

In dialogue with the Undersecretary of the Synod

An experience of deep listening

Interview with Sister Nathalie Becquart, XMCJ

French Sister Nathalie Becquart has been undersecretary of the Synod since February 6, 2021. She participated in the drafting of the Instrumentum laboris of the Synod together with a diverse group of other experts appointed by Pope Francis. She is part of the Congregation of the Missionaries of Christ Jesus, known as the Xavières, with advanced studies in theology, philosophy, sociology and communications.

What is the principal focus of the Instrumentum laboris ...and what does it not want to be?

We can say the *Instrumentum laboris* is a gathering of the fruits of the first phase of the Synod, of a long process of listening and discernment. But the document also goes a step further because it brings together the voices of the people of God in a useful form for the October Assembly. It is designed both to support the synodal process of local Churches in continuing this synodal conversion – which is the purpose of the Synod – and serve as a working instrument for the October Assembly in its content and method. Thus, it sheds light on key questions for discernment by its members. It is not, however, a pre-defined document for which the synod fathers are called to only make modifications. Rather it is the first time that a document has been written precisely in such a way as to pose questions for discernment by the Assembly.

What does this document ask of Synod Assembly members?

We need to always remember the principal question – unchanged since the Synod's beginning -- *who is really the guide of the whole synod process? And how do we travel this journey together?* This is synodality. It is walking together. What steps is the Holy Spirit asking to move forward towards a synodal conversion of the Church? This conversion process is not done in two days nor in two years, but little by little, stage after stage.

This is also the basic question for the October Assembly. In the document, the Holy Spirit invites us to consider three priorities. We will see what will be possible to do. The only thing we can say at this point is that the *Instrumentum laboris* asks the Assembly for openness to the Holy Spirit's guidance. In the previous phase, we experimented with a way of proceeding that we called, "conversation in the Spirit". This will also be the methodology used during the October Assembly.

You have mentioned that the document speaks of listening as a fundamental feature of the Church today, together with other aspects constitutive of a synodal Church. What are these other aspects?

I would first say that it is difficult to describe this method of "conversation in the Spirit." We can talk about it, but it cannot really be fully understood if we have not experienced it. Likewise with regard to synodality: Synodality is not learned through an academic process. Rather it requires a concrete experience. In fact, we see that people who have had this experience of conversation in the Spirit with this methodology have understood. But those looking at the Synod from the outside, without taking the risk of having this transformative experience, have more difficulties. We hope and desire that the October Assembly will be a true synodal experience, a lived experience of the Holy Spirit. One way of describing this synod experience, this "conversation in the Spirit", is to speak of the phrase: "*From I to we.*". This is also my experience of synodality. In the end, the Holy Spirit creates harmony, communion, joy and peace.

A recurring theme in the document is the tension between the vision of the Catholic Church in its universality and requests of particular Churches living in profoundly different contexts. How is this crucial issue being handled?

Yes, it is true. I think one of the most interesting points relative to the Synod is this discernment on how to be a universal Church, but with all the diversity of the local Churches. This is precisely the vision of the synodal Church and diversity should not frighten us.

There is a need to see tensions not as polarization or divisions, but as signs of life, because life is this way. At the same time, however, we must dialogue more among ourselves on how to live unity in diversity. Unity is not uniformity, as Pope Francis emphasized many times by using the image of the polyhedron. So, the question is one of identifying both those points that we must have in common and the possible diversities for which there is need for greater openness.

Is there something you see as still needed for this synodal journey? Some claim, for example, the Synod failed to involve those not currently involved in a parish or diocese.

Yes, this is also true. We have not yet arrived at the participation of all baptized people. Not all have been heard. However, I would reiterate that this synodal experience is done little by little, gradually, because there is a newness here. We see in some countries that many have said: "This is the first time the Church has heard my voice". But then in other countries, there is already an experience of diocesan synods or the participatory processes, and a commitment of the laity. Some dioceses did a very extensive consultation in schools, among the *Caritas* organizations, prisons, hospital chapels, while in other places this listening was limited to parishes and active parishioners. There is still much to do along this path locally, in order to reach those who are distant [from the Church].

Bishops are invited to work on three priorities linked to the three key words of the Synod: communion, participation, mission. Why is it important to remain focused on these three words?

The priorities are undoubtedly linked to the words of the Synod's title: *For a synodal Church: Communion, participation, mission*. It is interesting, however, to note that the articulation of the questions changed somewhat, because we gave first priority to the concept of growing in communion. But in the document there has also been a reversal, with 'mission' now

instead being the second priority. And now in the end, we raise the theme of ‘participation’, to identify structures and dynamics of governance for a missionary synodal Church. This is because internal organization is at the service of mission in the world.

Some of the document’s questions concern structures, while others speak to a synodal spirituality that must mature.

Yes, for this process of reform of the Church – which is the People of God always journeying towards the Kingdom of God – two dimensions are needed. Regarding a change of mentality and culture for synodality, we see that the most important things are humility and the desire to listen to others, as well as the courage to speak and a desire for dialogue and encounter. Listening to the Word of God and the Holy Spirit must truly be placed at the center. Thus, structures are not enough. People with a synodal mentality are needed. Pope Francis once said: ‘[I]t is not enough to hold a Synod. We must be a Synod.’

As you closely followed the synod journey, as well as the problematic situations in which the Church is immersed in, do you feel the Instrumentum laboris represents what emerged in the early phases?

The document reflects a very collaborative process, with a number of experts involved in the synodal process. We lived a week of discernment, prayer and listening together in order to understand the most important points for the Assembly’s work. The *Instrumentum laboris* is therefore a document that is the fruit of a synodal experience. It is good to remember the Synod’s purpose is not one of producing documents but, as we wrote, one of germinating dreams, bringing forth prophecies and visions, allowing hope to flourish, creating trust, healing wounds, weaving relationships, arousing a dawn of hope, learning from one another and creating a positive vision that enlightens minds, warms hearts and restores strength to our hands. The fruits of synodality can be seen in this document. My hope for the October Assembly is that all members can truly experience these fruits and that the Church may experience a renewal, a new Pentecost.

Is the ongoing Synod work still in the hands of the bishops at this stage?

I think the first thing to keep in mind is that a bishop does not participate in the Synod for himself. He brings the voices of his people and, in addition, bishops will not be the only people present at the October Assembly. Then, in the year following this October 2023 Assembly, the journey will continue at the level of the local Church, opening another opportunity for ongoing involvement of the baptized faithful. There are concrete website proposals (www.synod.va), too, for how synodal groups can take the *Instrumentum laboris* and contribute by offering feedback to those who will come to Rome.

With Adriana Masotti