

Reflections on Conversation in the Spirit

Mary, Teacher and Model of Synodality

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This contribution comes from a seminar held in mid-May at Castel Gandolfo and organized by the Evangelii Gaudium Center of Sophia University Institute (Loppiano – Florence). In his presentation below, the now emeritus Archbishop of L'Aquila (Italy) focused on the Marian dimension of synodality, with its ecclesial and cultural implications. He outlined core themes and paths of meaningful consideration, leaving them to participants' deeper reflection.

I start from two convictions: Synodality, like any ecclesial journey, is called by grace to re-propose the dynamics of the Incarnation, *Verbum caro factum est* (*The Word was made flesh*); and Mary constitutes the essential "bridge" so that the Word can become flesh through the work of the Spirit in the life and mission of the Church also today.

From this perspective, it is essential to carefully explore what is the specific "Verbum", the spirituality, which must animate synodality today. Likewise, we must examine with evangelical wisdom, the characteristic *human typology* this spirituality must assume to become recognizable and effective.

In synodality, too, '*Verbum*' (*Word*) and '*caro*' (*flesh*) must unite without blending or confusing. It is not about reaching a compromise where both lose something to merge with the other. The distinction that preserves full identity within communion must be safeguarded and never taken for granted.

Conversation in the Spirit

Conversation in the Spirit, a dynamic aspect of the synodal event, exhibits similar characteristics.

It is called "Conversation in the Spirit" *because it is inspired and guided by the Spirit and happens within the Spirit*. Therefore, it cannot be reduced to cordial exchanges of ideas or friendly dialogue. Consequently, essential conceptual and operational frameworks from psychology and social sciences are insufficient by themselves to explain or foster synodality. These

frameworks help build relational systems of shared understanding, emotional harmony, and operational synergies. However, they remain on the human level and cannot ascend to the divine realm without God's grace. To become 'lived Church', there is the need for an integration into synodality, one rooted in Trinitarian communion. The process must move from a purely 'creaturely' level to the plane of evangelical unity ignited by the Spirit. This is because it is a charismatic, pentecostal event.

To use an analogy, *it is a process akin to the Eucharist*, where use of bread (fruit of the earth and human labor) is required, but it is not enough. The Holy Spirit's transformative intervention through the *epiclesis*, is necessary for bread to become the Body of Christ.

Thus, good human interactions provide the basic condition. But until these are elevated to communal processes through "Trinitarian" dynamics activated by grace, the term, 'synodality', cannot yet be used.

Communional Synodality and Egological Anti-Synodality

Thus, it becomes clear that the synodal 'caro,' or *anthropological (human) dimension*, must be increasingly configured as a 'humanity of communion'. It is a shift from a simple societal aggregation to a relational-communal dimension that is participation in the life of the Triune God. There is need for cognitive, ethical, and behavioral traits that bring one to follow a path leading *from the 'I' to the evangelical, 'we.'*

For this divine-human process to unfold, incursions of *egological anti-synodality*—always lurking at an individual and communal level—must be neutralized. The post-synodal apostolic exhortation, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, speaks of the necessity for a *synodal person* to "not be arrogant, or quarrelsome, but affable, hospitable, sincere in his words and heart, prudent and discreet, generous and ready to serve, capable of opening himself to clear and brotherly relationships and of encouraging the same in others, and quick to understand, forgive and console." (n. 43).

This requires living, evangelical asceticism. It entails constant work on oneself, alongside the collaboration of the community. Thus, it is an effort to be conjugated not only in the singular but also in the plural, as the 'We-Church'.

Needed Conditions for Conversation in the Spirit

To practice a Conversation in the Spirit that fosters "active participation, attentive listening, reflective speaking, and spiritual discernment,"¹ there must be an ever increasing shared and systematic commitment on multiple levels:

"Synodalizing" the Mind: This involves cultivating the ability to "speak the truth in love" (cf. Eph 4:15). Without love, inner light fades and leaves unseen truth that is beyond the reach of ego-centered mindsets. Communal intelligence, trained in "thinking together," instead remains open to honest and objective knowledge of reality. It is vigilant in defusing perceptual distortions and ideological biases. Moreover, such a mind perceives and values God's providence at work in history because it is illuminated by the Spirit, and able to transcend the surface of mere existential facts.

