

The Synod of Bishops: Implementation begins

The Church in Relationships

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On December 17, 2024, the Ordinary Council of the General Secretariat of the Synod met in the Vatican to start the implementation phase of the Path underway since 2021. On that occasion, Msgr. Piero Coda, Secretary General of the International Theological Commission, presented a report on the vision and ecclesiological perspectives that inspire the Final Document of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod recently concluded and approved by Pope Francis. With the kind permission of the author, we reproduce the text here, in an English translation from the Italian.

2021-2024: The “synodal process” convened by Pope Francis was a three-year journey; its fruits were collected in the *Final Document* of the second session of the XVI Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in October last year. The Second Vatican Council also lasted three years. Suggesting such a parallel may seem risky, but perhaps it is not. The Synod of Bishops is one of the most important fruits of the last Council, as attested by its visionary institution by Paul VI. But it is also because *this* Synod undoubtedly constitutes a specific and important stage of the Church's journey that was set in motion by Vatican II. For the first time, in fact, the Assembly saw the convocation not only of the College of Bishops in the consultation and celebratory phases, but also the whole People of God. In addition, the *Final Document* produced and approved by Francis is now returned with a view to its concrete reception by the local Churches.

Road map for the Church's mission in the Third Millennium

The formula referenced by Francis in an *Accompanying Note* is important: "Now the journey continues in the local Churches and their groupings, treasuring the *Final Document* that was voted on and approved by the Assembly in all its parts on 26 October. I too approved it and, signing it, ordered its publication, joining the “we” of the Assembly which, through the *Final Document*, addresses the holy faithful People of God." ¹

This is a life-giving, efficacious formula for its practical implementation. It gives an impulse, with the specific authority of the Bishop of Rome, to synodality as a constitutive, qualifying dimension of the Church's mission. With it, and in referencing *Acts 15:28* ("it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us"), Francis recognizes and promotes the Synod of Bishops, "transformed into a *phased process*," as “the essential relationship between the People of God, the College of Bishops and the Pope... participat[ing] fully in the synodal process, each according to their proper function. This participation is made manifest in the varied composition of the Synodal Assembly gathered around the Pope" (n. 136).

It follows that the composition of the XVI Assembly is "more than a contingent fact. It expresses a way of exercising the episcopal ministry *consistent with the living Tradition of the Churches and with the teaching of Second Vatican Council*."² Such a composition in fact emphasizes that "what is essential is that the combination of the involvement of all (the holy People of God), the ministry of some (the College of Bishops) and the presidency of one (successor of Peter) appears and is concretely realized" (n. 136). And therefore, the conclusion of the Assembly "does not put an end to the synodal process," but it engages "local Churches and groupings of Churches ... to *implement*, in their different contexts, the authoritative proposals contained in the Document through the processes of discernment and decision-making provided for by law and by the Document itself."³

Despite the small number of people involved – at least so far – and the minimal media impact, the synodal process is *a clear sign that is significant in scope*, if we see things from the perspective of the ecclesial reform promoted by Vatican II. It is a sign not only of the Gospel's perennial generativity, but of that culture of peace and fraternity which, against all odds and like a sprouting seed piercing hard and barren soil, bears substantial fruits. Beyond the *Final Document's* limitations -- which all such documents certainly have - it proposes itself as an authoritative reference point for the continuation of the journey. It offers a sort of *road map* on which everyone, without rigidity and uniformity, can find him or herself in at least two aspects.

At the heart of synodality: "self-examination" between conversion and reform

The first touches on the self-awareness of the Church, to whose crucial significance Paul VI drew attention in *Ecclesiam suam* [*On the Church*], in some way summarizing the important message of Vatican II. "We believe", he wrote, "that it is a duty of the Church at the present time to strive toward a clearer and deeper awareness of itself and its mission in the world, and of the treasury of truth of which it is heir and custodian" (n. 18); "The Church needs to reflect upon itself and to *become aware of its own extraordinary vitality*. [...] It must *experience the indwelling presence of Christ*" (n. 25) for a rediscovery of the form and style of life in Christ in order to become, in Him, a message of salvation for and with all.

On closer inspection, the Final Document's precise step forward in its first part, in a convergence of voices of the People of God on *the heart of synodality*. We read in no. 28: "Synodality is a path of spiritual renewal and structural reform that enables the Church to be more participatory and missionary so that it can walk with every man and woman, radiating the light of Christ."

