

## A. For a Synodal Church

### An integral experience

“Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each of them is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good”  
(1 Cor 12: 4-7)

17. One common trait unites the narratives of the stages of the first phase: it is the surprise expressed by participants who were able to share the synodal journey in a way that exceeded their expectations. For those who take part, **the synodal process offers an opportunity for an encounter in faith that makes the bond with the Lord, fraternity between people and love for the Church**, not only on an individual level, but involving and energising the entire community. The experience is that of a horizon of hope opening up for the Church, a clear sign of the presence and action of the Spirit that guides it through history on its path towards the Kingdom (cf. LG 5): “[T]he protagonist of the Synod is the Holy Spirit”<sup>5</sup>. In this way, the more intensely the invitation to journey together has been accepted, the more the Synod has become a path on which the People of God proceed with enthusiasm, but without naivety. In fact, problems, resistances, difficulties and tensions are not concealed or hidden but identified and named thanks to a context of authentic dialogue that makes it possible to speak and listen with freedom and sincerity. Issues that are often posed in an adversarial manner, or for which the life of the Church today lacks a place of acceptance and discernment, can be addressed in an evangelical way within the synodal process.

18. A term as abstract or theoretical as synodality has thus begun to be embodied in a concrete experience. From listening to the People of God a progressive appropriation and understanding of synodality “from within” emerges, which does not derive from the enunciation of a principle, a theory or a formula, but develops from a readiness to enter into a dynamic of constructive, respectful and prayerful speaking, listening and dialogue. At the root of this process is the acceptance, both personal and communal, of something that is both a gift and a challenge: to be a Church of sisters and brothers in Christ who listen to one another and who, in so doing, are gradually transformed by the Spirit.

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<sup>5</sup> FRANCIS, *Moment of reflection for the beginning of the synodal path*, 9 October 2021.

## A 1. The characteristic signs of a synodal Church

19. Within this integral understanding, an awareness emerges of certain characteristics or distinctive signs of a synodal Church. These are shared convictions on which to dwell and reflect together as we undertake a journey that will continue to clarify and refine them, starting from the work of the Synodal Assembly will undertake.

20. This is what emerges with great force from all the continents: an awareness that **ua synodal Church is founded on the recognition of a common dignity deriving from Baptism, which makes all who receive it sons and daughters of God, members of the family of God, and therefore brothers and sisters in Christ, inhabited by the one Spirit and sent to fulfil a common mission.** In Paul's language, "we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit" (1Cor 12:13). Baptism thus creates a true co-responsibility among all the members of the Church, which is manifested in the participation of all, with the charisms of each, in the mission of the Church and the building up of the ecclesial community. **A synodal Church cannot be understood other than within the horizon of communion, which is always also a mission** to proclaim and incarnate the Gospel in every dimension of human existence. Communion and mission are nourished in the common participation in the Eucharist that makes the Church a body "joined and knitted together" (Eph 4:16) in Christ, able to walk together towards the Kingdom.

21. Rooted in this awareness is the desire for a **Church that is also increasingly synodal in its institutions, structures and procedures**, so as to constitute a space in which common baptismal dignity and co-responsibility for mission are not only affirmed, but exercised, and practised. In this space, the exercise of authority in the Church is appreciated as a gift, with the desire that it be increasingly configured as "a true service, and in Holy Scripture it is significantly call 'diakonia' or ministry" (LG 24), following the model of Jesus, who stooped to wash the feet of his disciples (cf. Jn 13:1-11).

22. "A synodal Church is a listening Church"<sup>6</sup>: this awareness is the fruit of the experience of the synodal journey, which is a listening to the Spirit through listening to the Word and listening to each other as individuals and among ecclesial communities, from the local level to the continental and universal levels. For many, the great surprise was the experience of being listened to by the community, in some cases for the first time, thus receiving a recognition of their unique human worth that testifies to the Father's love for each of his sons and daughters. The experience of listening and being listened to in this way serves not only a practical function but also has a theological and ecclesial depth because it follows the example of how Jesus listened to the people he met. This style of listening is necessary to mark and transform all the relationships that the Christian community establishes among its members as well as with other faith communities and with society as a whole, especially towards those whose voice is most often ignored.

