

The Church's synodal "method"

Mysticism and process

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The second Session of the Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on Synodality focused on the question "How to be a synodal Church in Mission?" Two fundamental dimensions come together in this eminently practical question: The loving relationship of the three divine Persons as the source of Church life and mission, and specific procedural questions. Piero Coda, secretary of the International Theological Commission and a theologian at the Synod, explores what the Synod's Instrumentum laboris says in this regard.

It is worth the effort to read closely the introductory section of the *Instrumentum laboris* (Working document) prepared for the Second Session of the Synod Assembly held in October 2024. Indeed, it intended to offer a clear and consistent roadmap for ecclesial practice concerning the central question around which work revolved: 'How can the identity of the synodal People of God in mission take concrete form in the relationships, paths, and places of everyday Church life?' (Intro.).

The question is not ultimately a theoretical one about *what* it means to be a synodal church. Rather, it is a practical one about *how* to relate and take action to become what the Christian community is by grace and thus called to show forth and accomplish. It is a fruit that is already beginning to mature in the unfolding synodal process. The *Instrumentum laboris* (IL) points out that "among the gains of the process so far, we can include experiencing and learning a method for addressing questions together, in dialogue and discernment" (Intro.). It points out that it is a defined, exercised method, one with broad consensus and relative success, as *Conversations in the Holy Spirit*.

Presence of the Spirit in the today of history

Indeed, the widespread, committed convergence to adopt the practice of *Conversation in the Spirit* is not only undeniably significant but also of decisive relevance in articulating an appropriate and effective answer to the question of "how" to be a synodal Church in mission. It is a matter of acquiring and implementing evangelical meaning and performative expressions of such a method from the lived synodal experience. Only in this way can a true synodal spirit and correlative synodal culture realistically grow to open unexpected perspectives and shape Church life in the service of the coming of God's Kingdom.

This is occurring at a momentous turning point in our history. It is challenging and dramatic - we say this in faith, hope, and solidarity with all who suffer, seek, and cry out - but at the same time promises light, justice, and peace. If we fail to make room for this new prophetic opportunity, we remain on the level of good, but ultimately ineffective, idealistic intentions. The *Instrumentum laboris* gathered and intelligently ordered emerging information and directions, resonating as a valuable echo of Pope Francis' invitation formulated already ten years prior: " So, be men and women of communion! Have the courage to be present amid conflict and tension as a credible sign of the presence of the Spirit who inspires in human hearts a passion for all to be one (cf. Jn 17:21). Live the *mysticism of encounter*, which entails 'the ability to hear, to listen to other people; the ability to seek together ways and means.' Live in the light of the loving relationship of the three divine Persons (cf. 1 Jn 4:8), the model for all interpersonal relationships." (*Apostolic Letter on the occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life*, Nov. 28, 2014).

The mystical, dynamic and communal identity of God's People

Is Pope Francis offering a seemingly utopic invitation to develop a dialogic method of ecclesial community relationships and above all, one rooted in the unprecedented, demanding *place* of Jesus Himself as the *door* (cf. John 10:7) and the *way* (cf. John 14:6): the love of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? This is the "mystery" of God into which the Church is drawn by grace. As Vatican II teaches, the Church is "sacrament" for all in Jesus. She is the "sign" and "instrument", "a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race" (*Lumen Gentium*, 1).

It is not for nothing that the *Instrumentum laboris* (IL) states, "Baptism in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit gives rise to the *mystical, dynamic and communitarian identity* of the People of God. It orients us to the fullness of life in which the Lord Jesus precedes us and to the mission of inviting every man and woman to accept the gift of salvation in freedom (cf. Mt 28:18-19). In Baptism, Jesus clothes us with Himself and shares His identity and mission with us (cf. Gal 3:27)" . From here, begins a dynamic sharing in Jesus' life that comes to fullness through participation in the Eucharist, in his body and blood. The liturgy - [is the] "summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the font from which all her power flows" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 10) - is simultaneously "the source of the Church's synodal life and the prototype of every synodal event, making the mystery of the Trinity appear 'like in a mirror' (1 Cor. 13:12; cf. *Dei Verbum*, 7)" (IL 25).

Yes, the Church's identity is first a *mystical identity*. It is rooted in what Paul the apostle describes as the great *mystérion*: the design of infinite, universal agápe flowing from the heart of the Father. It is manifested to the world "in the fullness of time" in the only begotten Son made flesh and communicated in the "measureless" gift of the Holy Spirit. This gift invites us into a free and joyous communion with God and thus among human people and with all creatures (cf. DV 2; IL 23). The Church's mission is expressed by this identity, a communication of the extraordinary, inexhaustible gift by which she already lives in true anticipation and pressing on to fulfillment.

Precisely for its expressed mystical nature, rooted in the mystery of God in Jesus, the identity of God's People is *dynamic and communitarian*. It is a *journeying*, a growing concrete fulfillment throughout history, even in the messiness of human reality lived through relationships and practices as a Christian community, and with all. "A *synodal Church* is a *relational Church*, in which interpersonal dynamics form the fabric of the life of a mission-oriented community, whose life unfolds within increasingly complex contexts" (IL Part II). It is, therefore, a matter of engaging with all, at every level, in "a dynamic relational reciprocity" (IL 13). This is because ultimately, "everything in this world is connected and is marked by a restless longing for the other. *Everything is a call to relationship*" (IL, Part II).