The second aspect articulates *the practical configuration* of this self-awareness: How is the Church today, in diverse contexts, called to creatively incarnate this reality in a diverse, non-theoretical, and concrete way? The Final Document proposes some basic guidelines and invites our focus upon two objectives: *conversion and reform*.

Spiritual and cultural conversion as "relational conversion"

Firstly, conversion touches the heart. The coincidence with the *Dilexit nos* encyclical is providential. In this encyclical, *On the Human and Divine Love of the Heart of Jesus Christ*, Pope Francis emphasizes that "the present document can help us see that the teaching of the

social Encyclicals *Laudato Si'* and *Fratelli Tutti* is not unrelated to our encounter with the love of Jesus Christ. For it is by drinking of that same love that we become capable of forging bonds of fraternity, of recognizing the dignity of each human being, and of working together to care for our common home. " (n. 217).

The synodal Church does not exist without a conversion that is first and foremost *spiritual*. Synodal spirituality begins from the heart, from the relationship with God who is Father, lived in Christ in the breath of the Holy Spirit, "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" (SC 10, cf. DF 21-27). The life of God pulsates ever new and fresh in the life of the People of God. This is why synodal spirituality is marked by fraternity, communion, and service to one another in the context of our common home. For this reason, the Final Document emphasizes that we are all called to a *relational conversion*, beginning with the relationship between women and men (cf. nos. 52, 60), in our way of living and exercising different charisms and ministries in Church life and mission (cf. part 2).

In the end, it is a matter of "experiencing how practicing the new commandment of reciprocal love is the place and form of encounter with God. In this sense, while drawing on the rich spiritual heritage of the Tradition, the synodal perspective contributes to renewing its forms: a prayer open to participation, a discernment lived together, and a missionary energy that arises from sharing and that radiates as service" (n. 44).

The source and style of synodal spirituality, in a word, comes from the Most Holy Trinity. The Church takes its origin and form here, drawing her life as a people gathered in the unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (cf. LG 4), in the celebration of the Eucharistic Assembly (cf. Final Document, 27). "The ultimate meaning of synodality," we read in no. 154, "is the witness that the Church is called to give to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the harmony of love that pours Himself out, to give Himself to the world." Thus, as is emphasized in no. 50, "When our relationships, even in their fragility, allow the grace of Christ, the love of the Father, and the communion of the Spirit to shine through, *we confess with our lives our faith in God the Trinity*."

Thanks to these affirmations gained from the experience of God's people gathered for the synodal process, the Magisterium of Vatican II, which describes the Church "in Christ as the sacrament, or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race" (*Lumen Gentium*, 1), is interpreted by the Final Document in concrete relationality and life practices reflective of the Church and her mission. It is an acquisition which, if well understood in all its existential, communitarian implications, can and must have a powerful pastoral and missionary impact in the new stage of evangelization to which the Church is called today.

Relational conversion concerns the very way of seeing, thinking, and acting that becomes *cultural conversion*. The way of conceiving discipleship, of building up the community, of proclaiming the *kerygma* and bearing witness to it cannot remain imprisoned in practices that were suitable for yesterday but are no longer relevant today.

Spiritual conversion and cultural conversion, however, do not happen overnight. They require openness, commitment, training and imagination. Concretely, they require the accompaniment of an ongoing formation expressed through shared learning around the practices proposed by the Final Document. In this way they can be concretely experienced and put into practice (part three, cf. nos. 79-80). They call for *ecclesial discernment*, care for *decision-making procedures*, *transparency* in programs and works, and the evaluation of initiatives undertaken.

The *conversations in the Spirit* – with necessary adjustments, interpretations, and adaptations – marks a point of no return. Through it, the People of God "practice" the experience of the presence of the Risen Jesus among His own (cf. *Mt* 18:20). In the light of this presence, each one places him or herself in a needed attitude of listening to "what the Spirit says to the Churches." The practices express and promote this synodal life of the Church aimed at ensuring participants can relive that original and transforming encounter with the Risen Lord. The Risen Lord assured the disciples that He would be with them always, until the end of the world, and sending them out to continue His mission (cf. *Mt* 28:18-20).

