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HOLY SEE PRESS OFFICE BUREAU DE PRESSE DU SAINT-SIÈGE PRESSEAMT DES HEILIGEN STUHL
OFICINA DE PRENSA DE LA SANTA SEDE SALA DE IMPRENSA DA SANTA SÉ
BIURO PRASOWE STOLICY APOSTOLSKIEJ دار الصحافة التابعة للكرسي الرسولي

N. 240314g

Thursday 14.03.2024

Document of the General Secretariat of the Synod: “How to be a synodal Church on mission? Five perspectives for theological exploration in view of the Second Session of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops”

GENERAL SECRETARIAT OF THE SYNOD

How to be a synodal Church on mission?

Five perspectives for theological exploration
in view of the Second Session
of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops

Foreword

“Rather than saying that the Church has a mission, let us affirm that the Church is mission. ‘As the Father has sent me, I also send you’ (Jn 20:21): the Church receives its own mission from Christ, the Father’s Envoy. Supported and guided by the Holy Spirit, she proclaims and bears witness to the Gospel to those who do not know or accept it, with the preferential option for the poor that is rooted in Jesus’ mission. In this way it contributes to the coming of the Kingdom of God, of which it ‘constitutes the seed and the beginning’ (cf. LG 5)” (*Synthesis Report* of the First Session of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops [SR], 8a). Growing as a synodal Church is a concrete way to respond, each and all together, to this call and this mission.

Our brothers and sisters who have participated in synodal meetings, especially those who took part in the First Session, have had a real experience of the unity and plurality of the Church. Even in a time like ours, marked by growing inequalities, bitter polarisations and a continuous explosion of conflicts, the Church is, in Christ, a sign and instrument of union with God and unity between people, and is called to be so ever more visibly. Listening to the Holy Spirit, welcoming the testimony of Scripture and reading the signs of the times in faith, She can harmonise differences as an expression of the inexhaustible richness of the mystery of Christ. The experience of the Synod as a practice of unity in diversity thus represents a prophetic word addressed to a world that struggles to believe that peace and concord are possible.

1. The guiding question

The synodal process has made us increasingly aware of our mission. In the First Assembly Session, this awareness progressively “took on flesh”, guiding the path towards the Second Session (October 2024). The document *Towards October 2024* (11 December 2023) explains that the time between the First and Second Session finds us engaged in another consultative moment guided by the following question: *HOW can we be a synodal Church on mission?*

The objective is to identify the paths to take and the tools to adopt in the different contexts and circumstances, so as to enhance the originality of each baptised person and each Church in the unique mission of proclaiming the Risen Lord and His Gospel to the world today. It is therefore not a question of limiting ourselves to the plan of technical or procedural improvements that make the Church’s structures more efficient, but of working on the concrete forms of the missionary commitment to which we are called, in the dynamism between unity and diversity proper to a synodal Church (*Towards October 2024*, n. 1).

The focus will, therefore, be the theme of everyone’s participation, with our varied vocations, charisms and ministries, in the one mission of proclaiming Jesus Christ to the world. In light of the Church’s missionary transformation, envisaged in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, according to which “the new evangelisation must imply a new protagonism of each of the baptised” (n. 120), we will reflect on the contribution to the mission that comes from the recognising and promoting the specific gifts of each member of the People of God, and on the relationship between the common work and the ministry of authority of the Pastors. The dynamic connection between the participation of all and the authority of some, in the horizon of communion and mission, will be deepened in its theological meaning, in the practical ways of setting it in motion, and in the reality of canonical structures. This exploration will be articulated on three levels, distinct but interdependent: that of the local Church, that of the groupings of Churches (national, regional, continental), that of the whole Church in the relationship between the primacy of the Bishop of Rome, episcopal collegiality and ecclesial synodality. Identifying the three levels makes it possible to organise the work in view of the Second Session of the Assembly, without forgetting that they are three connected perspectives through which to look at a unitary and organic reality: the life of the missionary synodal Church.

