

XVI ORDINARY GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS

*FOR A SYNODAL CHURCH:
COMMUNION, PARTICIPATION, MISSION*

INSTRUMENTUM LABORIS

For the First Session

(October 2023)

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ABBREVIATIONS

AA Vatican Council II, Decree *Apostolicam actuositatem* (18 November 1965)

AG Vatican Council II, Decree *Ad gentes* (7 December 1965)

CA St. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Centesimus annus* (1 May 1991)

CL St. John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici* (30 December 1988)

CV Francis, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christus vivit* (25 March 2019)

PD General Secretariat of the Synod, *For a Synodal Church. Communion, Participation, Mission. Preparatory Document* (2021)

DCS General Secretariat of the Synod, *For a Synodal Church. Communion, Participation, Mission. "Enlarge the space of your tent (Is 54:2). Working Document for the Continental Stage* (2022)

DV Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum* (18 November 1965)

EC Francis, Apostolic Constitution *Episcopalis communio* (15 September 2018)

EG Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (24 November 2013)

FT Francis, Encyclical Letter *Fratelli tutti* (3 October 2020)

GS Vatican Council II, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes* (7 December 1965)

IL *Instrumentum Laboris*

LG Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium* (21 November 1964)

PE Francis, Apostolic Constitution *Praedicate Evangelium* (19 March 2022)

SC Vatican Council II, Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (4 December 1963)

UR Vatican Council II, Decree *Unitatis redintegratio* (21 November 1964)

INSTRUMENTUM LABORIS

Foreword

"May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to think in harmony with one another, in keeping with Christ Jesus, that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom 15:5-6).

The journey so far

1. The People of God have been on the move since Pope Francis convened the whole Church in Synod in October 2021. Beginning at their most vital and elementary level, the local Churches across the globe have initiated the consultation of the People of God, starting with the basic question formulated in no. 2 of

the *Preparatory Document* (PD): “**How does this ‘journeying together,’ which takes place today on different levels (from the local level to the universal one), allow the Church to proclaim the Gospel in accordance with the mission entrusted to Her; and what steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow as a synodal Church?**”. The fruits of the consultation were collected at the diocesan level and then summarised and sent to the Synods of the Eastern Catholic Churches and the Episcopal Conferences. In their turn, each drafted a synthesis that was forwarded to the General Secretariat of the Synod.

2. In order to serve a new stage in the ongoing synodal process, the *Working Document for the Continental Stage* (DCS) was drafted from the reading and analysis of the documents collected. The DCS was returned to the local Churches around the world, inviting them to engage with it and then to meet and enter into dialogue at the seven Continental Assemblies. During this time, the work of the Digital Synod also continued. The aim was to focus on the insights and tensions that resonated most strongly with the experience of the Church on each continent and to identify, from the perspective of each continent, the priorities to be addressed in the first session of the Synodal Assembly (October 2023).

3. This *Instrumentum Laboris* (IL) was drafted on the basis of all the material gathered during the listening phase, and in particular the final documents of the Continental Assemblies. Its publication closes the first phase of the Synod, “For a Synodal Church: communion, participation, mission” and opens the second phase, composed of the two sessions^[1] (October 2023 and October 2024) in which the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops will take place. Its aim will be to continue to animate the synodal process in the ordinary life of the Church, identifying which pathways the Spirit invites us to walk along more decisively as one People of God. The fruit for which we ask at the next Assembly is that the Spirit inspire the Church’s walking together as the People of God in fidelity to the mission that the Lord has entrusted to it. Indeed, the purpose of the synodal process “is not to produce documents but to open horizons of hope for the fulfilment of the Church’s mission” (DCS, 6).

4. The journey so far, especially the continental stage, has made it possible to identify and share the particular situations experienced by the Church in different regions of the world. These include the reality of too many wars that stain our world with blood leading to a call for a renewed commitment to building a just peace, the threat represented by climate change that implies a necessary priority of caring for the common home, the cry to oppose an economic system that produces exploitation, inequality and a throwaway culture, and the desire to resist the homogenising pressure of cultural colonialism that crushes minorities. Situations of persecution to the point of martyrdom and emigration that progressively hollow out communities, threatening their very survival are deeply lamented. The local Churches have spoken of their concern to be equipped to address urgent social realities, from the growing cultural pluralism that now marks the entire planet, to the experience of Christian communities that represent scattered minorities within the country in which they live, to the experience of coming to terms with an ever more advanced, and at times aggressive, secularisation that seems to consider religious experience irrelevant, but where there remains a thirst for the Good News of the Gospel. In many regions, the Churches are deeply affected by the crisis caused by various forms of abuse, including sexual abuse and the abuse of power, conscience

and money. These are open wounds, the consequences of which have yet to be fully addressed. To the penitence it owes to victims and survivors for the suffering it has caused, the Church must add a growing and intensified commitment to conversion and reform in order to prevent similar situations from happening again in the future.

