



MOMENT OF REFLECTION OF THE BEGINNING OF THE SYNODAL PROCESS

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MESSAGE

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Secretary General

ORIGINAL: ITALIAN

Dear brothers and sisters, who manifest here the variety of gifts and charisms, of ministries and vocations which enrich the one holy People of God.

To the Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops is entrusted the task of concluding this first session of intense work. What can I say after the words of the Holy Father, after the invitation to listen by Card. Hollerich, General Relator of the XVIth Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, after the testimonies offered to us? Closing a meeting always entails the responsibility of providing at least an initial assessment of what has been done. It seems to me right and proper, at the beginning of the synodal process, to give an account of what has been done so far, and then to broaden our gaze to what remains to be done, to ensure that the synodal itinerary is, to the end, an experience of that "walking together" of the holy People of God, which constitutes the most beautiful exercise of a synodal Church.

Very often, we have heard the words "Synod" and "synodal process." An initial clarification is in order: the fact that we speak of the "Opening of the Synodal Process of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops" does not mean to reduce this first phase to preliminary preparation for this process. It is possible that some understand the formula "preparatory phase" from the Apostolic Exhortation *Episcopalis communio* in this way¹. However, the Synod Secretariat, supported by the common opinion of many experts, understands the first phase as an integral part of the synodal process. The Church's doctrine itself determines this conclusion: if synodality is a constitutive dimension of the Church-People of God, how could there be a synodal process without the first subject of synodality? And if the synodal Church "is a Church of listening," how could there be a full exercise of synodality without listening to the Holy People of God? Moreover, the first phase also includes discernment by the Church's Pastors within both national and continental Episcopal Conferences. How could we understand this entire process as a merely preliminary phase, or, as some would like, reduce it to a decorative or unnecessary phase? I therefore reiterate that all three phases are integral to the synodal process and that the XVIth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod begins

¹ EC article 4 and 5.

on October 10, 2021, with the solemn Eucharistic celebration in St. Peter's presided over by the Bishop of Rome, "visible principle and foundation of unity" of the whole Church.

If, then, we fix our attention on the long synodal process that awaits us, the first thought is one of gratitude. Gratitude to God who calls us to "walk together", but also gratitude to the many who, with their labor, have made this beginning possible. Today the Church is able to begin the journey that the Spirit is opening to her, because many people — the Council of the Synod of Bishops, officials, consultors, experts of the four Commissions, together with me and with Sr. Nathalie and H.L. Msgr. Marín — have created all the necessary conditions to enable us to commence this first phase of the journey. When we look at the Church as the People of God setting out on its journey, we can liken it to Israel walking in the desert towards the Promised Land. The Council establishes this parallelism: "Israel according to the flesh, which wandered as an exile in the desert, was already called the Church of God. So likewise the new Israel which while living in this present age goes in search of a future and abiding city is called the Church of Christ." (LG 9). The joy of seeing the Church that not only *acknowledges* the Council's doctrine on the Church as the People of God, but is prepared *to live* the dynamism that qualifies it from within — to be the People of God that walks towards the fulfillment of the Kingdom — is accompanied by thanks for those who explored and measured the terrain, as far as they could and as their knowledge and experience allowed, in order to place signposts that would help orient the People of God on the path. The *Preparatory Document* and the *Vademecum* are these discreet but clear signposts that are intended to help the "Church of God convoked in Synod" in the first phase of the synodal process.

This example leads me to offer a further clarification: in no way do the *Preparatory Document* and the *Vademecum* intend to predetermine the conditions of the journey or dictate the road, obliging the Church to follow a path that has been established in advance. This is why I spoke of signposts, not roads. Once laid, a road constrains the path of those who travel it. If this had been our intention, we would have pretended to constrain the Spirit, who, rather, guides the Church as he wishes. It is we who must obey the Spirit, not vice versa; and if we allow ourselves to be led by the Spirit, we can, as the Letter to the Hebrews says, "make straight roads for our steps" (cf. Heb. 12:13). Rather than building a road, we have rediscovered paths, itineraries, or for me, as a man of the sea, the sea-lanes that the Church has already traveled throughout the centuries as attested to by the Tradition. We do not invent synodality: it is a gift and a dimension of the Church-People of God that the Spirit is leading us to rediscover and experience. It is a style and a form that was customary in the Church of the Fathers and that — as we emphasized in the *Preparatory Document* — the Second Vatican Council has restored to us. The journey we are undertaking today can be a sign that we are convinced — at last — that the Church is defined by her tension towards the Kingdom. This tension constitutes her as a People on a journey. Only this certainty can motivate and sustain the choice of the synodal process even when difficulties and fatigue emerge. Today it is enough for us to live the joy of being part of the People of God on a journey, each one putting at the service of the others the gifts, charisms, ministries and functions that the Spirit has abundantly distributed among those of us here, grateful to share the commitment of this first phase of the synodal dynamism.