“Synodalizing” the Heart: This requires equipping the heart to receive, safeguard, and offer a complete love aimed at doing good, for the benefit of others. This calls for a heart always ready to love everyone in every circumstance and beyond all obstacles (cf. 1 Cor 13:4-13). It asks a heart filled with wisdom and rich in mercy – *ready to receive forgiveness (first from God and then from oneself), to forgive others, and to ask for forgiveness.* Such a heart is wholly devoted to ensuring that the Church becomes ever more Church, and humanity becomes ever more human. It asks for a heart driven persistently by Christ’s love, which the Holy Spirit has poured into believers (cf. Rom 5:5).

“Synodalizing” Expectations and Plans: This involves nurturing profound ‘hope for the Church’ that is aligned with the words that the Lord is asking of God’s people today. In this context, it is of primary importance to discern the signs of the times (cf. Mt 16:3), to *synchronize ideas and resources with the Spirit’s movements and walk together at God’s pace.*

Mary, Woman of the Spirit

Let us now address the second conviction, one closely tied to the first.

The spirituality and anthropology of synodality is fulfilled in all its splendor in Mary:

- *In Mary, the Word is fully lived, becoming a historical Presence, fully transmitted.*
- *Mary participates wholly in the redemptive suffering of Jesus.*
- *Mary, along with the apostles, witnesses the Lord's resurrection.* The Acts of the Apostles state, “All these devoted themselves with one accord to prayer, together with some women, and Mary the mother of Jesus and his brothers” (Acts 1:14).
- By gathering the disciples around her, Mary becomes the ‘*architect*’ of Pentecost. Pope Francis affirms: “She joined the disciples in praying for the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:14) and thus made possible the missionary outburst which took place at Pentecost.” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 284).
- *In Mary, the Word becomes Church.*

John Paul II writes in his apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*:

“The Second Vatican Council, confirming the teaching of the whole of tradition, recalled that in the hierarchy of holiness it is precisely the “woman”, Mary of Nazareth, who is the “figure” of the Church. She “precedes” everyone on the path to holiness; in her person “the Church has already reached that perfection whereby she exists without spot or wrinkle (cf. Eph 5:27). In this sense, one can say that the Church is both “Marian” and “Apostolic-Petrine”. And he quotes particularly what he had said a few months earlier to the Roman Curia: This Marian profile is also – even perhaps more so – fundamental and characteristic for the Church as is the apostolic and Petrine profile to which it is profoundly united. ...The Marian dimension of the Church is antecedent to that of the Petrine, without being in any way divided from it or being less complementary. Mary Immaculate precedes all others, including obviously Peter himself and the Apostles [...] A contemporary theologian has rightly stated that Mary is ‘Queen of the Apostles without any pretensions to apostolic powers: she has other and greater powers’.”².

Pope Francis also observes: “The Lord did not want to leave the Church without this icon of womanhood.” (EG 285). Hence, “there is a Marian style to the Church’s work of evangelization”. (EG 288), which leads us to conclude this style also applies to synodality!

Paths for Verification

Conversation in the Spirit, when lived in a Marian dimension, produces synodal effects that it is possible and necessary to verify:

Constructive Listening: Dialogue does not stop at acknowledging facts but moves into *constructive listening*. This approach allows participants to go beyond individual perspectives and discover new horizons of meaning and understanding.

Seeing Through Others’ Eyes: It teaches not only to see with one’s own eyes but to use the perspectives of others in addressing issues more deeply. Analogously, as neurophysiological science suggests, three-dimensional vision also requires the interaction of both eyes. There is a privileged opportunity for *mutual understanding and deeper comprehension*.

Wisdom From Above: Participants recognize that gathering data is not enough. Only wisdom from above enables one to discern God’s design within events.

Harmonizing of Notes: In the ‘musical score’ of synodality, each of the ‘notes’ (theological, institutional, aggregative, cultural, etc.) must harmonize in an evangelical key, creating a chord that *echoes the Symphony of the Trinity*. When relational or communicative discord arises, calm intervention is needed to prevent contrasting opinions from generating conflict or abrasive attitudes, whether theoretical or psychological. Diversity must never degrade into hostility.

Pentecostal Growth: Where the flow of Pentecost begins, Conversation in the Spirit results in a “more” and a “better” *compared to the reality of before*. This is the fruit of the Spirit “making all things new” (cf. Rev 21:5). Indeed, the Spirit is ready to open a path in the desert and bring rivers into the wilderness (cf. Is 43:18-19).

Elevating Communication: *Conversation in the Spirit does not rest at the level of accurate information but rises to the level of good communication*. This means moving beyond a merely detached sharing of data, to the revealing of oneself. In this way, participants engage personally and foster friendly interaction.