5. It is in this context, diverse but with common global features, that the synodal journey takes place. The Synodal Assembly of October 2023 will be asked to listen deeply to the situations in which the Church lives and carries out its mission. What it means to walk together gains its missionary urgency when this question is asked in a particular context with real people and situations in mind. What is at stake is the ability to proclaim the Gospel by walking together with the men and women of our time, wherever they are, and practising the catholicity that emerges from walking together with the Churches that live in conditions of particular suffering (cf. LG 23).

6. To the Synodal Assembly we bring the fruits gathered during the listening phase. First of all, we have experienced the joy expressed in **the sincere and respectful encounter between brothers and sisters in the faith: to meet each other is to encounter the Lord who is in our midst!** Thus, we were able to touch with our own hands the catholicity of the Church, which, in the variety of ages, sexes and social conditions, manifests an extraordinary wealth of charisms and ecclesial vocations, and is the custodian of a treasure trove of differences in languages, cultures, liturgical expressions and theological traditions. In effect, this rich diversity is the gift of each local Church to all the others (cf. LG 13), and the synodal dynamic is a way to appreciate and enhance this rich diversity without flattening it into uniformity. Similarly, we have discovered that there are shared questions, even if synodality is experienced and understood in a variety of ways in different parts of the world on the basis of a common inheritance of the apostolic Tradition. Part of the challenge of synodality is to discern the level at which it is most appropriate to address each question. Equally shared are certain tensions. We should not be frightened by them, nor attempt at any cost to resolve them, but rather engage in ongoing synodal discernment. Only in this way can these tensions become sources of energy and not lapse into destructive polarisations.

7. The first phase renewed our awareness that **our identity and vocation is to become an increasingly synodal Church**: walking together, that is, becoming synodal, is the way to truly become disciples and friends of that Master and Lord who said of himself: "I am the way" (Jn 14:6). Today it is also a deep desire: having experienced it as a gift, **we want to continue to do so, aware that this journey will be fulfilled on the last day**, when, by the grace of God we will become part of that throng described in Revelation thus: "there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!'" (Rev 7:9-10). This text gives us the image of a definitively accomplished synodality, in which perfect communion reigns across all the differences that compose it, differences which are maintained and united in the one mission that remains to be completed: to participate in the liturgy of praise that from all creatures, through Christ, rises to the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit.

8. To the intercession of these sisters and brothers, who are already living the full communion of saints (cf. LG 50), and especially to that of she who is first in their ranks (cf. LG 63), Mary Mother of the Church, we entrust the work of the Assembly and the continuation of our commitment to a synodal Church. We ask that the Assembly be a time of outpouring of the Spirit, but even more that **grace accompanies us when the time comes to put its fruits into action in the daily life of Christian communities throughout the world.**

A working tool for the second phase of the synodal journey

9. The peculiar features marking Synod 2021-2024 are inevitably reflected in the meaning and dynamics of the Synodal Assembly and, thus, in the structure of the IL that serves it. In particular, the long preparatory phase has already led to the production of a multiplicity of documents: PD, reports of the local Churches, DCS and Final Documents of the Continental Assemblies. In this way, a cycle of mutually informed communication has been established among local Churches and between them and the General Secretariat of the Synod. The present IL does not annul previous documents or absorb all their richness, but is rooted in them and continually refers back to them. In preparation for the Assembly, **the Members of the Synod are asked to keep in mind the previous documents, in particular, the DCS and the Final Documents of the Continental Assemblies of the different continents, as well as the report of the Digital Synod and to use them as tools for their own discernment.** In particular, the Final Documents of the Continental Assemblies are particularly valuable for retaining the concreteness of the different contexts and the challenges posed by each. The common work of the Synodal Assembly cannot disregard these sources for discernment. The many resources collected in the special section of the Synod 2021-2024 website, www.synod.va may also be of help, in particular the Apostolic Constitution *Episcopalis communio* and the two documents of the International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (2018) and *The sensus fidei in the Life of the Church* (2014).

