

**Address to Priests on Clergy Day  
on the process toward the celebration of the  
16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, in October, 2023,  
“For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission”**

**“Synodality!” Don’t you love it when we use these fancy words in the Church!**

As a matter of fact, the word “synod” is probably older than most words in the English language. It is an ancient and venerable term in the Tradition of the Church. “Synodos” is Greek for walking or journeying together.

(Conversion – Dialogue ----- all together)

Saint John Chrysostom even says that Synod and Church are synonymous.

*(Yes, “synonymous” is Greek as well).* We know that the Church was founded on Pentecost, fifty days after the Resurrection of the Lord, when “they were all in one place together. ... And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit.”

(Acts 2: 1.4). The Church is the assembly that comes together to give thanks and glory to God. This brings to mind another word of Greek origin that we often use: “Eucharist” – thanks giving. Eucharist mode of participation and responsibility. Christ centered = prayerful process.

Over time, as it became necessary to make more distinctions, the word “synod” has been progressively used more to refer to a specific form of assembly. As Pope St. Paul VI was preparing to bring the Second Vatican Council to an end – Council also means assembly but in Latin – he established the Synod of Bishops, 56 years ago. The purpose was to provide the appropriate space and method for further discussions of great importance for the whole Church. There are also diocesan or archdiocesan synods, which normally bring the clergy together to have such discussions.

The Synod of Bishops discusses many topics. In recent years, there have been synodal assemblies to discuss the challenges facing the Church

in the Amazon region, the family and the New Evangelization. With prophetic vision, Pope St. John XXIII convoked the Second Vatican Council as the whole world began to transition through the time that fifty years. Just on this past Saturday, Pope has addressed his Diocese (the Diocese of Rome) and said about the Synod that: it is ‘a dynamism of mutual listening, conducted at all levels of the Church, involving all the people of God’

“The theme of synodality is not the chapter of a treatise on ecclesiology, much less a fashion, a slogan or the new term to be used or exploited in our meetings. No! Synodality expresses the nature of the Church, its form, its style, its mission” Pope Francis has said.

Something that happens during an epochal change as Pope Francis has called this transition – as was the case for instance between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance – is that the value scale that keeps society functioning with a sense of normality is fractured. People no longer share the same worldview, and so distrust rises. Ultimately, authority figures lose credibility in the minds of people, until a new society emerges. When my generation was brought up, we were taught rules that most people followed. Through certain shared disciplines, we learned to relate to one another and with God, and we received our very identity as individuals and as a people. In other words, we live at a time like the Tower of Babel, where everyone speaks a different language and walks in a different direction. Dictating rules and discipline is not enough.

Pope St. Paul VI famously said that the Church is “expert on humanity.” And as the book of Ecclesiastes says, “Nothing is new under the sun!”. The first and most important reference about ‘synodality’ is the book of the Acts of the Apostles and contains everything we need to understand: this “walking together”. Acts of the Apostles is the story of a journey from

Jerusalem crossing Samaria and Judea, continuing in the regions of Syria and Asia Minor and then in Greece, ending in Rome. This road and the many developments, agreements and disagreements tells the story in which the Word of God and the people who turn their attention and faith to that Word walk together. Chapter 6 of the Acts of the Apostles tells us how the Apostles prayed and laid hands on appointed brothers to serve the community in prayer and ministry of the Word; Chapter 10, tells how Peter is pushed by Spirit to go to the house of Cornelius despite his hesitations. The encounter between the two seals one of the most beautiful phrases of Christianity. Cornelius had gone to meet him, had thrown himself at his feet, but Peter picking him up said to him: "Get up: I too am a man!" (Acts 10:26), Pope Francis reminded the Diocese of Rome on Saturday: "We all say this: "I am a man, I am a woman, we are human", and we should all say it, even the Bishops, all of us: "get up: I too am a man""; Chapter 15: tells us about the Council of Jerusalem where Paul and Silas along with others were chosen to go to Antioch. And speaking of disagreements, Paul and Barnabas did not agree to take John (Mark) with them. "So sharp was their disagreement that they separated. Barnabas took John (Mark) and sailed to Cyprus. But Paul chose Silas and departed after being commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord." Acts 15: 39-40. As you can see, disagreements in the Church have existed from the very beginning of our history-. Yet, God walked with them then, and still God's Word walks with us today. Pope Francis has reminded us: "**Everyone is a protagonist [in this history], no one can be considered a mere extra.** One last reference from the Acts of the Apostles, when the Church was founded on Pentecost, the disciples "began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim." The people gathered around them "in a large crowd, but they were confused

because each one heard them speaking in his own language. ... Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice, and proclaimed to them... Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand persons were added that day.” (Acts 2: 4.6.41). And the story goes on two thousand years later. That is why Pope Francis has said that “Synodality is the path God expects of the Church of the third millennium.” And it is the reason behind the theme of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, in October of 2023, which will be synodality itself. The title is: “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission.”

