



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS TO THE FAITHFUL OF THE DIOCESE OF ROME

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Saturday, 18 September 2021*

[[Multimedia](#)]

Dear brothers and sisters,

As you are aware, we are about to begin a synodal process, a journey on which the whole Church will reflect on the theme: *Towards a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission*: those three pillars. Three phases are planned, and will take place between October 2021 and October 2023. This process was conceived as an exercise in mutual listening. I want to emphasize this. It is an exercise of mutual listening, conducted at all levels of the Church and involving the entire People of God. The Cardinal Vicar, the auxiliary bishops, priests, religious and laity have to listen to one another, and then to everyone else. Listening, speaking and listening. It is not about garnering opinions, not a survey, but a matter of listening to the Holy Spirit, as we read in the book of Revelation: “Whoever has ears should listen to what the Spirit says to the churches” (2:7). To have ears, to listen, is the first thing we need to do. To hear God’s voice, to sense his presence, to witness his passage and his breath of life.

Thus the prophet Elijah came to realize that God is always a God of surprises, even in the way he passes by and makes himself felt: “A strong and heavy wind was rending the mountains and crushing rocks... but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind, there was an earthquake – but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake, there was fire – but the Lord was not in the fire. After the fire, there was a tiny whispering sound. When he heard this, Elijah hid his face in his cloak” (1 Kg 19:11-13).

That is how God speaks to us. We need to open our ears to hear that tiny whispering sound, the

gentle breeze of God, which scholars also translate as “a quiet whisper” or “a small, still voice”.

The first step of the process (October 2021–April 2022) will take place in each diocese. That why I am here, as your bishop, for this moment of sharing, because it is very important that the Diocese of Rome be committed to this process. Wouldn't it look bad if the Pope's own diocese was not committed to this? Yes, it would look bad, for the Pope, but also for you!

Synodality is not a chapter in an ecclesiology textbook, much less a fad or a slogan to be bandied about in our meetings. Synodality is an expression of the Church's nature, her form, style and mission. We can talk about the Church as being “synodal”, without reducing that word to yet another description or definition of the Church. I say this not as a theological opinion or even my own thinking, but based on what can be considered the first and most important “manual” of ecclesiology: the Acts of the Apostles.

The word “synod” says it all: it means “journeying together”. The Book of Acts is the story of a journey that started in Jerusalem, passed through Samaria and Judea, then on to the regions of Syria, Asia Minor, Greece, ending up in Rome. A journey that reveals how God's word, and the people who heed and put their faith in that word, journey together. The word of God journeys with us. Everyone has a part to play; no one is a mere extra. This is important: everyone has a part to play. The Pope, the Cardinal Vicar and the auxiliary bishops are not more important than the others; no, all of us have a part to play and no one can be considered simply as an extra. At that time, the ministries were clearly seen as forms of service. Authority derived from listening to the voice of God and of the people, inseparably. This kept those who received it humble, serving the lowly with faith and love. Yet that story, that journey, was not merely geographical, it was also marked by a constant inner restlessness. This is essential: if Christians do not feel a deep inner restlessness, then something is missing. That inner restlessness is born of faith; it impels us to consider what it is best to do, what needs to be preserved or changed. History teaches us that it is not good for the Church to stand still (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 23). Movement is the fruit of docility to the Holy Spirit, who directs this history, in which all have a part to play, in which all are restless, never standing still.

Peter and Paul were not just two individuals with their own personalities. They represent two visions within much broader horizons. They were capable of reassessing things in the light of events, witnesses of an impulse that led them to stop and think – that is another expression we should remember: to stop and think. An impulse that drove them to be daring, to question, to change their minds, to make mistakes and learn from those mistakes, but above all to hope in spite of every difficulty. They were disciples of the Holy Spirit, who showed them the geography of salvation, opening doors and windows, breaking down walls, shattering chains and opening frontiers. This may mean setting out, changing course, leaving behind certain ideas that hold us back and prevent us from setting out and walking together.