10. Given the abundance of material already available, the IL is designed as a practical aid for the conduct of the Synodal Assembly in October 2023 and thus for its preparation. All the more valid for the IL is the description given to the DCS: “is not a document of the Church’s Magisterium, nor is it the report of a sociological survey; it does not offer the formulation of operational indications, goals and objectives, nor a full elaboration of a theological vision” (no. 8). This is inevitable given that the IL is part of an unfinished process. Nonetheless, the IL takes a step beyond the DCS, drawing from the insights of the first phase and now the work of the Continental Assemblies, **articulating some of the priorities that emerged from listening to the People of God**, but avoids presenting them as assertions or stances. Instead, it expresses them as **questions addressed to the Synodal Assembly**. This body will have the task of discerning the concrete steps which enable the continued growth of a synodal Church, steps that it will then submit to the Holy Father. Only then will that particular dynamic of listening be completed in which “each has something to learn. Faithful people, College of Bishops, Bishop of Rome: one listening to the other; and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the ‘Spirit of truth’ (Jn 14:17), to know what He ‘is saying to the Churches’ (Rev 2:7)”^[2]. In this light, the purpose of the IL is not to be a first draft of the Final Document of the Synodal Assembly, only to be corrected or amended. Rather, it outlines an initial understanding of the synodal dimension of the

Church on the basis of which further discernment can be made. The Members of the Synodal Assembly are the primary recipients of the IL, which is also made public not only for reasons of transparency but as a contribution to the implementation of ecclesial initiatives. In particular, it can encourage participation in the synodal dynamic at the local and regional levels, while waiting for the outcome of the October Assembly. This will provide further material on which the local Churches will be called to pray, reflect, act and make their own contribution.

11. The questions that the IL poses are an expression of the richness of the process from which they were drawn: they bear the imprint of the particular names and faces of those who took part, and they bear witness to the faith experience of the People of God and thus reveal the reality of a transcendent experience. From this point of view, they indicate a horizon towards which we are invited to travel with confidence, deepening the synodal practice of the Church. **The first phase enables us to understand the importance of taking the local Church as a privileged point of reference³¹, as the theological place where the Baptised experience in practical terms “walking together”.** However, this does not lead to a retreat. No local Church can live outside the relationships that unite it with all others, including that particular relationship with the Church of Rome, which is entrusted with the service of unity through the ministry of its Pastor, who has summoned the whole Church in Synod.

12. This focus on local Churches requires taking into account their variety and diversity of cultures, languages and modes of expression. In particular, the same words — think, for example, of authority and leadership — can have very different resonances and connotations in different linguistic and cultural areas, especially when in some contexts a term is associated with precise theoretical or ideological approaches. The IL strives to avoid divisive language in the hope of furthering better understanding among members of the Synodal Assembly who come from different regions or traditions. The vision of Vatican II is the shared point of reference, starting from the catholicity of the People of God, in virtue of which “each individual part contributes through its special gifts to the good of the other parts and of the whole Church. Through the common sharing of gifts and through the common effort to attain fullness in unity [...] without in any way opposing the primacy of the Chair of Peter, which presides over the whole assembly of charity and protects legitimate differences, while at the same time assuring that such differences do not hinder unity but rather contribute toward it” (LG 13). This catholicity is realised in the relationship of mutual interiority between the universal Church and the local Churches, in which and from which there “comes into being the one and only Catholic Church” (LG 23). The synodal process first given expression in the local Churches has now reached its second phase in the universal Church, with the unfolding of the two sessions of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops.

The structure of the text

13. This IL is divided into two sections, which correspond to the tasks entrusted to the Continental Assemblies (and thus to the contents of the relevant Final Documents): first of all, Continental Assemblies were invited to undertake a re-reading of the path followed during the first phase, in order to identify what the Church on each continent had learnt from the experience of living the synodal dimension at the service

of mission; secondly, the Continental Assemblies were invited to reflect on the DCS and discern the resonances produced in the local churches of the continent, in order to identify the priorities on which to continue the discernment during the Synodal Assembly.

