

Synodality, a path of personal and communal conversion

When I was director of the National Service for the Evangelization of Youth and for Vocations at the French Bishops' Conference from 2012 to 2018, like the other national service directors, I participated each year at Lourdes in the beginning of November in the Plenary Assembly of the Bishops of France. In 2015, we had a series at the 2nd Synod of Bishops on the Family that had just taken place in Rome. The French bishops who were delegates to the synod then shared with their peers some summaries of this experience. Each then evoked in his testimony how this month of Roman meetings in contact with the bishops of the whole world had moved him in his way of seeing, and converted him. And Cardinal André Vingt-Trois – at that time archbishop of Paris - expressed with his usual humor: "Even I, an old Cardinal well anchored in his convictions as you can imagine, this synod has moved me! ». Already in 2012, on the return from the Synod of Bishops on the New Evangelization, I was struck by the remark of Bishop Yves Le Saux, Bishop of Le Mans: "During this synod, we became aware of the radical changes in our society of what is at stake in a pastoral conversion. And we understood, as bishops, that evangelization begins with our own personal conversion". Then in October 2018, having the chance to participate in the Synod of Bishops on "Youth, Faith and Vocational Discernment" as an observer, I myself had direct experience of it. That synod profoundly transformed me, far beyond what I could have imagined. Synodality lived in a profound attitude of listening to the Spirit, in an attitude of discernment, is truly a journey of personal and community conversion. Pope Francis expressed it this way in his last book of interviews on the current crisis: "What characterizes a synod's journey is the role of the Holy Spirit. (...) Open to changes and new possibilities, the Synod is for everyone an experience of conversion."¹ Synodality is not a path marked out in advance and requires us to be open to the unexpected from God who, through listening to others, comes to touch us, to shake us up, to move us interiorly. As a path of discernment in common with an Assembly rooted in the Eucharist that becomes aware of herself and sets out together, synodality is fundamentally a call to conversion in order to aim at and produce a missionary communion at the service of the world. It is a process -a spiritual process- that unfolds over time. It needs a framework and structure, but more fundamentally "synodality denotes the particular *style* that qualifies the life and mission of the Church, expressing her nature as the People of God journeying together and gathering in assembly, summoned by the Lord Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit to proclaim the Gospel."² It therefore calls for certain human and spiritual attitudes that we will take the time to explore after having tried to further define what synodality is.

1. Synodality, a style, a call to live the Church in the breath of the Trinity.

Synodality has become for many a buzzword! In the Church of France for instance many initiatives and publications advocate the implementation at all levels of a more synodal Church. With Pope Francis, who fosters synodality as a major axis of his pontificate and has chosen it to be the theme of

¹ Pope Francis, *Let Us Dream, The Path to a Better Future*, Simon & Schuster 2020 p. 86

² International theological commission, *Synodality in the life and mission of the Church*, March 2 2018, §70a

the next Synod of Bishops³, all the baptized are called to be promoters and actors of synodality. But what exactly is synodality? What vision of the Church does it express? What practices does it call for?

Often, to put it simply, synodality is presented according to the etymology of the word synod-which comes from the Greek *sun-odos*, that is to say, "walking together"-as "walking together" in listening to the Spirit. But synodality, an ancient notion whose Latin equivalent *concilium* (in English Council) designates an assembly of bishops, is a rich and polyform notion that has no completely settled definition. For synodality is a *modus vivendi et operandi*: "This *modus vivendi et operandi* works through the community listening to the Word and celebrating the Eucharist, the brotherhood of communion and the co-responsibility and participation of the whole People of God in its life and mission, on all levels and distinguishing between various ministries and roles."⁴

Synodality, so to speak, is a style, a practice, a way of being Church in history "in the image of Trinitarian communion" as Pope Francis tells us: "the practice of synodality, traditional but always to be renewed, is the implementation, in the history of the People of God on their journey, of the Church as a mystery of communion, in the image of Trinitarian communion. As you know, this theme is very close to my heart: synodality is a style, it is walking together, and it is what the Lord expects of the Church in the third millennium"⁵. This ancient notion was in fact characteristic of the early Church because, in the first centuries, many local synods and councils were organized to allow the assembled bishops to discuss and discern the decisions to be taken in a context marked by controversies and heresies that had to be resolved. With the historian John O'Malley, one can recognize that "from a historical viewpoint, traditional Church governance was synodal governance". And more precisely "On both the local and the church-wide level, traditional church governance was synodal, that is, collegial"⁶. If synodality has its roots in the Bible, and in particular in the oft-quoted source-reference that is the "Council" of Jerusalem in Acts 15 which is considered the "paradigmatic model"⁷ of all subsequent Councils, in its modern vision and reappropriation, it is considered and developed today as a fruit of the Second Vatican Council. In fact, the institution of the Synod of Bishops in September 1965 by Paul VI at the opening of the fourth and last session of the Council was intended to be an expression of synodality and a means to follow-up the experience of collegiality⁸ lived and desired by the Council Fathers.