We can see the Spirit driving Peter to go to the house of Cornelius, the pagan centurion, despite his qualms. Remember: Peter had had a disturbing vision in which he was told to eat things he considered impure. He was troubled, despite the assurance that what God has made clean should no longer be considered impure. While he was trying to grasp the significance of this vision, some men sent by Cornelius arrived. Cornelius too had received a vision and a message. He was a pious Roman official, sympathetic to Judaism, but not enough to be fully Jewish or Christian; he would not have made it past a religious “customs office”. Cornelius was a pagan, yet he was told that his prayers were heard by God and that he should send and ask Peter to come to his house. At this point, with Peter and his doubts, and Cornelius uncertain and confused, the Spirit overcomes Peter’s resistance and opens a new chapter of missionary history. That is how the Spirit works. In the meeting between those two men, we hear one of the most beautiful phrases of Christianity. Cornelius meets Peter and falls at his feet, but Peter, picking him up, tells him: “Get up. I too am a man” (*Acts* 10:26). All of us can say the same thing: “I am a man, I am a woman; we are all human”. This is something we should all say, bishops too, all of us: “Get up. I too am a man”.

The text also says that Peter conversed with Cornelius (cf. v. 27). Christianity should always be human and accessible, reconciling differences and distances, turning them into familiarity and proximity. One of the ills of the Church, indeed a perversion, is the clericalism that detaches priests and bishops from people, making them officials, not pastors. Saint Paul VI liked to quote the words of Terence: “I am a man: I regard nothing human as foreign to me”. The encounter between Peter and Cornelius resolved a problem; it helped bring about the decision to preach directly to the pagans, in the conviction that – as Peter put it – “God shows no partiality” (*Acts* 10:34). There can be no discrimination in the name of God. Discrimination is a sin among us too, whenever we start to say: “We are the pure, we are the elect, we belong to this movement that knows everything, we are...” No! We are the Church, all of us together.

You see, we cannot understand what it means to be “catholic” without thinking of this large, open and welcoming expanse. Being Church is a path to enter into this broad embrace of God. To return to the Acts of the Apostles, we see the emerging problem of how to organize the growing number of Christians, and particularly how to provide for the needs of the poor. Some were saying that their widows were being neglected. The solution was found by assembling the disciples and determining together that seven men would be appointed full time for *diakonia*, to serve the tables (*Acts* 6:1-7). In this way, though service, the Church advanced, journeyed together, was “synodal”, accompanied by discernment, amid the felt needs and realities of life and in the power of the Spirit. The Spirit is always the great “protagonist” of the Church’s life.

There was also the clash of differing visions and expectations. We need not be afraid when the same thing happens today. Would that we could argue like that! Arguments are a sign of docility and openness to the Spirit. Serious conflicts can also take place, as was the case with the issue of circumcision for pagan converts, which was settled with the deliberation of the so-called Council of

Jerusalem, the first Council. Today too, there can be a rigid way of looking at things, one that restricts God's *makrothymía*, his patient, profound, broad and farsighted way of seeing things. God sees into the distance; God is not in a hurry. Rigidity is another perversion, a sin against the patience of God, a sin against God's sovereignty. Today too.

So it was back then. Some converts from Judaism, in their self-absorption, maintained that there could be no salvation without submission to the Law of Moses. In this way, they opposed Paul, who proclaimed salvation directly in the name of Jesus. This opposition would have compromised the reception of the new pagan converts. Paul and Barnabas were sent to Jerusalem, to the Apostles and the elders. It was not easy: in discussing this problem, the arguments appeared irreconcilable; they debated at length. It was a matter of recognizing God's freedom of action, that no obstacles could prevent him from touching the hearts of people of any moral or religious background. The situation was resolved when they accepted the evidence that "God, who knows the heart" – as a good "cardiologist" – was on the side of the pagans being admitted to salvation, since he "gave them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us" (*Acts 15:8*). In this way, respect was shown for the sensibilities of all and excesses were tempered. They learned from Peter's experience with Cornelius. Indeed, the final "document" presents the Spirit as the protagonist in the process of decision-making and reflects the wisdom that he is always capable of inspiring: "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to place on you any burden beyond these necessary things" (*Acts 15:28*).

"... and to us". In this Synod, we want to get to the point where we can say, "it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us", for, guided by the Holy Spirit, you will be in constant dialogue among yourselves, but also in dialogue with the Holy Spirit. Remember those words: "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to place on you any burden..." "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us". That is how you should try to discuss things at every stage of this synodal process. Without the Holy Spirit, this will be a kind of diocesan parliament, but not a Synod. We are not holding a diocesan parliament, examining this or that question, but making a journey of listening to one another and to the Holy Spirit, discussing yes, but discussing with the Holy Spirit, which is a way of praying.