2. Steps towards drafting the *Instrumentum laboris* for the Second Session

On the basis of the guiding question, a new consultation process was opened, different in character from that of the first phase of the synodal process, as explained in the document *Towards October 2024*, asking the Bishops’ Conferences and the Eastern Hierarchical Structures to be the reference for this part of the process and to coordinate the collection of contributions from Dioceses and Eparchies, setting out the methods and timing. They will also carry out the in-depth study from the same guiding question at their level and at the continental level, as deemed appropriate and feasible (cf. n. 1). The syntheses that will gather the fruit of this consultation, by Episcopal Conferences, Eastern Hierarchical Structures and Dioceses that do not belong to any Episcopal Conference, must reach the General Secretariat of the Synod by 15 May 2024 and will serve as the basis for the drafting of the next *Instrumentum laboris*.

Other materials will be added to the syntheses, starting with the results of the international meeting “Parish priests for the Synod” (Sacrofano [Rome], 28 April - 2 May 2024), convened to meet the need, repeatedly expressed during the first phase and also during the First Session, to listen to and enhance the experience of priests engaged in pastoral ministry in the local Churches, with a view to their greater involvement in the synodal process.

Lastly, the results of the theological study carried out by five Working Groups activated by the General Secretariat of the Synod, in the wake of what was requested several times by the Assembly and in the spirit of what is foreseen by Article 10 of the Apostolic Constitution *Episcopalis communio* will also be included in the materials for the *Instrumentum laboris*. These Groups will be composed of experts, respecting the necessary variety of geographical origin, gender and ecclesial condition, and will work with a synodal method. In particular, three Groups will focus primarily on the three levels indicated above (one Group on each level), while two other

Groups will work on the two transversal axes, highlighting the interconnections and interdependencies between the levels, according to the outlines summarised in the following paragraphs.

3. Perspectives to be explored

I. The Synodal Missionary Face of the Local Church

The *Synthesis Report* approved at the end of the First Session recognises that the co-responsibility of all in the mission “must be the criterion at the basis of the structuring of Christian communities and of the entire local Church with all its services, in all its institutions, in all its organism of communion” (SR 18b). The search for the face and the paths of the missionary synodal Church directly involves every local Church, in the plurality of the subjects that constitute it, without forgetting that the task of bearing witness to the Gospel unites all the baptised, beyond the confessional affiliations, by virtue of the common baptismal dignity. The Working Group, which will take on the perspective of the synodal Church on mission at the local Church level, will explore points such as:

- a) the meaning and forms of the diocesan bishop’s ministry as the “visible principle and foundation of unity” (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 23) of the Church entrusted to him and, in particular, relations with the presbyterate, participatory bodies, consecrated life and ecclesial aggregations, in a missionary perspective (cf. SR 12);
- b) the introduction of structures and processes to regularly verify the work of the diocesan bishop and those who carry out a ministry (ordained or non-ordained) in the local Church, fostering *accountability* (accounting for the exercise of one’s responsibilities) by all, in different ways (cf. SR 12j);
- c) the style and mode of operation of participatory bodies. Particular attention will be paid to the relationship between the consultative moment and the deliberative moment in decision-making processes (cf. SR 18g), ensuring that women too, where this is not yet the case, can participate in decision-making processes and take on roles of responsibility in pastoral care and ministry (cf. SR 9m);
- d) the presence and service of instituted ministries and de facto ministries, which can contribute to configure in a more choral and effective way the work of evangelisation of the local Church in the territory and between cultures, enhancing the charisms and the role of the laity in carrying out the mission of the Church (cf. SR 8d-e), with respect for their specificity (cf. SR 8f) and in relation to the tension between the mission of sanctification of temporal realities and the carrying out of tasks and ministries within the Church (cf. SR 8j), also considering the opportunity to establish new ministries (cf. SR 8n and 16p).

Particular attention must be paid to “recognising and valuing the contribution of women and increasing the pastoral responsibilities entrusted to them in all areas of the Church’s life and mission. In order to give better expression to everyone’s charisms and better respond to pastoral needs, how can the Church include more women in existing roles and ministries? If new ministries are needed, at what level and in what way?” (SR 9i).

