

NOTES ON SYNODALITY

22.9.2023

A couple of more encompassing reflections on synodality are worthwhile. The first reflection is more anthropological; the second is more theological.

1. A new collective subject

Outside the Church

In many ways and with regard to many events, my impression is that we are living in a historical moment in which humanity perceives itself as *a (new) collective subject*, as a single actor before its own destiny. Today there is an interaction between people, societies and states, which is developing to the maximum the process of awareness that we are a single united actor, protagonist and responsible for its history.

In anthropological terms, the above means that we are experiencing a *leap of consciousness*: from the *I* -in all its versions: individual, culture-state-continent...- to the *we* -also in all its versions: planet, nature, ecosystem, networks...-. Covid-19 was the occasion to witness that this "*we*" was the question! -If we did not fight *together*, and not separately, against the virus, we were not going to do anything really effective against the pandemic. The ecological crisis has been telling us the same thing for quite some time. All this represents a demanding and not easy step towards a cultural horizon that puts in our hands a different vision of what is common. Unlike other historical moments, this step comes to us today as a requirement of the first order: almost to be or not to be, to live or to die?

However, the meaning of this unprecedented *universality* is a hotly debated issue today. All possible positions are appearing within such a profound transformation process: from *globalization* -which excessively standardizes this planetary "*we*"- to *populism* -which excessively particularizes the local and cultural "*we*". Between one and the other, quite a few things are happening, as if we were facing a true "agitation of spirits", which warns of a very deep cultural movement, described by some as the explosion of a *new anthropology* -with features such as its extreme sensitivity to diversity, its constant call for inclusion, its recognition of the minority (indigenism, anti-colonialism, historical revisionism), its recognition of the resized otherness of women, its new paradigm of sexuality, etc.-. *Denialism* can be seen as an irrational rejection of this transition. It is not a minor phenomenon. It is currently splitting many contemporary societies in half.

Inside the Church

My impression is that the Church is not unscathed by all of the above. The current fragmentation of the Church is a result of how it is internalizing the cultural transition to a new *us*. But that fragmentation is proof that we are at a juncture that affects crucial issues, about which choices have to be made. And if choices have to be made, then the Church is not dead, but alive.

In my understanding, *synodality* is, *roughly speaking*, the Church's current response to the cultural crossroads in which we find ourselves. Synodality is the framework that encompasses areas, concepts and ecclesial practices, which point to a certainly different way - albeit with very ancient roots - of perceiving ourselves as *us*, as a collective *body* (a way that I judge enormously pertinent for the moment we are living in). The Church, being synodal, constitutes a *we* that could well help the world it seeks to evangelize by offering a transformative version of the collective.

2. Common Discernment and Synodality

Of the many aspects associated with synodality, discernment in common is absolutely key. Discernment brings to mind a concept of Christian *discipleship* from which an ecclesiality appropriate for our times can also be deduced. In other words, Christian discipleship can (should) be understood as a *permanent state of discernment*, which generates a new kind of ecclesial belonging.

Taken as a whole, the theological extrapolations derived from Ignatian discernment suggest an even more fundamental question: the *ecclesiality* that should be assumed if such extrapolations are accepted.

This ecclesiality would advocate two principles:

a) In times tempted by superficiality, the *depth* to which discernment leads us goes hand in hand with a Christian discipleship lived as a permanent state of seeking God's will. But this supposes conceding, from the outset, that *every baptized person is capable of discernment*. It has not always been admitted in this way. Discernment has been assumed to have a certain exclusivity and exceptionality, and has been recognized as possible only for a small group of believers. An example of this is the recurrent discussion about the value of vocal prayer versus mental prayer. Discernment rests especially on the goodness of the latter, but such goodness has not been peacefully accepted by the spiritualities in force in the Church. The Ignatian spirituality, among others, thinks that discernment, in whatever degree, is feasible for anyone, based on the immediacy of the relationship that God establishes with each human being.

b) The search for God's will is not confined to the sphere of personal experience. It can also be done *collectively*. The *communitarian* application of personal discernment is being defended and promoted recently. In the Jesuit tradition, in spite of its reticence, this application is not strange. Themes such as the *discrete charitas* of the government of persons, communal *deliberation* and spiritual *accompaniment* are long-standing records in the Society of Jesus that demonstrate that personal discernment has transcended the limits of the strictly individual. What is interesting is that the extension of personal discernment to the community level brings with it ecclesial consequences, all of them of great significance. Community discernment, in its different versions, would underline the importance of the *spiritual conversation* of personal motions as the best communicative means for decision making. Or it would emphasize that authority in the Church is a key element, but not the only one from the outset, in the co-responsible search for God's will. Or it would enhance the communitarian dimension of faith by valuing the role of the community as the collective subject of significant consolations and desolations in defining the mission. Or it would promote that the growth in faith of each believer has to

pass through the spiritual accompaniment offered by other believers, suitable in the personal processes of discernment. Or it would enrich the methodology of pastoral planning of the current ecclesial structures, by incorporating, without fear, more numerous and horizontal instances of discernment.

All this is the outline of a *qualitative Christianity*, animated by its real capacity for discernment. Contemporary Christianity will be looked at, more than by its *whats*, by its discerned *hows*: by the way it bases and focuses its strategic choices of evangelization, its procedures for carrying them out and its credibility in incarnating them. The Church has to emit signs of *depth*, that which discernment provides. Its institutional strength will be ineffective without them. The practice of discernment would favor that depth. It would give the message that the Church does not hesitate to see that it is facing a world open to new forms of humanization, *for which a new conscience is also required*: the one to which the Spirit has always led when it is listened to for discernment.