"To the Holy Spirit and to us". Still, it is always tempting to do things on our own, in an "ecclesiology of substitution", which can take many forms. As if, once ascended to heaven, the Lord had left a void needing to be filled, and we ourselves have to fill it. No, the Lord has left us the Spirit! Jesus' words are very clear: "I will pray to the Father and he will give you another Paraclete, to stay with you forever... I will not leave you orphans" (*Jn 14:16.18*). In fulfilment of this promise, the Church is a sacrament, as we read in *Lumen Gentium*, 1: "The Church, in Christ, is like a sacrament – a sign and instrument of communion with God and of the unity of the whole human race". That sentence, which echoes the testimony of the Council of Jerusalem, contradicts those who would take God's place, presuming to shape the Church on the basis of their own cultural and historical convictions, forcing it to set up armed borders, toll booths, forms of

spirituality that blaspheme the gratuitousness of God's involvement in our lives. When the Church is a witness, in word and deed, of God's unconditional love, of his welcoming embrace, she authentically expresses her catholicity. And she is impelled, from within and without, to be present in every time and place. That impulse and ability are the Spirit's gift: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). To receive the power of the Holy Spirit to become witnesses: this is our path as Church, and we will be Church if we take this path.

Being a synodal Church means being a Church that is the sacrament of Christ's promise that the Spirit will always be with us. We show this by growing in our relationship with the Spirit and the world to come. There will always be disagreements, thank God, but solutions have to be sought by listening to God and to the ways he speaks in in our midst. By praying and opening our eyes to everything around us; by practicing a life of fidelity to the Gospel; by seeking answers in God's revelation through a pilgrim hermeneutic capable of persevering in the journey begun in the Acts of the Apostles. This is important: the way to understand and interpret is through a pilgrim hermeneutic, one that is always journeying. The journey that began after the Council? No. The journey that began with the first Apostles and has continued ever since. Once the Church stops, she is no longer Church, but a lovely pious association, for she keeps the Holy Spirit in a cage. A pilgrim hermeneutic capable of persevering in the journey begun in the Acts of the Apostles. Otherwise, the Holy Spirit would be demeaned. Gustav Mahler – as I have said on other occasions – once stated that fidelity to tradition does not consist in worshipping ashes but in keeping a fire burning. As you begin this synodal journey, I ask you: what are you more inclined to do: guard the ashes of the Church, in other words, your association or group, or keep the fire burning? Are you more inclined to worship what you cherish, and which keep you self-enclosed – "I belong to Peter, I belong to Paul, I belong to this association, you to that one, I am a priest, I am a bishop..." – or do you feel called to keep the fire of the Spirit burning? Mahler was a great composer, but those words showed that he was also a teacher of wisdom. *Dei Verbum* (no. 8), citing the Letter to the Hebrews, tells us that "God, who spoke in partial and various ways to our fathers (*Heb* 1:1), uninterruptedly converses with the bride of his beloved Son". Saint Vincent of Lérins aptly compared human growth to the development of the Church's Tradition, which is passed on from one generation to the next. He tells us that "the deposit of faith" cannot be preserved without making it advance in such a way as "to be consolidated by years, enlarged by time, refined by age" (*Commonitorium primum*, 23: *ut annis consolidetur, dilatetur tempore, sublimetur aetate*). This is how our own journey should be. For reality, including theology, is like water; unless it keeps flowing, it becomes stagnant and putrefies. A stagnant Church starts to decay.

You see, then, how our Tradition is like a mass of leavened dough; we can see it growing and in that growth is communion: journeying together brings about true communion. Here too, the Acts of the Apostles can help us by showing us that communion does not suppress differences. It is the wonder of Pentecost, where different languages are not obstacles; by the working of the Holy Spirit, "each one heard them speaking in his own language" (Acts 2:8). Feeling at home, different

but together on the same journey. [Pardon me for speaking so long, but the Synod is a serious matter, and so I have felt free to speak at length...]

To return to the synodal process, the diocesan phase is very important, since it involves listening to all the baptized, the subject of the infallible *sensus fidei in credendo*. There is a certain resistance to moving beyond the image of a Church rigidly divided into leaders and followers, those who teach and those who are taught; we forget that God likes to overturn things: as Mary said, “he has thrown down the rulers from their thrones but lifted up the lowly” (*Lk* 1:52).