II. The missionary synodal face of church groupings

In 2015, in his *Address for the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops*, Pope Francis affirmed that “the second level of the exercise of synodality is that of Ecclesiastical Provinces and Regions, Particular Councils and in a special way Episcopal Conferences”, referring to canons 495-514 of the Code of Canon Law, regarding groupings of particular Churches. He emphasised the need and urgency to “reflect in order to realise even more, through these bodies, the intermediate instances of *collegiality*, perhaps integrating and updating some aspects of the ancient ecclesiastical order. The Council’s wish that these bodies could contribute to increasing the spirit of episcopal *collegiality* has not yet been fully realised. We are halfway, part of the way’. It thus points in the direction of a ‘healthy decentralisation’, already expressed in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (n. 16), later taken up in the Apostolic Constitution *Praedicate Evangelium* (II,2). The Working Group, which will take on the perspective of the synodal Church on mission at the level of the groupings of Churches, will explore points such as:

a) ways and conditions that make possible the effective exchange of gifts between the Churches (cf. SR 4m), sharing “spiritual treasures, apostolic workers and material resources” (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 13);

b) the statute of the Episcopal Conferences in a missionary synodal Church, so that they may grow as subjects of the exercise of collegiality in an all-synodal Church, also by increasing their own doctrinal and disciplinary authority, without limiting either the power proper to each Bishop in his Church, or that of the Bishop of Rome as the visible principle and foundation of unity of the whole Church (cf. SR 19);

c) the opportunity to expand the structures of communion between the Churches beyond the level of the Episcopal Conferences, considering how to specify the status of the bodies that group the local Churches of a continental or sub-continental area, taking into account the needs of a fruitful dialogue with cultures and societies in a missionary perspective (cf. SR 19).

III. The missionary synodal face of the universal Church

The ongoing synodal process is bringing out a new way of exercising the Petrine ministry. Thus, at the level of the universal Church, the question of the relationship between ecclesial synodality, episcopal collegiality and the primacy of the Bishop of Rome is emerging (cf. SR 13a). The Working Group that will take up this perspective will explore points such as:

a) the contribution that the Eastern Churches can offer for a deepening of the doctrine of the Petrine primacy, illuminating its intrinsic link with episcopal collegiality and ecclesial synodality (cf. SR 6d);

b) the contribution of the ecumenical path “to the Catholic understanding of primacy, collegiality, synodality and their mutual relations” (SR 13b);

c) the role of the Roman Curia, as a body at the service of the universal ministry of the Bishop of Rome, in a synodal Church, considering the relations between the Curia and the local Churches, the Curia and the Episcopal Conferences, the Curia and the Synod of Bishops, in the spirit of the Apostolic Constitution *Praedicate Evangelium* (cf. SR 13c-d);

d) the ways of exercising episcopal collegiality in a synodal Church, taking into account the doctrine of the Second Vatican Council and the theological and canonical developments of the post-conciliar period;

e) the peculiar identity of the Synod of Bishops, articulating in particular the specific role of Bishops and the participation of the People of God in all the phases of the synodal process (cf. SR 20).

IV. The Synodal Method

To open minds and hearts to welcome Christ present in His Spirit, we are called to meditation on Sacred Scripture, prayer and mutual listening, in readiness for personal and community conversion. Listening to one another, in particular, requires the constant exercise of practices that foster at all levels of the Church’s life the articulation of four dimensions: *spiritual, institutional, procedural, liturgical*.

Throughout the journey so far, and especially in the course of the First Session, the practice of “conversation in the Spirit” has been tested and recognised as capable of supporting and expressing the *spiritual dimension* of the journey we are on. Practising “conversation in the Spirit” does not mean following a codified technique, but embarking on a path that gives expression to the Church’s per se colloquial nature, which springs from the dialogue with which God himself, communicating his life, “speaks to men as friends and *converses* [*conversatur*] with them” (*Dei Verbum*, 2).