Structural reform: places and network of relationships

But spiritual and cultural conversion of practices is not enough. A *structural reform is also needed*: "New wine" requires "new wineskins." The Synod reveals two foundational directions: One must start from places, not only in a geographical sense, but in an existential sense. And, and that the Church, in its constitutive Catholicity, should be seen and realized for what it is, as an extraordinary planetary *network of relationships*. In this way, the experiences illuminated by the light of the Gospel in diverse places where the People of God encounter and mutually enrich one another through the reciprocal exchange of gifts, may overflow for the benefit of all (part 4).

It implies revitalization, with a new spirit and style at local levels (dioceses, parishes, communities of consecrated life, ecclesial movements and new communities), and Ecclesial Assemblies and Episcopal Conferences in national, continental, and major intercultural geographical regions (like the Amazon, Congo River basin, Mediterranean Sea). There is a need for greater implementation, and new impetus and style at all levels of the Church, with the participation and co-responsibility of all.

Thus, exercise of the ministry of unity by the Bishop of Rome is important and realistically outlined, while faithful to its evangelical substance. But it is also renewed in practice and promise from an ecumenical perspective, as hoped for by Pope John Paul II in the wake of Vatican II, in *Ut unum sint* (cf. n. 95). This, too, distinguishes the ecclesiological novelty of the Final Document (cf. nos. 122, 137-138), as was beautifully and constructively witnessed by the active participation of fraternal delegates of various Churches and Ecclesial Communities in the Synodal Assembly.

A Missionary perspective in service to a culture of encounter

As a final reflection, one dimension that dynamizes the Final Document's ecclesiological profile from start to finish, is its essentially missionary perspective. No. 14 states: "*The Church exists to bear witness in the world to the most decisive moment in history: the Resurrection*

of Jesus. The Risen Christ brings peace to the world and gives us the gift of His Spirit. The living Christ is the source of true freedom, the foundation for a hope that does not disappoint, the revelation of the true face of God and humanity's ultimate destiny."

In this perspective, the Synodal Church revitalizes the conciliar message of *Gaudium et Spes* on a social and political level *and* speaks of the Church as capable of generating "*a critical and prophetic voice over against the prevailing culture. In this way, we can offer a distinctive contribution to the search for answers to many challenges faced by our contemporary societies in building the common good*" (n. 47). Through the synodal process, God's People are fully committed to "*a culture of dialogue as the path; mutual cooperation as the code of conduct; reciprocal understanding as the method and standard*" (n. 123).

Borders, which for centuries have been the hinges of encounter and exchange between cultural identities and at the same time of their crossing in relation to the other, are too often transformed today into theaters of unprecedented inhumanity and brutal violence. Humanity urgently needs to rediscover borders as places of relationship and encounter, of recognition of the identity and hospitality of the other. With such a perspective, one then understands and lives humanity as a single diverse family destined to dwell in the common home.

It is necessary to promote with determination, Francis hopes, "*an authentic culture of encounter, a culture, we might say, of encounter between all the authentic and vital cultures, thanks to a reciprocal exchange of the gifts of each in that luminous space opened up by God's love for all his creatures*" (*Veritatis Gaudium* 4b). The missionary, synodal Church is called by her Lord to treasure with new enthusiasm and inspired imagination the evangelical wisdom coming to her from the gift of relationship, reciprocity, and free and gratuitous inclusion. It is through this that she lives and has grown in the light of the very life of the Most Holy Trinity communicated through the centuries. Only in this way can the Church offer (cf. 1 Jn 3:20) a contribution that is *counter-current, creative and decisive for a culture of encounter* between people and cultures.

As Pope Francis never tires of repeating, it is a journeying hand in hand with everyone, everyone, everyone, [*tutti, tutti, tutti*]. This is because the synodal Church – as the Fathers teach – is a *Mother-Church: a Church-Mary*.

At the end of the discussion following the report, Council members examined initiatives and themes to be developed, in order to accompany local Churches in receiving and implementing the Instructions of the Final Document. The General Secretariat undertook the task of preparing a draft to this effect, to be presented at the next meeting in early February 2025.

¹ Pope Francis, *Accompanying Note* to the Final Document of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, 24 November 2024.

https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/news/2024-10-26_final-document/ENG---Documento-finale.pdf

² Pope Francis, *Address to the First General Congregation of the Second Session*, 2 October 2024, cf. *Final Document*, 136. <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2024/october/documents/20241002-sinodo-vescovi.html>

³ *Accompanying note, cit.*