Journeying together tends to be more horizontal than vertical; a synodal Church clears the horizon where Christ, our sun, rises, while erecting monuments to hierarchy covers it. Shepherds walk with their people: we shepherds walk with our people, at times in front, at times in the middle, at times behind. A good shepherd should move that way: in front to lead, in the middle to encourage and preserve the smell of the flock, and behind, since the people too have their own “sense of smell”. They have a nose for finding new paths for the journey, or for finding the road when the way is lost. I want to emphasize this, also for the bishops and priests of the diocese. In this synodal process, they should ask: “Am I capable of walking, of moving, in front, in between and behind, or do I remain seated in my chair, with mitre and crozier?” Shepherds in the midst of the flock, yet remaining shepherds, not the flock. The flock knows we are shepherds, the flock knows the difference. In front to show the way, in the middle to sense how people feel, behind to help the stragglers, letting the people sniff out where the best pastures are found.

The *sensus fidei* gives everyone a share in the dignity of the prophetic office of Christ (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 34-35), so that they can discern the paths of the Gospel in the present time. It is the “sense of smell” proper to the sheep, but let us be careful: in the history of salvation, we are all sheep with regard to the Shepherd who is the Lord. The image (of sheep) helps us understand the two dimensions that contribute to this “sense of smell”. One is individual and the other communitarian: we are sheep, yet we are also members of the flock, which in this case means the Church. These days, in the Office of Readings, we are reading from Augustine’s sermon on pastors, where he tells us, “with you I am a sheep; for you I am a shepherd”. These two aspects, individual and ecclesial, are inseparable: there can be no *sensus fidei* without sharing in the life of the Church, which is more than mere Catholic activism; it must above all be that “sense” that is nourished by the “mind of Christ” (*Phil* 2:5).

The exercise of the *sensus fidei* cannot be reduced to the communication and comparison of our own opinions on this or that issue, or a single aspect of the Church’s teaching or discipline. No, those are instruments, verbalizations, dogmatic or disciplinary statements. The idea of distinguishing between majorities and minorities must not prevail: that is what parliaments do. How many times have those who were “rejected” become “the cornerstone” (cf. *Ps* 118:22; *Mt* 21:42), while those who were “far away” have drawn “near” (*Eph* 2:13). The marginalized, the poor, the hopeless were chosen to be a sacrament of Christ (cf. *Mt* 25:31-46). The Church is like that. And whenever some groups wanted to stand out more, those groups always ended badly, even

denying salvation, in heresies. We can think of the heresies that claimed to lead the Church forward, like Pelagianism, and then Jansenism. Every heresy ended badly. Gnosticism and Pelagianism are constant temptations for the Church. We are so rightly concerned for the dignity of our liturgical celebrations, but we can easily end up simply becoming complacent. Saint John Chrysostom warns us: “Do you want to honour the body of Christ? Do not allow it to be despised in its members, that is, in the poor who lack clothes to cover themselves. Do not honour him here in the church with rich fabrics while outside you neglect him when he is suffering from cold and naked. The one who said, “this is my body”, confirming the fact with his word, also said, “you saw me hungry and you did not feed me” and, “whenever you failed to do these things to one of the least of these, you failed to do it to me” (*Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew*, 50, 3). You may say to me: “Father, what do you mean? Are the poor, the beggars, young drug addicts, all those people that society discards, part of the Synod too?”

Yes, dear friends. It is not me who is saying this, but the Lord. They too are part of the Church, and you will not properly celebrate the Synod unless you somehow make them part of it (in a way to be determined), or spend time with them, not only listening to what they have to say, but also feeling what they feel, listening to them even if they may insult you. The Synod is for everyone, and it is meant to include everyone. The Synod is also about discussing our problems, the problems I have as your Bishop, the problems that the auxiliary Bishops have, the problems that priests and laity have, the problems that groups and associations have. So many problems! Yet unless we include the “problem people” of society, those left out, we will never be able to deal with our own problems. This is important: that we let our own problems come out in the dialogue, without trying to hide them or justify them. Do not be afraid!

