

Towards a Synodal Church

Seven stumbling blocks on the synodal journey

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With the closing of the first session of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, the journey of the Church is now entering its second phase: that of wisdom. The aim is to awaken in the Church the permanent style of synodality. Yet there is still a need to overcome reservations and obstacles in order to ensure ever greater and more effective involvement. In an online course on synodality promoted by the Evangelii Gaudium Center of the Sophia University Institute, Professor Andrew Recepción of the Pontifical Gregorian University, highlighted seven salient points that can hinder a synodal conversion. They can serve as a kind of synodal "examination of conscience" for all faithful.

1. Synodality risks becoming a mere ecclesial cliché: a slogan or watchword in today's Church but without real incidence.

Synodality is a word that is spreading. Bishops' Conferences around the world have launched a process of raising awareness and formation on synodality. Almost everyone who follows recent events in the Church cannot miss information about the synodal path. Information also abounds on (Catholic) social media. However, there is a risk of making synodality an ecclesiastical cliché, that is, a slogan or watchword that everyone talks about. Yet the challenge is to know how widespread the awareness of synodality is and how deeply rooted is this new way of being Church in the life of communities.

2. Synodality is for Church leaders and experts; the others are spectators.

The verification of reality, at least in certain contexts, seems to indicate that synodality is practically the competence and responsibility of the leaders and experts of the Church. It is an inferring that they are the insiders and the rest of the community remains as external spectators, so to speak. This difficulty does not derive so much from the process -- which has been carried out very well as evidenced by the various reports and documents from the continents -- but from the existential indifference of many baptized Christians to ecclesial life and activities.

3. Synodality is only for the few who are close to a parish or ecclesiastical institution, and the rest of the faithful do not care.

When you talk to people attending Sunday Mass, you may notice that some have heard of synodality, but often they express little interest in it. They have the impression that it is a reality that concerns a small group of people who are more committed to the Church, while the others continue in the usual way in which they express their life of faith in daily life. The difficulty arises from the fact that synodality is understood as a consultation process among selected members of the community, without ensuring that the process has the necessary connection to the rest of the faithful. An authentic synodal conversion needs instead to provide creative spaces for dialogue that include everyone, including those marginalized voices of persons ignored due to social and economic conditions, and who fear to speak out because they feel unwelcomed and insignificant.

4. Synodality is a beautiful idea in theology and ecclesiology, but has nothing to do with ordinary daily life.

One of people's impressions of synodality is that it is a rather difficult idea to understand, and only theologians can truly understand it. Additionally, for many faithful, a synodal lifestyle is not part of their faith experience in the ordinary environments of their lives, and in the daily rhythm of work, family and relationships. Yet Pope Francis reminds us that synodality is an expression of an even more fundamental fact: the Gospel urges us to encounter the "other" starting with those who are closest to us. It is not enough to meet people. Rather we need to accompany each other on the journey of our life, to walk together.

5. Synodality is difficult to apply in pastoral ministry.

On several occasions, priests have spoken of synodality as a difficult process to apply in a pastoral care context, because for many parishes and traditional institutions the key word is maintenance of existing structures and programs. Therefore, a radical reorientation of pastoral care as a synodal path must begin from the conversion of pastors and entire communities.

6. Synodality is a passing initiative, one that will come and go.

There are many skeptics with regard to whether the synodal path will endure after the 2023 and 2024 Synod Assemblies. Some even think it is a passing instance of the current papacy. Such thinking is based on the consideration that synodality is a Church activity, a beautiful strategic plan for the coming years, but then things can change and other initiatives will be adopted later. One problem in this way of looking at synodality is that of seeing it in discontinuity, rather than in continuity, with tradition and with the life of the Church from the early Christian communities until the Second Vatican Council.

7. Synodality is a panacea attempting to solve all the problems of the Church today.

Some think synodality can solve all of the Church's problems as a panacea, like a big pot in which you can add anything and get "a good stew". This difficulty arises from perceptions that synodality, with its bottom-up universal Catholic process, is trying to create a global perspective that does not take into account diversities of environments, cultures, and peoples. Some maintain that the language used in the reports received from the continents gave preference to expressions that do not always sufficiently reflect the typical characteristics of each local Church. Although this may have happened, in reality the synodal process as a whole was a journey not of uniformity but of communion.