

Experiments in Synodality in Local Churches Around the World

Learning Unity in Diversity

Adriana Masotti

The impression gained from the reports of local Churches on the work done in the past months around the question “How to be a synodal Church in mission?” and especially from the reading of the “best practices” sent to the General Secretariat of the Synod in preparation for the October Assembly, is that we are facing a living and moving Church. This was stated by Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich, the General Rapporteur of the Synod, at the press conference presenting the *Instrumentum laboris* on July 9.

Sharing and Listening

Almost all the delegates to the first Assembly in the Vatican, upon returning to their dioceses, shared the summary report which came out of it with their communities and, above all, the personal experience they had lived. The journey then continued with some common elements. Let us look at a few examples with a brief world tour. “Our Church is living a time of grace, in which we are listening and being listened to,” reports the Episcopal Conference of Panama, which views the synodal process as a significant phase with the opening of “a space for dialogue and reflection on contemporary challenges.” “The gratitude for this synodal process is profound,” write the bishops of the United States, speaking in some cases of new hope “for the future of local communities.”

Conversation in the Spirit and Formation

The contributions reveal the widespread experience of “Conversation in the Spirit” as a method of synodal “listening” and “inner silence.” The Episcopal Conference of India has reported using this method nationwide, “for its strategic planning, consulting groups and people across the country.” The Local Organizing Committee of the Archdiocese of Seoul, in South Korea, is doing the same in its meetings in preparation for the next World Youth Day. Another successful initiative has been formation proposals on synodality organized by dioceses, associations, movements, and religious congregations. Synodality courses and schools have emerged in various places: from Vietnam to French-speaking Africa, from the United States to Italy, such as the multilingual theological-pastoral course organized for the third consecutive year by the *Evangelii Gaudium* Center for further formation at the Sophia University Institute in collaboration with the General Secretariat of the Synod.

A Path of Conversion That Is Not Immediate

From the reports submitted for the upcoming Assembly of Bishops, there has been a notable change in the attitude of local Churches compared to the summaries of the previous phase (*for the first session of the Assembly*), which the General Rapporteur of the Synod sees as a fruit: “If the reports from the first session of the Synod,” he observed, “seemed to throw up some resistance and opposition to the synodal process, the more recent reports (*leading up to the second session of the Synod*) highlight more the fatigue and the struggle of a conversion journey that is not immediate.” A second fruit, according to the Cardinal, is “the great freedom and frankness they reveal.” Another noticeable trend from the reports is the increased involvement of laypeople, women, and youth in ecclesial life. In Zimbabwe, eight dioceses have decided to include at least one young person in each Pastoral Council.

The Ability to Reinterpret One’s Synodal Experience

Hollerich also spoke about the ability of local Churches to reinterpret their synodal experience, which, he said, “will greatly help to concretize more and more the need for transparency, accountability, and evaluation as expressed in the *Instrumentum laboris*.” This ability to reinterpret “has allowed the local Churches to highlight aspects of their culture that contain seeds of synodality to be nurtured or elements that are obstacles to it.” One example comes from Papua New Guinea, which writes: “We propose to deepen synodality by integrating our cultural values of goodness and beauty with the Gospel. Our values of life, community, relationships, justice, and care for the environment guide our ways of relating, designing structures, and discerning and decision-making processes.”

Synodality and Dialogue

In Croatia, the third edition of the Mediterranean Theological Encounters took place in July on the theme *Christianity and Islam: At the Service of Brotherhood in a Divided World*, organized by the Archdiocese of Rijeka-Fiume in Lovran on the Croatian Adriatic coast. For the first time, young theologians and Muslim teachers participated. Sister Nathalie Becquart, Undersecretary of the Synod of Bishops, spoke on “*Synodality, Ecumenism, and Interreligious Dialogue*.” “The Church should not be afraid of diversity because it already carries it within itself and does not force uniformity,” said Becquart.

A synodal Church is called “to practice a culture of encounter and dialogue” with all, “not only with Catholics, Christians, and people of other faiths,” and the synodal process, the French religious underlined, “has been an opportunity to learn what it means to live unity in diversity.” Regarding interreligious dialogue where Catholics are a minority, Sister Becquart shared her impression from her visit to Bangalore, India, in January 2023, where “it was almost natural to involve representatives of other religions in some of the local synodal meetings.” “People of goodwill can enter into relationship,” she stated, and create true harmony among differences to build a better world.

The fruits gathered so far show that the Synod is already marking the way of being and living of local Churches “stimulating spiritual, structural, and pastoral changes,” Cardinal Hollerich concluded in his report.