At the same time, the synodal method calls for care to be taken of the *institutional dimension*, proper to the

bodies and events in which the life and mission of the Church are expressed, and of the *procedural dimension*, paying particular attention to the relationship between *decision-making* and decision-taking.

These three dimensions should not be conceived as separate: they are distinct aspects, each requiring specific attention, to be thought of and lived in their dynamic unity. Finally, since the liturgy is both a mirror and nourishment of the life of the Church, the work will also concern the *liturgical dimension*: “If the Eucharist gives form to synodality, the first step to be taken is to honour its grace with a celebratory style that matches the gift and with an authentic fraternity” (SR 3k).

The Working Group, which will take on the transversal perspective of the synodal method, will explore points such as:

- a) the fruitful relationship between the liturgical and sacramental rootedness of the Church’s synodal life (listening to the Word and celebrating the Eucharist) and the practice of ecclesial discernment;
- b) a better clarification of the configuration of the ‘conversation in the Spirit’, taking into account the plurality of declinations it knows from the experience of multiple ecclesial spiritualities and different cultural contexts (cf. SR 2i-j);
- c) the invitation formulated by the First Session of the Synodal Assembly, on the one hand, to “clarify how conversation in the Spirit can integrate the contributions of theological thought and the human and social sciences” (SR 2h), and on the other hand, for “experts in the various fields of knowledge to mature a spiritual wisdom that allows their specialised expertise to become a true ecclesial service” (SR 15i) through mutual listening, dialogue and participation in community discernment;
- d) focusing on the criteria for theological and disciplinary discernment, clarifying the circular relationship, in obedience to Revelation and listening to the signs of the times, between the *sensus fidei* of the People of God and the Magisterium of the Pastors, in the perspective of the “change of epoch” we are living through;
- e) the articulation between ‘decision making’ and ‘decision taking’ in the ecclesiological perspective of the relationship between the participation of all and the specific exercise of authority by some, identifying and specifying the spheres of competence (doctrinal, pastoral, cultural) of the different ecclesial subjects and of the different bodies and events in which the practice of synodality is expressed;
- f) the promotion of a celebratory style appropriate to a synodal Church, which enables the common participation of all to be experienced and witnessed, while respecting and promoting the specificity of the roles, charisms and ministries of each.

V. The ‘place’ of the synodal Church on mission

The current synodal process clearly shows how the reference to the principle of ‘mutual interiority’ between the local Churches and the universal Church favours the symphonic exercise of synodality, collegiality and primacy at different levels (local, regional, universal). The ‘place’ in which the Church is called to live communion, participation and mission is made up of many ‘places’. This is not only a fact but corresponds to the way in which “it pleased God, in his goodness and wisdom, to reveal himself [reveal himself in person] and to manifest the mystery of his will” (*Dei Verbum* 2). The relationship with Jesus Christ - mediator and fullness of the entire revelation - is always contextual: it ‘takes place’. The ‘place’, in this sense, is generative of the believing experience. It is also a hermeneutical space in which “the understanding of things as well as of the words transmitted grows” (*Dei Verbum* 8) and the proclamation of salvific truth finds ever new expressions: the “where” is constitutive of the kerygmatic form.

We live in a time in which the spatial dimension of the relationship between people and communities is profoundly changing. Human mobility, the presence of different cultures and religious experiences in the same

context, and the pervasiveness of the digital environment (the infosphere) can be considered 'signs of the times' that need to be discerned.

The changes taking place and the awareness of the plurality of the faces of the People of God call for renewed attention to the relationships between the local Churches that, in communion with each other and with the Bishop of Rome, constitute the Church of God, a holy catholic and apostolic Church. In a world marked by violence and fragmentation, a witness to the unity of humanity, its common origin and common destiny, in a coordinated and fraternal solidarity towards social justice, peace, reconciliation and the care of the common home, thus overcoming the divisive potential of some erroneous ways of understanding the reference to a place, its inhabitants and its culture, appears ever more urgent.

