

Synodality. A Church People of God walking together

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1. Situating ourselves as people of God

What we understand today by synodality is the fruit of the great ecclesiological shift promoted by the Second Vatican Council from the incorporation of the category People of God that "highlights the common dignity and mission of all the baptized in the exercise of the multiform and ordered richness of their charisms, their vocation, their ministries" (CTI, Sin 6). The notion of *People of God* had been proposed by Cardinal Suenens, who added a chapter entitled *De Populo Dei* to the schema *De Ecclesia*. The change will be incorporated in the *textus emendatus* by placing the chapter on the *People of God (De Populo Dei)* before the other dedicated to the hierarchy. Thus, *Lumen gentium* will place the chapter on the People of God [II] before the chapter on the Hierarchy [III].

With the new *sequence*, the Council Fathers chose to recognize the radical equality of all the members of the People of God by reason of their baptismal dignity and emphasized the fact that "the ecclesiastical hierarchy is placed at the service of the People of God" (CTI, Sin 54). Therefore, Vatican II chose to distinguish between the permanent, which lies in the unique Christian vocation, and the transitory or temporary, which corresponds to the functions, roles or services to carry out the mission of the Church in the world. Congar maintained that "a horizontal decentering of the community and the People of God had been achieved, [which means that] the People of God is structured by a hierarchy whose *functional character* is manifested in its nature of *service*" to the evangelizing mission of the Church, rather than to its own self-preservation.

The *mens* of the conciliar texts posed the challenge of putting into practice a new hermeneutic inspired by the Church as an *organic totality of the faithful*, in whose reciprocal interaction they are constituted as the people of God. Cardinal Suenens emphasized this novelty when he said: "if I were asked what is the richest germ of life in pastoral consequences due to the Council, I would answer without hesitation: the rediscovery of the People of God as a *whole*, as a *totality* and, consequently, the *co-responsibility* that derives from this for each of its members". This rediscovery is deepened today in light of Synodality as the maturation of a new reception of this ecclesiology "in the perspective of a pilgrim and missionary People of God" (CTI, Sin 10, 49) that goes out of itself, in a permanent state of conversion and reform, to form a great *ecclesial we*.

2. Living and walking together as people of God

In light of this, Pope Francis describes the institutional form of a *synodal Church* with the following words: "what the Lord asks of us, in a certain sense, is already all contained in the word "Synod". To walk together —laity, *pastors*, *Bishop of Rome*". But what does this expression mean? The document of the *International Theological Commission on Synodality in the life and mission of the Church* explains the scope of this expression —*walking together*— by defining synodality as a "constitutive dimension of the whole Church" (ITC Sin 1, 5, 42, 57, 70, 76, 94, 116), which refers to "the specific way of living and acting/operating (*modus vivendi et operandi*) of the Church

People of God which manifests and concretely realizes its being communion in walking together in the common life *and mission of the Church*, 116), specifically, by "gathering in assembly and in the active participation of all its members in its evangelizing mission" (CTI *Sin* 6). Consequently, a synodal Church supposes *meeting and discerning together* in order to put into action modalities and decision-making processes that arise from the participation of all (LG 13).

Moreover, "walking together" implies the fact that any process of reform must seek ways to *involve* the entire People of God, in its totality, in the processes of *discernment, elaboration* and *decision-making* in the Church. Or as the International Theological Commission maintains: "the synodal dimension of the Church must be expressed through the realization and governance of *processes of participation and discernment* capable of manifesting the dynamism of communion that inspires *all ecclesial decisions*" (ITC *Sin* 53,67,76). Especially if "a synodal Church is a participatory and co-responsible Church, called to articulate *the participation of all, according to the vocation of each one*" (CTI *Sin* 67).