14. **Section A of the IL**, entitled “For a Synodal Church”, attempts to gather the insights of the path travelled so far. Firstly, it **outlines a series of fundamental characteristics or distinguishing marks of a synodal Church. It then articulates the awareness that a synodal Church is also marked by a particular way of proceeding.** According to the outcome of the first phase, conversation in the Spirit is this way of proceeding. The Assembly will be invited to respond to these insights with the aim of clarifying and refining them. **Section B** of this IL, entitled “Communion, mission, participation”^[4], **articulates, in the form of three questions, the priorities that most strongly emerge from the work of all the continents**, thus placing them before the Assembly for discernment. In order to assist the working process of the Synodal Assembly, especially the group work (*Circuli Minores*), five worksheets are proposed for each of the three priorities, allowing them to be approached from different perspectives.

15. The three priorities of section B, developed through the respective worksheets, cover broad topics of great relevance. Many could be the subject of an entire Synod, and some already have been. In a number of cases the interventions of the Magisterium are also numerous and well defined. During the Assembly they cannot be dealt with extensively, nor, above all, should they be considered independently of one another. Instead, they should be addressed starting from their relationship with the real theme of the work, namely a synodal Church. For example, references to the urgency of devoting adequate attention to families and youth do not aim to stimulate a new treatment of family or youth ministry. Their purpose is to help focus on how the implementation of the conclusions of the two previous Ordinary General Assemblies of the Synod of Bishops (2015 and 2018) and of the successive Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortations, *Amoris laetitia* and *Christus vivit*, represents an opportunity to walk together as a Church capable of welcoming and accompanying, accepting the necessary changes in rules, structures and procedures. The same applies to many other issues that emerge in the discussion threads.

16. The commitment asked of the Assembly and its Members will be to **sustain a dynamic equilibrium between maintaining an overview**, which characterises the work outlined in section A, **and the identification of practical steps to be taken** in a concrete and timely fashion, work which is the focus of section B. On this will depend the fruitfulness of the discernment of the Synodal Assembly whose task will be to open the whole Church to welcome the voice of the Holy Spirit. An inspiration for this work might come from reflection on the articulation of the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, which “consists of two parts”, different in character and focus, but becoming “a unified whole” (GS, footnote 1).

A. For a Synodal Church

An integral experience

“Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each of them is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Cor 12: 4-7).

17. One common trait unites the narratives of the stages of the first phase: it is the surprise expressed by participants who were able to share the synodal journey in a way that exceeded their expectations. For those who take part, **the synodal process offers an opportunity for an encounter in faith that makes the bond with the Lord, fraternity between people and love for the Church**, not only on an individual level, but involving and energising the entire community. The experience is that of a horizon of hope opening up for the Church, a clear sign of the presence and action of the Spirit that guides it through history on its path towards the Kingdom (cf. LG 5): “[T]he protagonist of the Synod is the Holy Spirit”^[5]. In this way, the more intensely the invitation to journey together has been accepted, the more the Synod has become a path on which the People of God proceed with enthusiasm, but without naivety. In fact, problems, resistances, difficulties and tensions are not concealed or hidden but identified and named thanks to a context of authentic dialogue that makes it possible to speak and listen with freedom and sincerity. Issues that are often posed in an adversarial manner, or for which the life of the Church today lacks a place of acceptance and discernment, can be addressed in an evangelical way within the synodal process.

18. A term as abstract or theoretical as synodality has thus begun to be embodied in a concrete experience. From listening to the People of God a progressive appropriation and understanding of synodality “from within” emerges, which does not derive from the enunciation of a principle, a theory or a formula, but develops from a readiness to enter into a dynamic of constructive, respectful and prayerful speaking, listening and dialogue. At the root of this process is the acceptance, both personal and communal, of something that is both a gift and a challenge: to be a Church of sisters and brothers in Christ who listen to one another and who, in so doing, are gradually transformed by the Spirit.

A 1. The characteristic signs of a synodal Church

19. Within this integral understanding, an awareness emerges of certain characteristics or distinctive signs of a synodal Church. These are shared convictions on which to dwell and reflect together as we undertake a journey that will continue to clarify and refine them, starting from the work of the Synodal Assembly will undertake.