But the work has only just begun! Joy at the start of the journey is accompanied by a sense of responsibility for the phases that await us: the celebratory phase, with the Assembly in October 2023, and phase subsequent to that, which *Episcopalis communio* calls the implementation phase. These

are two very different phases, not only in the way they are carried out, but also in the reflection that accompanies and sustains them. The celebratory phase can benefit from the experience of many synodal assemblies: ordinary, extraordinary, special; the implementation phase, which perhaps we can already imagine as the phase of reception, does not go much beyond an initial terminological formulation. I would like to make two remarks about these phases, which show the great care with which we must guarantee the truth of the synodal process, so as not to prejudice the freedom with which it develops.

For the synodal process to be true (that is, for there to be no — or minimal — risk of pre-establishing an outcome), freedom must be guaranteed not only in the Spirit, but of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the first subject of synodality. The Church is synodal because the Spirit of Christ guides the Church on her journey to the Homeland. The Church is synodal because those who walk — the Holy People of God — obey the Spirit who guides them. The Church's synodal form and style spring from this listening to the Spirit which passes through the mutual listening of all: the totality of the baptized, the totality of the Pastors at the service of the People of God, the Bishop of Rome as the principle of unity which makes possible the exercise of synodality at all levels of the Church. Card. Kasper is absolutely right when he recently made this observation to me: "the spiritual way in which the Holy Father understands synodality is spiritually very demanding"!

In this ecclesial dynamic, there might easily appear a built-in temptation to conclude and resolve our listening by means of democratic dynamics. This manifests itself, above all, in giving the vote a value that risks transforming the Synodal Assembly into a parliament, introducing into the Church the logic of majority and minority. As much as I am aware that even in a council, consensus on the floor is measured by a vote, I wonder and I ask you if we should not reflect on this point, in order to find other solutions to verify consensus. Very often in meeting with church assemblies and other groups we are asked about the question of voting! Is it so impossible to imagine, for example, resorting to a vote on the *Final Document* and its individual paragraphs only when consensus is not certain? Is it not enough to foresee motivated objections to the text, perhaps signed by a suitable number of members of the Assembly, resolved through additional discussion, and to take recourse to the vote only in the undesired and last resort? I limit myself to these few questions, not to give a solution, but to point out a problem on which we must carefully reflect.

Just one more point for the phase of reception. We know that reception is the process through which the decisions of a council — in this case we could say of a synod — are received and assimilated into the life of the Church in its broadest articulation. I wonder: what if, instead of ending the assembly by delivering the final document to the Holy Father, we were to take another step, that of returning the conclusions of the synodal assembly to the particular Churches from which the entire synodal process began? In this case, the final document would arrive to the Bishop of Rome (who is recognized, always and by all, as the one who issues the decrees established by the councils and synods) already accompanied by the consensus of all the Churches. Moreover, the consensus on the document could be limited only not to the *placet* of the Bishop, but could also extend to the people of God summoned by him again to close the synodal process opened on 17 October 2021. In this case, the Bishop of Rome, the principle of unity of all the baptized and of all the bishops, would receive a document that manifests at one and the same time the consent of the People of God and of the College of Bishops: it would be a manifestation of the *sensus omnium fidelium*, which would at

the same time be an act of the of the ordinary magisterium of Bishops scattered throughout the world in communion with the Pope.

The two examples which I have mentioned are suggestions to stimulate reflection; they tell us how much work of interdisciplinary study and discernment still awaits us. Already the coming days will be an opportunity to measure ourselves alongside one another, all together and in the various commissions, to imagine a synodal process that is truly open to the Spirit. We are supported in this work by the Holy Father's encouragement, addressed several times to the Synod Secretariat, to "go forward"! We are sustained by the conviction that "the path of synodality is the path that God expects from the Church of the third millennium". We are sustained and comforted by the certainty that our service contributes to the journey of the Church. But we need to do things in an orderly way. Our present task is that of reflecting on the theme that has been assigned to the study groups: How might we accompany the dioceses in this first phase of the Synod? *Buon lavoro*