



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS
TO THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE NATIONAL MEETING OF DIOCESAN REPRESENTATIVES
OF THE ITALIAN SYNOD PATH**

Paul VI Hall

Thursday, 25 May 2023

[\[Multimedia\]](#)

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning and welcome!

I greet you all, bishops, together with the diocesan referents, the Committee and the presidency: thank you for being here.

This meeting takes place in the midst of a Synod process that involves the whole Church and, within it, the local Churches, in which the Synod Workshops have been set up as a beautiful experience of listening to the Spirit and comparing the different voices of the Christian communities. This has generated the involvement of many, especially on certain issues that you recognize as crucial and a priority for the present and the future. It is a unique spiritual experience of conversion and renewal that can make your ecclesial communities more missionary and better prepared for evangelization in today's world. This journey began sixty years ago, when Saint Paul VI, at the end of the Council, realized that the western Church had lost its synodality. He created the Secretariat for the Synod of Bishops. Over these years, a Synod has been held every four years; in the fiftieth year, a document was produced on synodality – that document is important – and then over these last ten years, it continued, and now we are holding a Synod to say what synodality is, that as we know it is not about seeking people's opinions, nor is it coming to an agreement; it is something else.

I would therefore urge you to continue along this road with courage and determination, first and foremost by harnessing the potential present in the parishes and in the various Christian

communities. Please, this is important. At the same time, since after the two-year period of listening, you are about to enter into what you call the “sapiential phase”, with the intention of not wasting what has been collected and of initiating an ecclesial discernment, I would like to entrust you with some recommendations. With these, I will try to answer, at least in part, to the questions that the Committee has sent me on the priorities for the Church in relation to society, on how to overcome resistance and concerns, on the involvement of priests and the laity, and on the experiences of marginalization.

So, here is the first recommendation: *continue to walk*. It must be done. While you gather the first fruits with regard to the questions and the issues that have emerged, you are invited not to stop. Christian life is a journey. Continue to walk, letting yourselves be guided by the Spirit. At the ecclesial convention in Florence, I indicated *humility*, *selflessness*, and *beatitude* as the three traits that must characterize the face of the Church, the face of your communities. Humility, selflessness and beatitude. A synodal Church is such because it has a lively awareness of walking in history in the company of the Risen One, concerned not with safeguarding herself and her own interests, but of serving the Gospel in a style of gratuitousness and care, cultivating the freedom and creativity proper to those who bear the good news of God’s love, remaining rooted in what is essential. A Church burdened by structures, bureaucracy and formalism will struggle to walk in history, in step with the Spirit; it will stay there and it will not be able to walk towards the men and women of our time.

The second recommendation is this: *be a Church together*. It is a need that we feel urgently, today, sixty years after the conclusion of Vatican II. Indeed, the temptation is always lurking to separate some “qualified actors” who carry forward pastoral action, “while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients” (*Evangelii gaudium*, 120). There are the “heads” of a parish, who carry things out, and the people receive only that. The Church is the holy faithful People of God and in it, “in virtue of their baptism, all the members ... have become missionary disciples” (*ibid*). This awareness must lead to the increasing growth of a style of ecclesial co-responsibility: every baptized person is called to participate actively in the life and the mission of the Church, starting from the specific nature of his or her own vocation, in relation with others and with other charisms, given by the Spirit for the good of all. We need Christian communities in which space is made where everyone can feel at home, where the structures and the pastoral means favour not the creation of small groups, but the joy of feeling co-responsible.

In this regard, we must ask the Holy Spirit to make us understand and experience how to be ordained ministers, and how to exercise the ministry in this time and in this Church: never without the Other with a capital “O”, never without others with whom to share the journey. This applies to the bishops, whose ministry cannot do without that of the priests and the deacons; and it also applies to those same priests and deacons, required to express their service within a broader *us*, which is the priesthood. But this also applies to the entire community of baptized people, in which everyone walks with other brothers and other sisters, in the school of the one Gospel and in the

light of the Spirit.

The third recommendation: *be an open Church*. Rediscovering ourselves as co-responsible in the Church does not equate to putting into practice a worldly logic of distribution of powers, but rather it means cultivating the desire to recognize the other in the wealth of his or her charisms and uniqueness. In this way, a place can be found for those who still struggle to see their presence in the Church recognized, those whose voices are stifled, if not silenced or ignored, those who feel inadequate, perhaps because they have difficult or complex life paths. Sometimes they are “excommunicated” *a priori*. But let us remember: the Church must let God’s heart shine through: a heart open to all and for all. Let us please not forget Jesus’ parable of the failed wedding feast, when that gentleman, no guests having come, what does he say? “Go to the thoroughfares and invite as many as you find” (cf. *Mt 22:9*). Everyone: the sick, not sick, righteous, sinners, everyone, all in.