20. This is what emerges with great force from all the continents: an awareness that **a synodal Church is founded on the recognition of a common dignity deriving from Baptism, which makes all who receive it sons and daughters of God, members of the family of God, and therefore brothers and sisters in Christ, inhabited by the one Spirit and sent to fulfil a common mission**. In Paul’s language, “we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (1Cor 12:13). Baptism thus creates a true co-responsibility among all the members of the Church, which is manifested in the participation of all, with the charisms of each, in the mission of the Church and the building up of the ecclesial community. **A synodal Church cannot be understood other than within the horizon of communion, which is always also a mission** to proclaim and incarnate the Gospel in every dimension of human existence. Communion and mission are nourished in the common participation

in the Eucharist that makes the Church a body “joined and knitted together” (Eph 4:16) in Christ, able to walk together towards the Kingdom.

21. Rooted in this awareness is the desire for **a Church that is also increasingly synodal in its institutions, structures and procedures**, so as to constitute a space in which common baptismal dignity and co-responsibility for mission are not only affirmed, but exercised, and practised. In this space, the exercise of authority in the Church is appreciated as a gift, with the desire that it be increasingly configured as “a true service, and in Holy Scripture it is significantly call ‘diakonia’ or ministry” (LG 24), following the model of Jesus, who stooped to wash the feet of his disciples (cf. Jn 13:1-11).

22. **“A synodal Church is a listening Church”**^[6]: this awareness is the fruit of the experience of the synodal journey, which is a listening to the Spirit through listening to the Word and listening to each other as individuals and among ecclesial communities, from the local level to the continental and universal levels. For many, the great surprise was the experience of being listened to by the community, in some cases for the first time, thus receiving a recognition of their unique human worth that testifies to the Father’s love for each of his sons and daughters. The experience of listening and being listened to in this way serves not only a practical function but also has a theological and ecclesial depth because it follows the example of how Jesus listened to the people he met. This style of listening is necessary to mark and transform all the relationships that the Christian community establishes among its members as well as with other faith communities and with society as a whole, especially towards those whose voice is most often ignored.

23. As a Church committed to listening, **a synodal Church desires to be humble, and knows that it must ask forgiveness and has much to learn**. Some reports noted that the synodal path is necessarily a penitential one, recognising that we have not always lived the constitutive synodal dimension of the ecclesial community. The face of the Church today bears the signs of serious crises of mistrust and lack of credibility. In many contexts, crises related to sexual abuse, and abuse of power, money and conscience have pushed the Church to a demanding examination of conscience so that “moved by the Holy Spirit” the Church “may never cease to renew herself” (LG 9), in a journey of repentance and conversion that opens paths of reconciliation, healing and justice.

24. **A synodal Church is a Church of encounter and dialogue**. On the path we have travelled, this aspect of synodality emerges with particular strength in relation to other Churches and ecclesial Communities, to which we are united by the bond of one Baptism. The Spirit, who is “the principle of the Church’s unity” (UR 2), is at work in these Churches and ecclesial Communities, and invites us to embark on paths of mutual knowledge, sharing and building a common life. At the local level, the importance of what is already being done together with members of other Churches and ecclesial Communities emerges strongly, especially as a common witness in socio-cultural contexts that are hostile to the point of persecution—this is the ecumenism of martyrdom—and in the face of the ecological emergency. Everywhere, in tune with the Magisterium of the Second Vatican Council, the profound desire to deepen the ecumenical journey also emerges: an authentically synodal Church cannot but involve all those who share the one Baptism.

25. **A synodal Church** is called to practice the culture of encounter and dialogue with the believers of other religions and with the cultures and societies in which it is embedded, but above all among the many differences that run through the Church itself. This Church **is not afraid of the variety it bears, but values it without forcing it into uniformity**. The synodal process has been an opportunity to begin to learn what it means to live unity in diversity, a fundamental point to continue exploring, trusting that the path will become clearer as we move forward. Therefore, **a synodal Church promotes the passage from “I” to “we”**. It is a space within which a call resonates to be members of a body that values diversity but is made one by the Spirit. It is the Spirit that impels us to listen to the Lord and respond to him as a people at the service of the one mission of proclaiming to all the nations the salvation offered by God in Christ Jesus. This happens in a great diversity of contexts: no one is asked to leave their own context, but rather to understand it and enter into it more deeply. Returning to this vision after the experience of the first phase, synodality appears first and foremost as a dynamism animating concrete local communities. Moving to the more universal level, this momentum embraces all the dimensions and realities of the Church, in a movement of authentic catholicity.