3. A co-responsible and participatory institutional model

In light of what have been mentioned above, we can affirm —as it is stated by the *International Theological Commission*— that "we are all *co-responsible for the life and mission* of the community and we are all called to act according to the law of mutual solidarity in respect for the specific ministries and charisms, inasmuch as each receives its energy from the one Lord (cf. 1 Cor 15:45)" (CTI *Sin*, 22). This "is based on the fact that *all the faithful* are enabled and called to place at the service of others their respective gifts received from the Holy Spirit" (CTI, *Sin* 67). This reciprocity *inter fideles* is not something external or auxiliary to the being and working of the Church. *Lumen gentium* reminds us that "each member is at the service of the other members.... [so that] Pastors and other members of the faithful are bound to one another by *mutual necessity*" (LG 32).

Therefore, we can sustain, as the *International Theological Commission* maintains, that "the concept of synodality refers to the *co-responsibility* and *participation* of the whole People of God in the life and mission of the Church" (ITC *Sin* 7). Though, while it is true that *co-responsibility* expresses the active subject character of all the baptized, *participation* (CTI *Sin* 67) supposes the necessary complementarity based on what each one can contribute —laity, *religious life, presbyterate, episcopate*— considering one's own gifts, charisms, services and ministries. But *participation* needs to be institutionalized. It is opportune to recall the words of Francis in his *Letter to all the People of God in Chile*: "I invite all [diocesan] organizations, whatever their area, to seek consciously and lucidly spaces of communion and participation *so that the Anointing of the People of God may find its concrete means to manifest itself*".

But, how can this participation be enabled and practice in an institutional model capable to shape the whole life of the Church at all levels? We can mention at least three aspects that need to be taken in to account. First, "the whole community, in the free and rich diversity of its members, must be called together. Not just a few. Second, participation in ecclesial processes is activated by *communicative dynamics* such as "*praying, listening, analyzing, dialoguing and advising*" together. Third, the purpose is not only to get to know each other better and share experiences, but "*so that pastoral decisions may be made in conformity with God's will*" (CTI *Sin* 68). In this model

the last word can never be taken, in isolation, by *some* or by *one*, but must arise from the experience of walking together, enabling a new culture of *consensus* building in which of all the faithful take part, each one according to its own vocation (LG 12,25).

4. Listening as a *mediation* through which we listen to the Spirit

From this horizon it is possible to build the *ecclesial we* through the implementation of a series of communicative dynamics, such as *consulting, listening, dialoguing, discerning in common, taking advice, elaborating decisions together and being accountable*. One challenge lies in its inclusive character as expressed in the *Document for the continental stage* when it says that "listening requires that we recognize others as subjects of their own journey. When we do so, others feel welcomed, not judged, free to share their own spiritual journey (...). The synodal experience can be read as a path of recognition for those who do not feel sufficiently recognized in the Church" (DCS 32). Listening to others is, therefore, a powerful communicative dynamic that opens the way to conversion and overcomes ecclesial self-referentiality, at all levels. In fact, people consulted during the continental stage of the *Synod on Synodality*, said that "not listening leads to misunderstanding, exclusion and marginalization. As a further consequence, it creates closed-mindedness, simplification, lack of trust and fears that destroy the community (...). Without listening, the responses to the difficulties of the faithful are taken out of context and do not address the essence of the problems they experience, becoming empty moralism" (DCS 33).

The great novelty of these communicative dynamics lies in the fact that they give form to a way of being and making Church, that is, to a permanent *ecclesial way of proceeding* that situates, in a practical and experiential way, the hermeneutics of chapters III [hierarchy], IV [laity] and VI [religious life] of *Lumen gentium* within chapter II [People of God] because these dynamics are activated in an *organic way*, linking the ecclesial subjects to one another by means of reciprocal actions, being the first of all that initiate the whole process the acts of *consulting, listening and dialoguing*. In fact, Francis uses these *communicative dynamics* to define the model of a *constitutively synodal Church*. In his *Address for the Commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops*, the Pope says that "a synodal Church is a Church of listening (...). It is a reciprocal listening in which everyone has something to learn (...). It is listening to God, to the point of hearing with him the cry of the people; and it is listening to the people, to the point of breathing in them the will to which God calls us". Hence, the exercise of *reciprocal listening* and *common discernment* is indispensable in a synodal ecclesiology because it starts from the recognition of the proper identity of each ecclesial subject based on relationships that "mutually complete" (*AA 6: mutuo se complent*) the subjects involved.