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<sup>6</sup> FRANCIS, *Address at the ceremony commemorating the 50th anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops*, 17 October 2015.

23. As a Church committed to listening, **a synodal Church desires to be humble, and knows that it must ask forgiveness and has much to learn.** Some reports noted that the synodal path is necessarily a penitential one, recognising that we have not always lived the constitutive synodal dimension of the ecclesial community. The face of the Church today bears the signs of serious crises of mistrust and lack of credibility. In many contexts, crises related to sexual abuse, and abuse of power, money and conscience have pushed the Church to a demanding examination of conscience so that “moved by the Holy Spirit” the Church “may never cease to renew herself” (LG 9), in a journey of repentance and conversion that opens paths of reconciliation, healing and justice.

24. **A synodal Church is a Church of encounter and dialogue.** On the path we have travelled, this aspect of synodality emerges with particular strength in relation to other Churches and ecclesial Communities, to which we are united by the bond of one Baptism. The Spirit, who is “the principle of the Church’s unity” (UR 2), is at work in these Churches and ecclesial Communities, and invites us to embark on paths of mutual knowledge, sharing and building a common life. At the local level, the importance of what is already being done together with members of other Churches and ecclesial Communities emerges strongly, especially as a common witness in socio-cultural contexts that are hostile to the point of persecution—this is the ecumenism of martyrdom—and in the face of the ecological emergency. Everywhere, in tune with the Magisterium of the Second Vatican Council, the profound desire to deepen the ecumenical journey also emerges: an authentically synodal Church cannot but involve all those who share the one Baptism.

25. **A synodal Church** is called to practice the culture of encounter and dialogue with the believers of other religions and with the cultures and societies in which it is embedded, but above all among the many differences that run through the Church itself. This Church **is not afraid of the variety it bears, but values it without forcing it into uniformity.** The synodal process has been an opportunity to begin to learn what it means to live unity in diversity, a fundamental point to continue exploring, trusting that the path will become clearer as we move forward. Therefore, **ua synodal Church promotes the passage from “I” to “we”**, It is a space within which a call resonates to be members of a body that values diversity but is made one by the Spirit. It is the Spirit that impels us to listen to the Lord and respond to him as a people at the service of the one mission of proclaiming to all the nations the salvation offered by God in Christ Jesus. This happens in a great diversity of contexts: no one is asked to leave their own context, but rather to understand it and enter into it more deeply. Returning to this vision after the experience of the first phase, synodality appears first and foremost as a dynamism animating concrete local communities. Moving to the more universal level, this momentum embraces all the dimensions and realities of the Church, in a movement of authentic catholicity.

26. Lived in a diversity of contexts and cultures, synodality proves to be a constitutive dimension of the Church since its origin, even if it is still in the process

of being realised. Indeed, it presses to be implemented ever more fully, expressing a radical call to conversion, change, prayer and action that is for all. In this sense, **a synodal Church is open, welcoming and embraces all**. There is no border that this movement of the Spirit does not feel compelled to cross, to draw all into its dynamism. The radical nature of Christianity is not the prerogative of a few specific vocations, but the call to build a community that lives and bears witness to a different way of understanding the relationship between the daughters and sons of God, one that embodies the truth of love, one that is based on gift and gratuitousness. The radical call is, therefore, to build together, synodally, an attractive and concrete Church: an outgoing Church, in which all feel welcome.

27. At the same time, **a synodal Church confronts honestly and fearlessly the call to a deeper understanding of the relationship between love and truth**, according to St Paul's invitation: "But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love" (Eph 4:15-16). To authentically include everyone, it is necessary to enter into the mystery of Christ allowing oneself to be formed and transformed by the way he lived the relationship between love and truth.