The working group that will take this perspective - transversal to the three distinct levels of ecclesial relations: local, regional, universal - will explore points such as:

a) the development of an ecclesiology attentive to the cultural dimension of the People of God (with reference to what Pope Francis says in *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 115: "Grace presupposes culture, and the gift of God is incarnated in the culture of those who receive it"). In fact, it seems necessary to translate also on the institutional level the dynamism of reciprocity between evangelisation of culture and inculturation of the faith, giving space to local hermeneutics, without 'the local' becoming a reason for division and without 'the universal' turning into a form of hegemony;

b) the reference to 'place' in the dynamics of proclamation, in relation to the principle that 'the adaptation of the preaching of the revealed word must remain the law of all evangelisation. In this way, in fact, the ability of each people to express the message of Christ in its own way is stimulated, and at the same time a vital exchange between the Church and the different cultures of peoples is promoted" (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 44);

c) the reference to the particularity of 'place' and the requirements of ecclesial communion (at the different levels) in addressing the major moral and pastoral issues;

d) the impact of migratory phenomena that represent "a reality that reshapes local Churches as intercultural communities. Often migrants and refugees, many of whom bear the wounds of uprooting, war and violence, become a source of renewal and enrichment for the communities that welcome them and an opportunity to establish direct links with geographically distant Churches" (SR 5d);

e) the impact of the culture of the digital environment and new technologies on the notion of the 'local'. For example, all relations and initiatives, including ecclesial ones, that take place online "have a scope and reach that extend beyond the traditionally understood territorial boundaries" (SR 17h);

f) the canonical and pastoral issues opened up by the substantial migration of the faithful of the Catholic East to territories with a Latin majority, for which "it is necessary that the local Churches of the Latin rite, in the name of synodality, help the emigrated Eastern faithful to preserve their identity and cultivate their specific heritage, without undergoing processes of assimilation" (SR 6c).

4. Some transversal points of reference

The deepening of the indicated perspectives can usefully refer to some principles that apply to each of them.

The first principle is the mission of evangelisation as the driving force and *raison d'être* of the Church.

The promotion of the figure and synodal dynamic of the Church has the purpose of credibly and effectively manifesting and supporting its mission, which is the ultimate criterion of all discernment. What is most effective in terms of the proclamation of the Gospel must be privileged, finding the courage to abandon what proves to be less useful or even an obstacle. It is this drive towards mission that ensures that the synodal process is not an exercise whereby the Church looks in the mirror and worries about its own balances but is projected towards the

world and the whole of humanity, asking each member of the People of God to make his or her own irreplaceable contribution. The ecumenism of blood (cf. SR 7d) reminds us in a powerful way that witnessing to the Gospel to the point of giving one's life is all the baptised, without distinction of confessional affiliation: it is, therefore, the common mission that constitutes the vector of the path towards Christian unity, starting from concrete forms of collaboration, which we must continue to promote and experiment.

If the drive for mission is constitutive of the Church and marks every moment of her history, missionary challenges will change over time. An effort must, therefore, be made to discern those of today's world: if we fail to identify and respond to them, our proclamation will lose relevance and attractiveness. Rooted in this need is the focus on young people, on digital culture, and the need to involve the poor and marginalised in the synodal process, bearers of a point of view capable of revealing social, economic and political dynamics that might otherwise remain hidden. Any changes in Church structures must be designed to be effective in responding to the challenges of mission in today's world.

The second principle is the promotion of participation in the mission, which is the gift and responsibility of all the baptised, in the active exercise of the *sensus fidei* and their respective charisms, in synergy with the exercise of the ministry of authority by the Bishops:

“The circularity between the *sensus fidei* with which all the faithful are endowed, the discernment carried out at the different levels of the realisation of synodality, and the authority of those who exercise the pastoral ministry of unity and governance describes the dynamic of synodality. Such a circularity promotes the baptismal dignity and co-responsibility of all, enhances the presence of the charisms spread by the Holy Spirit in the People of God, recognises the specific ministry of the Pastors in collegial and hierarchical communion with the Bishop of Rome, and ensures that synodal processes and events take place in fidelity to the *depositum fidei* and in listening to the Holy Spirit for the renewal of the Church's mission” (International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, n. 72).