With Pope Francis highlighting the Synod of Bishops as an important instrument of his project of Reforming the Church in view of her missionary transformation, synodality is gaining momentum and unfolding as a dynamic vision for the Church, a Church centered on mercy and called to permanent conversion. Synodality, church reform, and conversion are thus intrinsically linked.

³ As announced on March 7 2020, Pope Francis has chosen "For a synodal Church: communion, participation, and mission" as the theme for the next Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops."

<https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2020/03/07/0145/00318.html>

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ Francis, *Address to members of the International Theological Commission*, November 29 2019

⁶ O'Malley, John, *When Bishops Meet: an essay comparing Trent, Vatican I, and Vatican II*, Cambridge, Massachusetts 2019, 58

⁷ Meloni Alberto and Scatena Silvia (eds.), *Synod and Synodality. Theology, History, Canon Law and Ecumenism*, LIT Verlag, Münster 2005, 113

⁸ If synodality and collegiality participate in the same "dynamism of communion" that constitutes the Church, in the technical sense, today, we distinguish between collegiality - in the sense of episcopal collegiality as reintroduced at Vatican II - and synodality, which is no longer the expression of episcopal collegiality alone but involves all the faithful.

In the Eucharist celebrated on November 9, 2013 in Saint Martha, Pope Francis speaks of the challenge of the Church in this way: "*Ecclesia semper reformanda*. The Church always needs to renew itself because its members are sinners and need conversion."⁹ Synodality, therefore, carries within itself in its practice and implementation the call to personal and community conversion. It is a path of spiritual and pastoral conversion. It presupposes and requires spiritual attitudes, one could even speak of a spirituality of synodality which is in fact a spirituality of communion, as well described in the important document of the International Theological Commission on "Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church" published in 2018 in paragraph 107 on "The Spirituality of Communion and Formation for Synodal Life": "Hence the need for the Church to become "the home and school of communion"^[135]. Without conversion of heart and mind and without disciplined training for welcoming and listening to one another the external instruments of communion would be of hardly any use; on the contrary, they could be transformed into mere heartless, faceless masks. "While the wisdom of the law, by providing precise rules for participation, attests to the hierarchical structure of the Church and averts any temptation to arbitrariness or unjust claims, the spirituality of communion, by prompting a trust and openness wholly in accord with the dignity and responsibility of every member of the People of God, supplies institutional reality with a soul"^[136]¹⁰.

2. A spirituality of the ecclesial "we".

To enable this walking together in listening to the Spirit, the synodality must implement a practice of discernment in common that "stimulates the generation and implementation of processes that build us up as the People of God"¹¹ and aims at missionary communion. In summary, one could say that synodality is about moving from "I" to "we". But a "we" that integrates the singular "I" 's in an inclusive process. It is a "we" in which each "I" is a protagonist¹². Synodality means rediscovering the priority of the ecclesial "we" in order to serve the common good by becoming aware that "Life is a communal journey where tasks and responsibilities are apportioned and shared on the basis of the common good."¹³. Synodality, which presupposes that all the baptized take their baptism seriously in order to be protagonists of the directions to be taken and actors in the mission of the Church, reawakens and strengthens in us the constitutive ecclesial dimension of our baptismal vocation. Synodality is deeply connected to and rooted in an ecclesiology of the People of God: "Synodality

⁹ Quoted by Arturo Sosa, sj, in his introduction of the book of Rafael Luciani y Carlos Schickendatz (coord.) *Reforma de estructuras y conversion de mentalidades*, Ediciones Khaf 2020

¹⁰ International theological commission, *Synodality in the life and mission of the Church*, March 2 2018, §107

¹¹ Letter of Pope Francis to the Church in Germany in a synodal path, June 29 2019

¹² "Synodality is a fundamental quality of the Church as a whole. As St John Chrysostom said: "'Church" means both gathering [*systema*] and synod [*synodos*]'.(3) The term comes from the word 'council' (*synodos* in Greek, *concilium* in Latin), which primarily denotes a gathering of bishops, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, for common deliberation and action in caring for the Church. Broadly, it refers to the active participation of all the faithful in the life and mission of the Church." In Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, *Synodality and primacy during the first millennium*, Chieti September 21 2016, §3

¹³ Pope Francis, post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Querida Amazonia*, February 2 2020, §20
http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20200202_querida-amazonia.html

also characterizes the Church of the Second Vatican Council, understood as the People of God in their equality and common dignity with regard to the diversity of ministries, charisms and services"¹⁴. So synodality emphasizes the equal dignity of all the baptized, all inhabited by the Spirit, all called and all missionary disciples. It calls for taking the *sensus fidei*¹⁵ seriously and therefore listening to each one, taking into account the diversity of voices in the Church. " The same dispositions that are required to live and bring to maturity the *sensus fidei*, with which all believers are endowed, are also required to put it into use on the synodal path."¹⁶

Thus synodality asks us to look at the Church in a dynamic and systemic, inclusive and non-competitive vision¹⁷ that takes into account the diversity of charisms. That is to say a broad integral vision that emphasizes relationships and community, listening and dialogue, participation and co-responsibility, reciprocity among all members and circularity among all ecclesial poles. Beyond the formal synodality that unfolds in institutional structures and processes such as pastoral councils, synods or councils, this call to " journeying together and gathering in assembly, summoned by the Lord Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit to proclaim the Gospel (...) ought to be expressed in the Church's ordinary way of living and working."¹⁸ Synodality is therefore a process, a spiritual process that must be promoted at the grassroots in the local churches and at all levels, it is a way of life that fosters and develops the participation and collaboration of all.