We should ask ourselves how much space we make and how much we really listen in our communities to the voices of young people, women, the poor, those who are disappointed, those who have been hurt in life and are angry with the Church. As long as their presence remains a sporadic note in ecclesial life as a whole, the Church will not be synodal, it will be a Church of the few. Remember this, call everyone: the righteous, sinners, the healthy, the sick, everyone, everyone.

Sometimes one gets the impression that religious communities, curias, parishes are still a little too self-referential. And self-referentiality is a bit like the theology of the mirror: look in the mirror, make-up, I comb my hair well... It is a beautiful disease this, a beautiful disease that the Church has: self-referential, my parish, my class, my group, my association... It seems to creep in, somewhat covertly, a kind of “defensive neoclericalism” - clericalism is a perversion, and the clerical bishop, the clerical priest is perverse, but the clerical layman and laywoman is even more so: when clericalism enters the laity it is terrible! -: defensive neo-clericalism generated by a fearful attitude, by the lament about a world that “no longer understands us”, where “young people are lost”, by the need to reiterate and make one’s influence felt – “but I will do this...”. The Synod calls us to become a Church that walks joyfully, humbly and creatively within this time of ours, in the knowledge that we are all vulnerable and need each other. And I would like that in a synodal journey we take this word “vulnerability” seriously and talk about it, with a sense of community, about the vulnerability of the Church. And I would add: to walk trying to generate life, to multiply joy, not to extinguish the fires that the Spirit kindles in hearts. Fr. Primo Mazzolari wrote: “What a contrast when our life extinguishes the life of souls! Priests who are suffocators of life. Instead of lighting eternity, we extinguish life”. We are sent not to extinguish, but to kindle the hearts of our brothers and sisters, and to allow ourselves in turn to be enlightened by the glow of their consciences that seek the truth.

I was struck, in this regard, by the question of the chaplain of an Italian prison, who asked me how

to ensure that the synodal experience lived in a prison can then be followed up in the communities. On this question I would insert a final recommendation: *be a “restless” Church, in the restlessness of our time*. We are called to take up the anxieties of history and allow ourselves to be questioned by them, to bring them before God, to immerse them in the Pasch of Christ. The great enemy of this journey is fear: “I am afraid, be careful...”.

Forming synodal groups in prisons means setting out to listen to a humanity that is wounded yet, at the same time, in need of redemption. In Spain there is a prison, with a good chaplain, who sends me messages so that I can always see their meetings... But these prisoners are in a permanent synod! It is interesting to see how this chaplain brings out the best in them, to project it to the future. For a detainee, serving a sentence can become an opportunity to experience the merciful face of God, and so begin a new life. And the Christian community is provoked to come out of its prejudices, to seek out those from years of imprisonment, to meet them, to listen to their testimony, and to break with them the bread of the Word of God. This is an example of good restlessness, which you have given me; and I could cite many others: experiences of a Church that welcomes the challenges of our time, that knows how to go out to everyone to proclaim the joy of the Gospel.

Dear brothers and sisters, let us continue this journey together, with great confidence in the work that the Holy Spirit is performing. He is the agent of the synodal process, him, not us! It is he who opens up individuals and communities to listening; it is he who makes dialogue authentic and fruitful; it is he who enlightens discernment; it is he who guides choices and decisions. And it is he, above all, who creates harmony, communion in the Church. I like the way Saint Basil defines him: he is harmony. Let us not delude ourselves that we carry out the Synod, no. The Synod will go ahead if we are open to he who is the protagonist. *Lumen gentium* states that “The Church, which the Spirit guides in the way of all truth [cf. *Jn* 16:13] and which he unified in communion and in works of ministry, he both equips and directs with hierarchical and charismatic gifts and adorns with his fruits” (cf. *Eph* 4:11-12; *1 Cor* 12:4; *Gal* 5:22) (no. 4).

Thank you for the work you are doing. When I came in, one of you said to me a very Argentine expression, which I will not repeat, but it has a nice translation into Italian, which perhaps he will say... A thing that seems messy... Think of the trial of the Apostles on the morning of Pentecost: that morning was worse! Total disorder! And the one who caused that “worse” was the Spirit: He is good at doing these things, disorder, to stir... But the same Spirit who caused that, brought harmony. Both things are done by the Spirit, he is the protagonist, he is the one who does these things. We must not be afraid when there are disturbances provoked by the Spirit; but be afraid when they are provoked by our selfishness or by the spirit of evil. Let us entrust ourselves to the Holy Spirit. He is harmony. He makes all of this, the disorder, but he is able to make harmony, which is a totally different thing from the order that we could make by ourselves.

May the Lord bless you and may Our Lady keep you. And please do not forget to pray for me.

Thank you.

Holy See Press Office Bulletin, 25 May 2023

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