radical inclusion – no one is excluded – to be understood in a perspective of communion with sisters and brothers and with our common Father; listening appears here not as an instrumental action, but as the assumption of the basic attitude of a God who listens to his People, as the following of a Lord whom the Gospels constantly present to us in the act of listening to the people who come to him along the roads of the Holy Land; in this sense listening is already mission and proclamation;" (no. 11).

The Summary Report of the First Session of the Synod offers us an interpretation of listening from a theological perspective in two directions: "Listening has a Christological significance; it means adopting Jesus' attitude toward the people he encountered (cf. Phil. 2:6-11). It also has an ecclesial value, since it is the Church that is listening through the actions of the baptized who act not simply in their own name but in the name of the community." (n. 16d).

Strengths and attitudes to cultivate

There are many benefits arising from Conversations in the Spirit.

Trust. We trust in God's presence and action in our hearts and lives, in the group, and in each group member.

Justice. Every participant benefits from the same conditions and time.

Communion. The goal is not putting forward one's own point of view at the expense of others, but to listen together to what the Spirit is telling us.

Inclusion. Every person's voice is important. Everyone's voice is heard and valued.

Reconciliation. We speak of our experiences, not ideas. This allows us to move beyond personal opinions to connect on a deeper level.

To achieve this, certain attitudes clearly need to be cultivated. In a nutshell: Faith and trust in God, trust in others, listening, humility, prayer, dialogue and sharing, and inner freedom.

What is at stake in listening

In conclusion, I would highlight two basic perspectives.

1. *It is about becoming a learning Church.* By listening to others and broadening our perspectives, we discover and experience the face and form of a synodal Church, a Church where 'everyone has something to learn.' This is the faith-filled people, the College of Bishops, the Bishop of Rome. It is one listening to the others, and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the 'Spirit of truth' (Jn. 14:17), to know what He 'says to the Churches' (Rev. 2:7)"².

2. *It is about being a relational Church.* The need for a relational Church emerged strongly from the synod process. The Summary Report of the First Session states, "This process has renewed our experience of and desire for the Church as God's home and family, a Church that is closer to the lives of Her people, less bureaucratic and more relational. The terms "synodal" and "synodality" have been associated with this experience and desire, offering an understanding that now requires further clarification. This is the Church that young people first declared they desired in 2018 on the occasion of the Synod of Youth." (RdS 1b).

¹ XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *For a synodal church: communion, participation, mission. Instrumentum laboris for the first Session (October 2023)*, A1, A2.

² Francis, *Address for the Commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops, October 17, 2015.*