28. **Characteristic of a synodal Church is the ability to manage tensions without being crushed by them**, experiencing them as a drive to deepen how communion, mission and participation are lived and understood. Synodality is a privileged path of conversion, because it reconstitutes the Church in unity: it heals her wounds and reconciles her memory, welcomes the differences she bears and redeems her from festering divisions, thus enabling her to embody more fully her vocation to be "in Christ like a 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" (LG 1). Authentic listening and the ability to find ways to continue walking together beyond fragmentation and polarisation are indispensable for the Church to remain alive and vital and to be a powerful sign for the cultures of our time.

29. **Trying to walk together also brings us into contact with the healthy restlessness of incompleteness**, with the awareness that there are still many things whose weight we are not able to carry or bear (cf. Jn 16:12). This is not a problem to be solved, but rather a gift to be cultivated. We are faced with the inexhaustible and holy mystery of God and must remain open to its surprises as we walk through history towards the Kingdom. This also applies to the questions that the synodal process has brought to light. As a first step they require listening and attention, without rushing to offer immediate solutions.

30. Carrying the weight of these questions should not be the personal burden of those who occupy certain roles, with the risk of being crushed by them, but a task for the entire community, whose relational and sacramental life is often the most

effective immediate response. This is why **a synodal Church unceasingly nourishes itself at the source of the mystery it celebrates in the liturgy**, “the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed” and “the font from which all her power flows” (SC 10), particularly in the Eucharist.

31. Once the People of God are freed from the anxiety of inadequacy, the inevitable incompleteness of a synodal Church and the readiness of its members to accept their own vulnerabilities become the space for the action of the Spirit, who invites us to recognise the signs of his presence. This is why **a synodal Church is also a Church of discernment**, in the wealth of meanings that this term takes on within the different spiritual traditions. The first phase enabled the People of God to begin to experience discernment through the practice of conversation in the Spirit. As we listen attentively to each other’s lived experiences, we grow in mutual respect and begin to discern the movements of God’s Spirit in the lives of others and in our own. In this way, we begin to pay more attention to “what the Spirit is saying to the Churches” (Rev 2:7), in the commitment and hope of becoming a Church increasingly capable of making prophetic decisions that are the fruit of the Spirit’s guidance.

## **A 2. A way forward for the synodal Church: conversation in the Spirit**

32. Through the course of the first phase of the Synod and across all the continents there has been recognition of the fruitfulness of the method referred to here as “conversation in the Spirit” or “synodal method” (cf. figure on p. 18).

33. In its etymological sense, the term “conversation” does not indicate a generic exchange of ideas, but a dynamic in which the word spoken and heard generates familiarity, enabling the participants to draw closer to one another. The specification “in the Spirit” identifies the authentic protagonist: the desire of those conversing tends towards listening to His voice, which in prayer opens itself to the free action of the One who, like the wind, blows where He wills (cf. Jn 3:8). Gradually the conversation between brothers and sisters in faith opens the space for a ‘hearing together’, that is, a listening together to the voice of the Spirit. It is not conversation in the Spirit if there is not a step forward in a precise, often unexpected direction that points to concrete action.

34. In the local Churches, **conversation in the Spirit has been accepted and sometimes “discovered” as providing the atmosphere that makes possible the sharing of life experiences and the space for discernment in a synodal Church**. In the Final Documents of the Continental Assemblies, it is described as a Pentecostal moment, as an opportunity to experience being Church and to move from listening to our brothers and sisters in Christ to listening to the Spirit, who is the authentic protagonist, and being sent forth in mission by Him. At the same time, through this method, the grace of the Word and the Eucharist becomes a felt, actualised and

transforming reality, which attests to and realises the initiative by which the Lord Jesus makes himself present and active in the Church. Christ sends us out on mission and gathers us around himself to give thanks and glory to the Father in the Holy Spirit. Hence from all continents comes the request that this method may increasingly animate and inform the daily life of the Churches.