26. Lived in a diversity of contexts and cultures, synodality proves to be a constitutive dimension of the Church since its origin, even if it is still in the process of being realised. Indeed, it presses to be implemented ever more fully, expressing a radical call to conversion, change, prayer and action that is for all. In this sense, **a synodal Church is open, welcoming and embraces all**. There is no border that this movement of the Spirit does not feel compelled to cross, to draw all into its dynamism. The radical nature of Christianity is not the prerogative of a few specific vocations, but the call to build a community that lives and bears witness to a different way of understanding the relationship between the daughters and sons of God, one that embodies the truth of love, one that is based on gift and gratuitousness. The radical call is, therefore, to build together, synodally, an attractive and concrete Church: an outgoing Church, in which all feel welcome.

27. At the same time, **a synodal Church confronts honestly and fearlessly the call to a deeper understanding of the relationship between love and truth** according to St Paul's invitation: “But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love” (Eph 4:15-16). To authentically include everyone, it is necessary to enter into the mystery of Christ allowing oneself to be formed and transformed by the way he lived the relationship between love and truth.

28. **Characteristic of a synodal Church is the ability to manage tensions without being crushed by them**, experiencing them as a drive to deepen how communion, mission and participation are lived and understood. Synodality is a privileged path of conversion, because it reconstitutes the Church in unity: it heals her wounds and reconciles her memory, welcomes the differences she bears and redeems her from festering divisions, thus enabling her to embody more fully her vocation to be “in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race” (LG 1). Authentic listening and the ability to find ways to continue walking together beyond

fragmentation and polarisation are indispensable for the Church to remain alive and vital and to be a powerful sign for the cultures of our time.

29. Trying to walk together also brings us into contact with the healthy restlessness of

incompleteness, with the awareness that there are still many things whose weight we are not able to carry or bear (cf. Jn 16:12). This is not a problem to be solved, but rather a gift to be cultivated. We are faced with the inexhaustible and holy mystery of God and must remain open to its surprises as we walk through history towards the Kingdom. This also applies to the questions that the synodal process has brought to light. As a first step they require listening and attention, without rushing to offer immediate solutions.

30. Carrying the weight of these questions should not be the personal burden of those who occupy certain roles, with the risk of being crushed by them, but a task for the entire community, whose relational and sacramental life is often the most effective immediate response. This is why **a synodal Church unceasingly nourishes itself at the source of the mystery it celebrates in the liturgy**, “the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed” and “the font from which all her power flows” (SC 10), particularly in the Eucharist.

31. Once the People of God are freed from the anxiety of inadequacy, the inevitable incompleteness of a synodal Church and the readiness of its members to accept their own vulnerabilities become the space for the action of the Spirit, who invites us to recognise the signs of his presence. This is why **a synodal Church is also a Church of discernment**, in the wealth of meanings that this term takes on within the different spiritual traditions. The first phase enabled the People of God to begin to experience discernment through the practice of conversation in the Spirit. As we listen attentively to each other’s lived experiences, we grow in mutual respect and begin to discern the movements of God’s Spirit in the lives of others and in our own. In this way, we begin to pay more attention to “what the Spirit is saying to the Churches” (Rev 2:7), in the commitment and hope of becoming a Church increasingly capable of making prophetic decisions that are the fruit of the Spirit’s guidance.

A 2. A way forward for the synodal Church: conversation in the Spirit

32. Through the course of the first phase of the Synod and across all the continents there has been recognition of the fruitfulness of the method referred to here as “conversation in the Spirit” or “synodal method” (cf. figure on p. 16).

33. In its etymological sense, the term “conversation” does not indicate a generic exchange of ideas, but a dynamic in which the word spoken and heard generates familiarity, enabling the participants to draw closer to one another. The specification “in the Spirit” identifies the authentic protagonist: the desire of those conversing tends towards listening to His voice, which in prayer opens itself to the free action of the One who, like the wind, blows where He wills (cf. Jn 3:8). Gradually the conversation between brothers and sisters in faith opens the space for a ‘hearing together’, that is, a listening together to the voice of the Spirit. It is not conversation in the Spirit if there is not a step forward in a precise, often unexpected direction that points to concrete action.

34. In the local Churches, **conversation in the Spirit has been accepted and sometimes “discovered” as providing the atmosphere that makes possible the sharing of life experiences and the space for discernment in a synodal Church.** In the Final Documents of the Continental Assemblies, it is described as a Pentecostal moment, as an opportunity to experience being Church and to move from listening to our brothers and sisters in Christ to listening to the Spirit, who is the authentic protagonist, and being sent forth in mission by Him. At the same time, through this method, the grace of the Word and the Eucharist becomes a felt, actualised and transforming reality, which attests to and realises the initiative by which the Lord Jesus makes himself present and active in the Church. Christ sends us out on mission and gathers us around himself to give thanks and glory to the Father in the Holy Spirit. Hence from all continents comes the request that this method may increasingly animate and inform the daily life of the Churches.