Synodality is an essential dimension of the Church. It is expressed on the level of the universal Church in the dynamic circularity of the consensus of the faithful, episcopal collegiality and the primacy of the Pope. Faithful to the deposit of faith entrusted to the Church by the Lord until the end of time, and in creative openness to the voice of the Holy Spirit, the Church needs to respond to particular circumstances and challenges. She is called to set in motion a process of listening to all the voices who together form the People of God, in order to agree in discerning the truth and on the missionary path to take.

This context is the background of the specific ministry of the Pope concerning the exercise of synodality at the universal level. “I am persuaded” – said Pope Francis – “that, in a synodal Church, greater light can be shed on the exercise of the Petrine primacy. The Pope is not, by himself, above the Church; but within it as one of the baptized, and within the College of Bishops as a Bishop among Bishops, called at the same time – as Successor of Peter – to lead the Church of Rome which presides in charity over all the Churches.”

The Bishops together carry out an irreplaceable ministry in the exercise of synodality at the universal level. In communion with the Bishop of Rome, the Pope, Bishops exercise the supreme and full power over the whole Church in the name of Christ, moved by the Holy Spirit.

On this particular priestly aspect gathered with you dear brother, I'd like to make a special mention about two 'perversions' the Holy Father has mentioned on his address:

1. The clericalism which detaches the priest, the Bishop from the people. A Bishop and a priest detached from the people is an official, he is NOT a pastor
2. The rigid way of considering the circumstances which is a sin against the patience of God, a sin against His sovereignty. God sees far away, God is in no hurry.

Both of these 'perversions' as Pope Francis has called them are happening today in our Church. We must reflect about this. The great composer Gustav Mahler argued that fidelity to tradition *does not consist in worshipping ashes but in guarding fire*. Pope Francis invited his local Church to reflect on this and now I invite you to do the same: "Before starting this synodal journey, what are you most inclined to: to guard the ashes of the Church, that is, of your association, of your group, or to guard the fire? You are more inclined to adore your things, - I am from Peter, I am from Paul, I am from this association, you from the other, I am a priest, I am a Bishop - or you feel called to guard the fire of the Spirit?

Pope Francis continues: "St. John Chrysostom admonishes us: «Do you want to honor the body of Christ? Do not allow it to be an object of contempt in his limbs, that is, in the poor, without clothes to cover themselves. Do not honor him here in the church with silk fabrics, while outside you neglect him when

he suffers from cold and nakedness. He who said: "This is my body", confirming the fact with the word, also said "You saw me hungry and you did not feed me" and: "Whenever you did not do these things to one of the least of these, you did not do it even to me". "But, Father, what are you saying? Are the poor, the beggars, the young drug addicts, all these that society discards, part of the Synod? ". Yes, dear, yes, dear: I don't say it, the Lord says it: I am part of the Church. To the point that if you do not call them, they will see the way, or if you do not go to them to be with them for a while, to hear not what they say but what they feel, even the insults they give you, you are not doing the right thing.

The Synod must be led by the Holy Spirit. Pope Francis said: "If there is no Spirit, [The Synod] will be a diocesan parliament, but not a Synod. We are not making a diocesan parliament, we are not doing a study on this or the other, no: we are making a journey of listening to each other and listening to the Holy Spirit, of discussing and also discussing with the Holy Spirit, which is a way of praying.

Pope Francis continues reflecting: "The Synod is also making room for dialogue on our miseries, the miseries that I have as your Bishop, the miseries that the auxiliary Bishops have, the miseries that priests and laity have and those who belong to associations; take all this misery! But if we do not include the miserable of society, the discarded ones, we will never be able to take charge of our miseries. And this is important: that one's miseries can emerge in dialogue, without justifications. Do not be afraid!"

The parish is everyone's home in the neighborhood, not an exclusive club, Pope Francis recommends: "leave doors and windows open, don't limit yourself to just those who attend or think like you – which will be 3, 4 or 5%, not more. Allow everyone to enter ... Allow yourselves to go out to meet and

let yourself be questioned. The Spirit will lead you, trust in the Spirit. Do not be afraid to enter into dialogue and let yourselves be upset by dialogue: it is the dialogue of salvation. Don't be disenchanted, be prepared for surprises.'

### **Finalizes Pope Francis**

The fundamental question of the Synod is how this “journeying together” is taking place today in our particular Churches. This means: What experiences in our local Church this question calls to mind? What difficulties and obstacles have we encountered? What wounds have we brought to light?

I want to close with the words of encouragement of Pope Francis: Lord pushes the mission of a Church that is a sacrament of care, a Church that is an ongoing process of conversion. The world raised his cry, manifested his vulnerability: the world needs care”. May our Blessed Mother guide us on this journey, and help us open our hearts to the Holy Spirit, so that we can grow together in our shared responsibility to announce the Good News of Jesus Christ to the world. Let us sustain each other in prayer. Living as a Synodal Church.