35. Conversation in the Spirit is part of a long tradition of ecclesial discernment, which has produced a plurality of methods and approaches. Its precise missionary value should be emphasised. This spiritual practice enables us to move from the “I” to the “we”: it does not lose sight of or erase the personal dimension of the “I”, but recognises it and inserts it into the community dimension. In this way, enabling participants to speak and listen becomes an expression of liturgy and prayer, within which the Lord makes himself present and draws us towards ever more authentic forms of communion and discernment.

36. In the New Testament, there are numerous examples of this mode of conversation. **A paradigmatic account is provided by the account of the encounter of the Risen Lord with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus** (cf. Lk 24:13-35, and the explanation given in CV 237). As their experience demonstrates, conversation in the Spirit builds communion and brings missionary dynamism. The two, in fact, return to the community they had left to share the Easter proclamation that the Lord is risen.

37. In its concrete reality **conversation in the Spirit can be described as a shared prayer with a view to communal discernment** for which participants prepare themselves by personal reflection and meditation. They give each other the gift of a meditated word nourished by prayer, not an opinion improvised on the spot. **The dynamic between the participants articulates three fundamental steps. The first is devoted to each person taking the floor**, starting from his or her own experience reread in prayer during the period of preparation. Others listen in the knowledge that each one has a valuable contribution to offer and refrain from debates or discussions.

38. Silence and prayer help to prepare for the next step, in which each person is invited to open up within his or herself a space for others and for the Other. Once again, each person takes the floor: not to react to or counter what they have heard, reaffirming their own position, but to express what from their listening has touched them most deeply and what they feel challenged by most strongly. **The interior traces that result from one’s listening to sisters and brothers are the language with which the Holy Spirit makes his own voice resound.** The more each participant has been nourished by meditation on the Word and the Sacraments, growing in familiarity with the Lord, the more he or she will be able to recognise the sound of His voice (cf. Jn 10:14.27), assisted also by the accompaniment of the Magisterium and theology. Likewise, the more intentionally and carefully participants attend to the voice of the Spirit the more they will grow in a shared sense of mission.

39. The third step, again in an atmosphere of prayer and under the guidance

of the Holy Spirit, is **to identify the key points that have emerged and to build a consensus on the fruits of the joint work**, which each person feels is faithful to the process and by which he or she can therefore feel represented. It is not enough to draw up a report listing the most often mentioned points. Rather, discernment is needed, which also pays attention to marginal and prophetic voices and does not overlook the significance of the points on which disagreement emerges. The Lord is the cornerstone that will allow the “construction” to stand and the Spirit, the master of harmony, will help to move from cacophony to symphony.

40. The journey leads to a prayer of praise to God and gratitude for the experience. “When we live out a spirituality of drawing nearer to others and seeking their welfare, our hearts are opened wide to the Lord’s greatest and most beautiful gifts. **Whenever we encounter another person in love, we learn something new about God.** Whenever our eyes are opened to acknowledge the other, we grow in the light of faith and knowledge of God” (EG 272). This, in a nutshell, is the gift received by those who allow themselves to be involved in a conversation in the Spirit.

41. In concrete situations, it is never possible to follow this pattern slavishly. Rather it must always be adapted. Sometimes it is necessary to give priority to each one taking the floor and listening to the others; in other circumstances to bringing out the links between the different perspectives, in search of what makes “our hearts burn within us” (cf. Lk 24:32); in others still, to the explication of a consensus and working together to identify the direction in which one feels called by the Spirit to move. But, beyond the appropriate concrete adaptations, the intention and dynamism that unite the three steps are and remain characteristic of the way of proceeding of a synodal Church.

42. Bearing in mind the significance of conversation in the Spirit to animate the lived experience of the synodal Church, **formation in this method, and in particular of facilitators capable of accompanying communities in practising it, is perceived as a priority at all levels of ecclesial life** and for all the Baptised, starting with ordained Ministers in a spirit of co-responsibility and openness to different ecclesial vocations. Formation for conversation in the Spirit is formation to be a synodal Church.