Theologically, the experience of *listening and being listened to* reveals something more profound such as the recognition of common baptismal dignity and the constitutive co-responsibility of all the faithful, without exceptions, in all that concerns the life and mission of the Church. Cardinal Suenens recalled that, "in presenting the Church as the people of God, the Council immediately took a position, more fundamental than the organic and functional distinction between hierarchy and laity, and considered what is common to all: baptism (...). In the Church of God, this fundamental equality of all is the primordial fact. There is no super-baptism, no caste, no privilege (Gal 3:28)". To understand what this implies for the synodal conversion of all ordained ministries, and especially of the hierarchy in the Church, we can recall the words of Bishop Emile-Joseph De

Smedt, one of the most authoritative voices of the Council. In his book on the *Priesthood of the Faithful*, published in 1962, he said that "the teaching body [bishops] does not rest exclusively on the action of the Holy Spirit on the bishops; it [must] also *listen to* the action of the same spirit *in the people of God*. Therefore, the teaching body not only speaks to the People of God, but also *listens to this People* in whom Christ continues His teaching". Thus, the bishops must not only listen *to the* but also *in the People of God*, as an integral part of all the faithful and, all together, discern and elaborate pastoral decisions. In this way, we can say, quoting the Council, that "from the bishops down to the last lay faithful, they lend their universal consent in things of faith and morals" (LG 12; *Episcopalis Communio* 5).

Finally, if we want a synodal Church, we need to ask ourselves what are the mediations through which we listen to the Spirit and if we believe that the Spirit manifests freely through all persons and their life stories, even in points of view that are completely different and diverse from our own positions. The latter is also a mediation of the Spirit that we often forget because it can be uncomfortable to listen, talk and discern in common. Hence, the art of listening requires formation and experience, as well as to provide the necessary means at our disposal, in order to avoid empty discussions based on opinions or cultural wars. A true listening requires "to encourage the fuller dissemination of information, to allow consultation and the serene expression of diverse points of view, to support study leading to the maturing of ideas, to frame the exchange and deliberation leading to decision making, to encourage feedback in order to understand the orientations taken, and so on" (Routhier). If we do not proceed in this way, we can fall into the temptation of substituting ourselves for the Spirit, while the very scope of practicing and living these *communicative dynamics* is to generate a *synodal conversion of the whole Church and of all in the Church* (CTI, *Sin* 118). The scope is to open ourselves to find and discern what the Spirit is telling us today. We are living a *Kairos*. The Church has initiated a process that offers the possibility of converting, learning and reforming herself from what she has consulted and heard throughout the synodal process.

Open conclusion

I would like to end this reflection with a question posed by Congar in the light of the experience he lived in a Church that was in *transition* from the Council to the post-Council. He said: "We must ask ourselves if an *aggiornamento* will be sufficient or if something else will be necessary. The question arises to the extent that the institutions of the Church are emerging from a cultural world that could no longer fit into the new cultural world. Our era demands a revision of the traditional forms that goes beyond plans of adaptation or *aggiornamento*, and that supposes rather a new creation". This question can be read today as an invitation to continue deepening processes of "spiritual, pastoral and institutional reforms" —as the Latin American bishops stated in *Aparecida* in 2007 (Ap. 367)— and commit ourselves to move towards a *synodalization of the whole Church*. The great challenge, then, will be to create an institutional model that will provide a channel for a new ecclesial way of proceeding for the *Synodal Church* of the third millennium, because as Francis said on September 18, 2021 in his *Address to the faithful of the Diocese of Rome*, "synodality is not a chapter in a treatise on ecclesiology, and even less a fad, a slogan or a new term to be used or manipulated in our meetings. No! Synodality expresses the nature of the Church, its form, its style, its mission. We speak of a *synodal Church*, avoiding considering it as one title among others".