

Encouraging reflections from the Synod Assembly

Ecumenism and synodality

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One of the pleasant surprises of these three years of synodal journey has been the ongoing reference to ecumenism. The two sessions of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops were attended by a good number of fraternal delegates from other Churches and Ecclesial Communities – 12 in the first session and 16 in the second, who generously offered life testimonies of faith and prayer, and their work of sensitization to the poor. They were also able to freely express their points of view and perspectives on what we were discussing regarding synodality. It is no coincidence, therefore, that the Synod's Final Document speaks of the conviction that "one of the most significant fruits of the Synod 2021-2024 has been the intensity of ecumenical zeal" (n. 137). It is not surprising if we consider that the Synod on synodality was, in many ways, relaunching fundamental issues in the Second Vatican Council teachings, including Christian unity. The Holy Spirit is steering the boat of Christ's Church!

Perspectives

The Final Document dedicates many passages to Christian unity, emphasizing the baptismal dimension of ecumenism and synodality, spiritual ecumenism, the ecumenism of blood, the importance of theological dialogue and the exchange of gifts among Christians, the relationship between synodality and primacy, and the ecumenical dimension of formation. There are also a number of concrete proposals, such as inclusion of the remembrance of saints from other Christian traditions in the liturgical calendar, the continuation of ecumenical reflection based on the study document, *The Bishop of Rome*², preparation and joint commemoration of the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea in 2025, and the launch of initiatives toward a common date of Easter.

Prophetic Ecumenical Prayer

A particularly moving moment of this year's Assembly was the ecumenical prayer service held in the Vatican on 11 October, the anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council in 1962. It took place in the Square of the Roman Protomartyrs where tradition has it that St Peter was martyred. During the service, short texts from the Second Vatican

Council and prayers were read by representatives of various Churches, men and women, giving visibility to an impressive symphony of different Christian traditions.

Of course, we cannot fail to remember the Ecumenical Vigil on the eve of last year's Synodal Assembly. Entitled *Together – Gathering of the People of God*, and organized by the Taizé Community, it was attended by many young people, faithful from across the confessional spectrum and heads of many Christian Churches and Ecclesial Communities. On that occasion, Pope Francis had encouraged everyone to ask the Holy Spirit to grant the Synod participants "the gift of listening." There, he said words that particularly struck me: "Let us ask that the Synod be a *kairós* of fraternity, a place where the Holy Spirit will purify the Church from gossip, ideologies and polarization."

Exchange of gifts among the Churches?

In one of the synodal assembly groups I attended, a fraternal delegate invited us in a polite but provocative way to reflect more deeply on what we mean when we encourage the "exchange of gifts" among Christians. Although Pope John Paul II spoke of such an exchange in No. 28 of the encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*, we must be careful that it does not become a cliché without adequate confirmation in reality.

That intervention stimulated me to think of my decades of experience of many relationships built with Christians of other Churches. I know that I have received so many gifts from their traditions and experiences: the unfailing biblical reflection with which the Methodists begin their meetings, the desire to build bridges of the Anglicans, the conviction and liveliness of witness by the Evangelicals, and the emphasis on clear moral teaching on the part of the Presbyterians. A special gift for me has been participation in conversations between the Dicastery for Christian Unity and the Salvation Army. There is always great joy in meeting one another and I am struck by their strong desire to communicate the message of salvation to people in need, by doing them good.

Ecumenical synodality

But let's return to the Final Document. It states the conviction that ecumenical dialogue is "fundamental to developing an understanding of synodality and the unity of the Church." And this ecumenical dialogue draws very concrete consequences: "It urges us to develop ecumenical synodal practices, including forms of consultation and discernment on questions of shared and urgent interest, as the celebration of an ecumenical Synod on evangelisation could be. It also invites us to mutual accountability for who we are, what we do, and what we teach. What makes this possible is our unity under the one Baptism that offers us the dynamism of communion, participation and mission and which gives life to our identity as the People of God." (n. 138).

On the ecumenical journey, however, there is never a lack of difficulties. But even these can become a "gift" if they are accepted in the spirit of *kenosis* which is at the heart of synodality (n. 43). Although, as the Final Document states, "The Church exists to bear

witness in the world to the most decisive moment in history: the Resurrection of Jesus” (n. 14), we cannot fail to recognize that this path of bearing witness to the Risen Lord through our unity also passes through the ice of misunderstanding and the historical wounds that we have inherited, the sometimes-involuntary offenses that we do to one another, and our diversity in expressing our faith. I remember, for example, difficult conversations when the document *Dominus Iesus* was published. Some of our brothers and sisters from various Ecclesial Communities in Ireland were offended to read what was a harsh judgment for them: Their Churches were not considered Churches in the proper sense. For us Catholics, that moment was an opportunity to grow in humility and not to remain superficial, but to go more deeply.

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² Cf. *Ekklesia* n. 7 (2020/3)