Circular and Ascending Dynamics: Relationships within Conversation in the Spirit *exhibit a circular and ascending dynamic*. Each participant acts as both a point of departure and a point of arrival in the dialogic exchange. This process resembles a spiraling upwards, where truthful dialogue and creative friendship are strengthened and expanded with each encounter. *The ultimate goal is to become ‘of one heart and one soul’, mirroring the first Christian community* (cf. Acts 4:32).

The Spirit nurtures Christian and human attitudes: During synodal work, it is not enough to ‘attend’. One must ‘participate’, take risks and reap rewards.

A key goal in this journey is earning the *respect and collaboration of people of goodwill*. This also includes those of diverse cultural inspirations desiring to *contribute honestly to building a more equitable society*, one respectful of the inalienable dignity of every person, especially the poor and marginalized.

Evangelical Humility: To prevent these intentions from slipping into utopia, adequate and increasing doses of evangelical humility are required to neutralize the “synodal allergies” that may arise within us and others.

Conversation and Conversion: Conversation rhymes with conversion, *meaning a deeper alignment of the soul with the Spirit*. The synodal experience, as previously mentioned, is a paschal endeavor. It requires anticipating unexpected entries into the pores of the glorious cross, from which one emerges strengthened and spiritually enriched. To embark seriously on this holy journey, one must be ready to suffer in unity with the Lord.

The synodal community experiences an ever-expanding abundance of *fruits of the Spirit*: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Gal 5:22). These are the Risen Lord’s gifts, bestowed wherever two or more are gathered in His name (cf. Mt 18:20).

A Model of Conversation in the Spirit: The Encounter Between Mary and Elizabeth

A perfect model of Conversation in the Spirit is the meeting between Mary and her cousin Elizabeth. This extraordinary moment of communion between two women, in whom God found a complete dwelling – Mary, “full of grace” (Lk 1:28), and Elizabeth, “filled with the Holy Spirit” (Lk 1:41) – *is preceded by a compelling witness of charity*. Upon hearing the news that her elderly cousin was expecting a child, Mary “set out and traveled to the hill country in haste to a town of Judah” (Lk 1:39), undertaking an arduous and uncomfortable journey made even more challenging by her own newly begun pregnancy.

Every Conversation in the Spirit *should begin with a sincere act of goodwill and unfold in mutual dedication*. The foundational structure of the dialogue between these two women, friends and allies, is a behavioral paradigm to which we should always adhere. Mary’s greeting causes the child in Elizabeth’s womb to leap for joy. This movement enables Elizabeth to perceive that her unborn son was called to a great mission. It also reveals to her the profound vocation she herself had: to bring him into the world and raise him for this purpose. Likewise, Elizabeth’s words unveiled Mary to herself, in declaring Mary as “Mother of the Lord” and “blessed among women” and affirming the blessedness of the fruit of her womb (cf. Lk 1:42-43). Enlightened by the Spirit, Elizabeth praises the heart of Mary’s greatness: “Blessed are you who believed what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled” (Lk 1:44).

After this joyous “eruption” of Truth and Love, Mary proclaims the Magnificat, a hymn expressing her total belonging to God. There, Mary illuminates the redemptive work of the Almighty and the wise logic governing God’s actions (cf. Lk 1:46-55).

Concluding Reflections

Mary is the perfect disciple of Jesus, the complete and perpetual icon of Church-communion and of Church-mission. Therefore, *the Christian community will become more synodal to the extent that it 'marianizes'*. Similarly, conversations will truly be “in the Spirit” insofar as they reflect the style and dedication of the humble Virgin of Nazareth, whom God has made the servant of humanity.

May Mary, Ark of Synodality, accompany our days and activities as Mother, Teacher, and Model. Through Conversations in the Spirit, may she help us build *a more united Church*, one that is ever more a Trinitarian communion with a missionary focus. May she inspire believers to act as evangelical leaven of harmony and solidarity within society today, and in the world to come.

¹ General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, *Vademecum for the Synod on Synodality* (in view of the Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in October 2023), September 2021, Appendix B: Suggestions for Organizing a Synodal Consultation Meeting, No. 8.

² John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, August 15, 1988, no. 27 and note 55 citing *id.*, Address to Cardinals and Prelates of the Roman Curia, December 22, 1987, where Pope Wojtyla refers to H.U.von Balthasar.