We should feel ourselves part of one great people which has received God’s promises. Those promises speak of a future in which all are invited to partake of the banquet God has prepared for every people (cf. *Is 25:6*). Here I would note that even the notion “People of God” can be interpreted in a rigid and divisive way, in terms of exclusivity and privilege; that was the case with the notion of divine “election”, which the prophets had to correct, showing how it should rightly be understood. Being God’s people is not a privilege but a gift that we receive, not for ourselves but for everyone. The gift we receive is meant to be given in turn. That is what vocation is: a gift we receive for others, for everyone. A gift that is also a responsibility. The responsibility of witnessing by our deeds, not just our words, to God’s wonderful works, which, once known, help people to acknowledge his existence and to receive his salvation. Election is a gift. The question is this: if I am a Christian, if I believe in Christ, how do I give that gift to others? God’s universal saving will is offered to history, to all humanity, through the incarnation of his Son, so that all men and women can become his children, brothers and sisters among themselves, thanks to the mediation of the Church. That is how universal reconciliation is accomplished between God and humanity, that unity of the whole human family, of which the Church is a sign and instrument (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 1). In the period prior to the Second Vatican Council, thanks to the study of the Fathers of the Church, there was a renewed realization that the people of God is directed towards the coming of

the Kingdom, towards the unity of the human family created and loved by God. The Church, as we know and experience her in the apostolic succession, should be conscious of her relationship to this universal divine election and carry out her mission in its light. In that same spirit, I wrote my encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*. As Saint Paul VI said, the Church is a teacher of humanity, and today she aims at becoming a school of fraternity.

Why do I say these things? Because in the synodal process, our listening must take into account the *sensus fidei*, but it must not neglect all those “intuitions” found where we would least expect them, “freewheeling”, but no less important for that reason. The Holy Spirit in his freedom knows no boundaries or tests of admission. If the parish is to be a home to everyone in the neighbourhood, and not a kind of exclusive club, please, let’s keep the doors and windows open. Don’t limit yourself to those who come to church or think as you do – they may be no more than 3, 4 or 5 percent. Let everyone come in... Go out and meet them, let them question you, let their questions become your questions. Journey together: the Spirit will lead you; trust in the Spirit. Do not be afraid to engage in dialogue and even to be taken aback by what you hear, for this is the dialogue of salvation.

Don’t be disheartened; be prepared for surprises. In the book of Numbers (22:8ff.) we hear of a donkey who became a prophet of God. The Hebrews were about to end the long journey that led them to the promised land. Their passage through his territory frightened Balak, the king of Moab, who told Balaam, a seer, to stop them, in hopes of avoiding a war. Balaam, who was in his own way a believer, asked God what to do. God told him not to go along with the king, but since the king insisted, Balaam set out on a donkey to do as the king said. The donkey, however, turned aside from the road because it saw an angel with an unsheathed sword, representing the opposition of God. Balaam tugged at the reins and beat the donkey, but could not get it to return to the road. Finally, the donkey opened his mouth and spoke, the beginning of a dialogue that would open the seer’s eyes and turn his mission of cursing and death into a mission of blessing and life.

This story teaches us to trust that the Spirit will always make his voice heard. Even a donkey can become the voice of God, can open our eyes and change our course when we go astray. If a donkey can do that, how much more can a baptized person, a priest, a bishop, a Pope do it? We need but rely on the Holy Spirit, who uses all of creation to speak to us: he only asks us to clean out our ears, to hear better.

I came here to encourage you to take this synodal process seriously and to tell you that the Holy Spirit needs you. It is true: the Holy Spirit needs us. Listen to him by listening to each other. Leave no one behind or excluded. It will be good for the Diocese of Rome and for the whole Church, which is not strengthened simply by reforming structures (that is the great illusion!) or by giving instructions, offering retreats and conferences, by issuing guidelines and programmes. All those things are good, but as part of something else, namely our rediscovery that we are a people meant to walk together, with one another and with all humanity. A people that, here in Rome, embraces a

wide variety of communities and situations: an extraordinary treasure, in all its complexity! However, we need to pass beyond the 3 or 4 percent that are closest to us, to broaden our range and to listen to others; at times they may insult or dismiss you, but we need to hear what they are thinking, without trying to impose our own concerns: let the Spirit speak to us.

In this time of pandemic, the Lord is guiding the Church's mission as a sacrament of care. Our world has cried out and shown its vulnerability: our world needs care.

Take heart and keep going! Thank you!