The Church as *synodos*, measured by a specific "way of being"

If the Church is - in Christ and, for him, in the bosom of the Trinity - this prophetic "we," this "communitarian and historical subject" (cf. IL 3) called to witness and hand on the project of communion with God and all in Him, it becomes clear that the form and style of Church missionary life is called to express the mystery by which she lives and is destined to communicate. This is why the *ekklesia* (the assembly of Jesus' disciples) is called to a *synodos* (a journeying together) measured by a specific *methodos* (way of being). This way of being signifies orienting and proceeding along a path constructed in the light of the Gospel, with and for all humanity.

When we speak of the method of *Conversation in the Spirit* we intend, first, a discerning way. It is not "a strategy of manipulation, but an experience to be lived and celebrated with gratitude". The Church has an immense and gratuitous gift to be received and employed responsibly for the good of all (IL 20). Therein lies the first and fundamental conversion asked of each one and of all, as Church. It asks a determined, patient, persevering concretization. It is a learning to cherish and express Jesus' way of thinking and acting in our relationships, in situational discernment and decision making, and in the assuming of responsibilities, just as Paul urged the community of Philippi to do (cf. Phil. 2:1ff).

The IL defines this as "a *relational conversion*, which reorients the priorities and the action of each person, especially of those whose task it is to animate relationships in the service of unity, in the concreteness of an exchange of gifts that liberates and enriches all" (Part I, Introd.).

It then describes it more deeply in No. 62:

"Communal discernment is not a mere organizational technique but a demanding practice that qualifies the life and mission of the Church lived out in Christ and the Holy Spirit. For this reason, it must always be carried out with the awareness of and the will to be gathered in the name of the Lord Jesus (cf. Mt 18:20), listening to the voice of the Holy Spirit. As Jesus promised, only the Holy Spirit can lead the Church towards the fullness of life and truth (cf. Jn 16:13), that these may be made available to a world thirsting for meaning. The means by which the People of God lives out its mission of proclaiming and bearing witness to the Gospel is rooted here. It is, therefore, a priority to learn to practice at all levels that evangelical art that enabled the community of the apostles in Jerusalem to characterize the first synodal event in the history of the Church with these words: 'For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us' (Acts 15:28). It is in this spirit that the practice of the Church's

missionary synodal life taking place in specific places, structures, and events must be understood and oriented."

Importance of concrete, specific methods

With this made clear - and conscious that acquisition of such awareness requires a qualitative leap and ongoing commitment - two further clarifications are needed:

The first: *There is the need for this to be practiced by everyone.* Exercising this method demands not only the conversion of heart, mind, and lifestyle, but - precisely for this - adequate ongoing formation. It is not without reason that the *IL*, responding to the issue that emerged "universally and most strongly throughout the Synodal Process" (no. 51), focuses in precise detail on the forms and criteria of "an integral and shared formation" (cf. nos. 51-57). It stresses that the first challenge is a deeper "knowledge of how the Spirit acts in the Church and guides it through history." (*IL* 52); and "the purpose of formation in the perspective of missionary synodality is to form witnesses, that is: men and women capable of assuming the mission of the Church in co-responsibility and cooperation with the power of the Spirit" (*IL* 55).

Second: *There is the need for concrete and specific practices expressed according to situations and issues* arising in the everyday life of communities. Conversation in the Spirit portrays the *manner* of living and place of the Church's being and journeying. The *how* of synodal discernment must be done "'with our feet on the ground,' meaning within a concrete context, aware of its particularities and complexities" (*IL* 64; 80-83). It is a matter, therefore, of building on the expertise possessed by the Body of Christ in the plurality of its members, their vocations, charisms and ministries, all essential (and providential because they are gifts of the Spirit!) for the purpose of an accurate analysis and relevant discernment of issues. Such competencies, of course, will be - according to the situation - theological or social or administrative in nature...

It is essential that "concrete procedural options, in their variety, must be consistent with the requirements of an underlying synodal theological methodology" (n. 63)... "[T]his does not mean that technical and scientific expertise has the last word - such an approach would constitute a technocratic drift. Rather, the aim is to 'provide a concrete foundation for the ethical and spiritual itinerary that follows' (LS 15)" (n. 64).

Mary: a living, generative guide

With this commitment to rigorously and freely combine theological and procedural dimensions of the synodal "method," the *IL* offers a presentation of *Mary* with "her prayerful presence at the heart of the apostolic community in the cenacle (cf. Acts 1:14)". She is seen as "a living model and generative guide for an authentic synodal spirituality: in persevering and responsible listening to the Word and in meditative discernment of events (cf. Lk 1:26-38; 2:19. 51), in generous openness to the action of the Holy Spirit (cf. Lk 1:35), in sharing thanksgiving for the Lord's work (cf. Lk 1:39-56), and in concrete and timely service to each and every person (cf. Jn 2:1-12) whom Jesus entrusted to her maternal care (cf. Jn 19:25-27)" (*IL* 59).

The "way" and method of Mary, who was her Son's first disciple and, in him, Mother of his living Body, the Church - is to be iconically and concretely followed. Certainly, the rich indications offered in the *IL* will be subject to synodal discernment, and provide only an ideal, orientating map. The decisive challenge for Church life and mission today will be to grasp its truth in fidelity to the Gospel and concretely develop its form, patterns, and creative experience in fidelity to history. Only in this way can the Church serve the coming of God's Kingdom.