35. Conversation in the Spirit is part of a long tradition of ecclesial discernment, which has produced a plurality of methods and approaches. Its precise missionary value should be emphasised. This spiritual practice enables us to move from the “I” to the “we”: it does not lose sight of or erase the personal dimension of the “I”, but recognises it and inserts it into the community dimension. In this way, enabling participants to speak and listen becomes an expression of liturgy and prayer, within which the Lord makes himself present and draws us towards ever more authentic forms of communion and discernment.

36. In the New Testament, there are numerous examples of this mode of conversation. **A paradigmatic account is provided by the account of the encounter of the Risen Lord with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus** (cf. Lk 24:13-35, and the explanation given in CV 237). As their experience demonstrates, conversation in the Spirit builds communion and brings missionary dynamism. The two, in fact, return to the community they had left to share the Easter proclamation that the Lord is risen.

37. In its concrete reality **conversation in the Spirit can be described as a shared prayer with a view to communal discernment** for which participants prepare themselves by personal reflection and meditation. They give each other the gift of a meditated word nourished by prayer, not an opinion improvised on the spot. **The dynamic between the participants articulates three fundamental steps. The first is devoted to each person taking the floor**, starting from his or her own experience reread in prayer during the period of preparation. Others listen in the knowledge that each one has a valuable contribution to offer and refrain from debates or discussions.

38. Silence and prayer help to prepare for the next step, in which each person is invited to open up within his or herself a space for others and for the Other. Once again, each person takes the floor: not to react to or counter what they have heard, reaffirming their own position, but to express what from their listening has touched them most deeply and what they feel challenged by most strongly. **The interior traces that result from one’s listening to sisters and brothers are the language with which the Holy Spirit makes his own voice resound.** The more each participant has been nourished by meditation on the Word and the Sacraments, growing in familiarity with the Lord, the more he or she will be able to recognise the sound of His voice (cf. Jn 10:14.27), assisted also by the accompaniment of the Magisterium and theology. Likewise,

the more intentionally and carefully participants attend to the voice of the Spirit the more they will grow in a shared sense of mission.

39. The third step, again in an atmosphere of prayer and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, is **to identify the key points that have emerged and to build a consensus on the fruits of the joint work**, which each person feels is faithful to the process and by which he or she can therefore feel represented. It is not enough to draw up a report listing the most often mentioned points. Rather, discernment is needed, which also pays attention to marginal and prophetic voices and does not overlook the significance of the points on which disagreement emerges. The Lord is the cornerstone that will allow the “construction” to stand and the Spirit, the master of harmony, will help to move from cacophony to symphony.

40. The journey leads to a prayer of praise to God and gratitude for the experience. “When we live out a spirituality of drawing nearer to others and seeking their welfare, our hearts are opened wide to the Lord’s greatest and most beautiful gifts. **Whenever we encounter another person in love, we learn something new about God.** Whenever our eyes are opened to acknowledge the other, we grow in the light of faith and knowledge of God” (EG 272). This, in a nutshell, is the gift received by those who allow themselves to be involved in a conversation in the Spirit.

41. In concrete situations, it is never possible to follow this pattern slavishly. Rather it must always be adapted. Sometimes it is necessary to give priority to each one taking the floor and listening to the others; in other circumstances to bringing out the links between the different perspectives, in search of what makes “our hearts burn within us” (cf. Lk 24:32); in others still, to the explication of a consensus and working together to identify the direction in which one feels called by the Spirit to move. But, beyond the appropriate concrete adaptations, the intention and dynamism that unite the three steps are and remain characteristic of the way of proceeding of a synodal Church.

42. Bearing in mind the significance of conversation in the Spirit to animate the lived experience of the synodal Church, formation in this method, and in particular of facilitators capable of accompanying communities in practising it, is perceived as a priority at all levels of ecclesial life and for all the Baptised, starting with ordained Ministers in a spirit of co-responsibility and openness to different ecclesial vocations. Formation for conversation in the Spirit is formation to be a synodal Church.