Synodal dimension and hierarchical dimension are therefore not in competition. The tension that unites them is an important source of dynamism. In particular, decision-making processes are the place to creatively handle this tension so that each one is allowed to exercise its specific responsibility without being dispossessed of it.

The third principle is the articulation between local and universal, while considering the plurality and consistency of the intermediate levels. The one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church exists in and from the local Churches (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, n. 23) in communion with each other and with the Church of Rome. Each Church is, in Christ and through the Holy Spirit, the community subject, convoked by the Word and edified by the Sacraments, in which the one People of God lives and walks in a specific cultural and social context, within which the gift of God is embodied. At the same time, each Church is called to share with all the others the gifts with which it is enriched. This is achieved through the ministry of its Bishop, the principle and guarantor of unity in the synodal participation of all in its mission, in collegial communion with the other Bishops *cum Petro and sub Petro* at the service of the whole Church (cf. International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, n. 61). Synodality therefore constitutes the appropriate ecclesial context for understanding and promoting episcopal collegiality and describes the path to be followed to promote unity and catholicity in the discernment of ways forward in each Church and in the communion of Churches. What we are looking for is a way that is appropriate to today's world to live unity in diversity, experiencing interconnectedness without crushing differences and peculiarities, but also without losing sight of the fact that some challenges—such as care for the common home, migration or digital culture—can only be taken up together.

The fourth principle, the one most radical and demanding but at the same time capable of giving hope and generativity, is the *exquisitely spiritual character of the synodal process*. Gathered together by God the Father, in Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, sisters and brothers in the faith meet and listen to each other, each bringing the perspective and contribution of his or her own vocation, charisms and ministry received. This meeting and listening are not an end in themselves: they open up a space in which it becomes possible, together, to discern the voice of the Spirit and welcome his call. At all levels, we aim at the same result: to understand what the Lord is asking us to do and to be prepared to do it. The disciples' task, indeed their very

identity, is to follow the Master wherever he decides to go, to collaborate in a mission of salvation that is originally his.

5. Walking together towards October 2024

As the preparation for the Second Session of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops advances, also thanks to the orientations formulated here, work continues on the other two guidelines identified from the *Synthesis Report* of the First Session.

The first guideline is to *keep the synodal dynamic alive in the local Churches*, so that an increasing number of people can experience it directly. We repeat the invitation to all the dioceses to reread the *Synthesis Report* in order to identify the most significant solicitations for their situation and, on the basis of these, activate “the most appropriate initiatives to involve the entire People of God” (*Towards October 2024*, n. 2).

The second guideline consists in deepening, in a synodal manner, a series of issues of great importance, which “require to be dealt with at the level of the whole Church and in collaboration with the Dicastries of the Roman Curia” (*ibid.*, Introduction). Study Groups are being set up to set out the in-depth study of the themes identified, as better specified in the document *Study Groups for questions raised in the First Session of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops to be explored in collaboration with the Dicastries of the Roman Curia*, circulated at the same time as this one. “In addition, at the service of the synodal process in a broader sense, the General Secretariat of the Synod will activate a “permanent forum” to deepen the theological, canonical, pastoral, spiritual and communicative aspects of the Church’s synodality, also to respond to the request formulated by the SR “to promote, in appropriate forums, theological work of deepening the terminological and conceptual understanding of the notion and practice of synodality” (SR 1p). In carrying out this task, it will be assisted by the International Theological Commission and by a canonical Commission established at the service of the Synod in agreement with the Dicastery for Legislative Texts.

It is not possible to draw a clear dividing line between the subjects covered by the work of the many groups that have been activated: there are many connections, points of contact and even overlapping at different levels and along different axes. One of the tasks of the General Secretariat of the Synod is to ensure that the work proceeds in a coordinated manner and to listen to the results gradually achieved in the various areas so as to provide appropriate information to the Assembly Session in October 2024.

Vatican, 14 March 2024