To enter into this style and practice of synodality, we need to cultivate and employ spiritual attitudes such as: listening, dialogue, empathy, sharing, inner freedom and freedom of speech, humility, the search for truth and above all faith and trust in God, all anchored in prayer and the Eucharist. Above all, we need to nurture Trust in the Holy Spirit who breathes in each one and in the group that walks together through synodality. For the experience of synodality is above all an experience of the Spirit, it is an open path, not traced out in advance, woven by encounter, dialogue and sharing that broadens and shifts the vision of each person. It is a path of humanity and fraternity that makes us become "one family", one community. To enter into synodality is therefore to accept to set out on a journey, to live as pilgrims in a pilgrim Church on this earth. Synodality is an experience of incarnation that situates us in harmony with reality, attuned to the cries and needs of the world. It is " a way of being and working together, young and old, in listening and in discernment, in order to

¹⁴ Final Document of the Synod of Bishops on the Amazon, October 26 2019, §87

¹⁵ "What the Lord is asking of us is already in some sense present in the very word "synod". Journeying together — laity, pastors, the Bishop of Rome — is an easy concept to put into words, but not so easy to put into practice.

After stating that the people of God is comprised of all the baptized who are called to "be a spiritual house and a holy priesthood", (6) the Second Vatican Council went on to say that "the whole body of the faithful, who have an anointing which comes from the holy one (cf. 1 Jn 2:20,27), cannot err in matters of belief. This characteristic is shown in the supernatural sense of the faith (*sensus fidei*) of the whole people of God, when 'from the bishops to the last of the faithful' it manifests a universal consensus in matters of faith and morals". (7) These are the famous words *infallible "in credendo"*. In Pope Francis, *Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops*, October 17 2015

¹⁶ International theological commission, *Synodality in the life and mission of the Church*, March 2 2018, §108

¹⁷ To use an expression from Richard Gaillardetz, "Vatican II's Noncompetitive Theology of the Church." *Louvain Studies* 37 (2013): 3-27.

¹⁸ Ibid §70a

arrive at pastoral choices that respond to reality"¹⁹. Synodality is a call to change in a Church on the move. It is like "a dance together" in which all, pastors and faithful, through a living dialogue and sharing in trust, move in relation to one another in listening to one another and to the music of the Spirit. In order to enter into an adjusted attitude of dialogue and sharing that requires both " to speak with courage and frankness (*parrhesia*), namely to integrate *freedom, truth and charity* "²⁰ and entering into "the humility of listening"²¹, synodality requires interiority and attention to the movements of the spirits in oneself and in the group. One cannot develop synodality in the Church without training in discernment, because it presupposes being able to recognize those fruits of the Spirit which are also the fruits of synodality: joy, peace, missionary zeal, communion, desire for commitment, love of others and of the Church etc. To be implemented at all levels of the Church, both local and universal, synodality needs "leaders" capable of leading and accompanying synodal processes. For in the Catholic regime there is no synodality without primacy. Enlarging, because the Catholic Church structurally contains a hierarchical principle, it can be said that synodality cannot be implemented at all levels without the service of those in authority. This is undoubtedly one of the greatest challenges. To employ synodality, to implement synodal pastoral care, the Church today needs pastors trained in synodality who exercise a new style of leadership - which can be characterized as collaborative leadership - no longer vertical and clerical but more horizontal and cooperative. A servant leadership that translates into a new relationship with power and a new way of exercising authority that is conceived as a service of freedom. It is a certain way of accompanying by placing oneself in the midst of others, to be with them in a co-responsibility that seeks the empowerment and participation of all. This requires integrating and implementing a sense of authority seen as a generating force for liberating freedom and not as a power of imposition. In the image of Pope Francis, a model of leadership for a synodal Church, pastoral leaders at the service of the synod, called to be both pastors and disciples, are called to embrace these key words: closeness, availability, trust, mutuality. Without forgetting the responsibility to maintain the objective of synodality which is to build a people, a fraternal and missionary community at the service of the common good of society.

In conclusion, synodality, as a process of conversion, is in fact an art, the art of discernment that welcomes and names the life of the Spirit to make the Church a moving boat. It is the art of a Church that allows itself to be renewed to become more and more a relational, inclusive, dialogical and generative Church. That is to say, an emerging Church that is constantly being reborn with and by those who keep it alive.

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¹⁹ Pope Francis, Angelus at the end of the Synod on Youth, Sunday October 29 2018
http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2018/documents/papa-francesco_angelus_20181028.html

²⁰ Pope Francis, *Address at the opening of the synod of bishops*, Oct. 3rd 2018

²¹ *ibid*