The conversation in the Spirit

A dynamic of discernment in the synodal Church



Silence, prayer and listening
to the Word of God

PERSONAL PREPARATION

By entrusting oneself to the Father, conversing in prayer with the Lord Jesus and listening to the Holy Spirit, each one prepares his or her own contribution to the question about which he or she is called to discern.

«Taking the word and listening»

Each person takes turns speaking from his or her own experience and prayer, and listens carefully to the contribution of others.



Silence and
Prayer

«Making space for others and the Other»

From what the others have said, each one shares what has resonated most with him or her or what has aroused the most resistance in him or her, allowing himself or herself to be guided by the Holy Spirit: "When, listening, did my heart burn within me?"



Silence and
Prayer

«Building together»

Together we dialogue on the basis of what emerged earlier in order to discern and gather the fruit of the conversation in the Spirit: to recognize intuitions and convergences; to identify discordances, obstacles and new questions; to allow prophetic voices to emerge.

It is important that everyone can feel represented by the outcome of the work.

"To what steps is the Holy Spirit calling us together?"



Final prayer
of thanksgiving

B. Communion, mission, participation

Three priority issues for a synodal Church

“For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another” (Rom 12: 4-5).

43. Among the fruits of the first phase, and in particular of the Continental Assemblies, which came to the fore thanks to the way of proceeding just outlined, three priorities were identified that are now proposed to the Synodal Assembly of October 2023 for discernment. These are challenges with which the whole Church must measure itself in order to take a step forward and grow in its own synodal being at all levels and from a plurality of perspectives. They need to be addressed from the point of view of theology and canon law, as well as from that of pastoral care and spirituality. They call into question the way Dioceses plan as well as the daily choices and lifestyle of each member of the People of God. They are also authentically synodal because addressing them requires walking together as a people, with all its members. The three priorities will be illustrated in connection with the three key words of the Synod: communion, mission, participation. While this is done for the sake of simplicity and clarity of presentation, it risks presenting the three key words as three “pillars” independent of one another. Instead, in the life of the synodal Church, communion, mission and participation are articulated, nourishing and supporting each other. They must always be understood with this integration in mind.

44. The different order in which the three terms appear, with mission taking the central place, is also rooted in the awareness of the links that unite that developed during the first phase. In particular, **communion and mission are interwoven and mirror each other**, as already taught by Saint John Paul II: “Communion and mission are profoundly connected with each other, they interpenetrate and mutually imply each other, to the point that communion represents both the source and the fruit of mission: communion gives rise to mission and mission is accomplished in communion” (CL 32, taken up in PE I,4). We are invited to move beyond a dualist understanding in which the relationships within the ecclesial community are the domain of communion, while mission concerns the momentum *ad extra*. The first phase has instead highlighted how communion is the condition for the credibility of proclamation, an insight which recalls that of the XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on *Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment*^[7]. At the same time there is a growing awareness that the orientation for mission is the only evangelically founded criterion for the internal organisation of the Christian community, the distribution of roles and tasks, and the management of its institutions and structures. **It is in relationship with communion and mission that participation can be understood, and for this reason, it can only be addressed after the other two**. On the one hand, it gives them the concrete expression: attention to procedures, rules, structures and institutions allows the mission to be consolidated over time and frees communion from mere emotional spontaneity. On the other hand, it receives a meaning, orientation and dynamism that allows it to escape the risk of turning into a frenzy of individual rights claims that inevitably cause fragmentation rather than unity.

45. To accompany the preparation and structure of the work of the Assembly, five worksheets have been prepared to address each priority, to be found at the end of this section. Each of these constitutes an entry point to the priority in question which in this way can be approached from different but complementary perspectives related to different aspects of the life of the Church that have emerged through the work of the Continental Assemblies. In this case the three paragraphs that follow, to which the three groups of worksheets in the appendix correspond, should not be read as parallel and non-communicating columns. Rather, they are beams of light that illuminate the same reality, that is the synodal life of the Church, from different vantage points, continually intertwining and invoking one another, inviting us to growth.

B 1. A communion that radiates: How can we be more fully a sign and instrument of union with God and of the unity of all humanity?

46. Communion is not a sociological coming together as members of an identity group but is above all a gift of the Triune God, and at the same time a task, which is never exhausted, of building the “we” of the People of God. As the Continental Assemblies experienced, communion interweaves a vertical dimension, that *Lumen gentium* calls “union with God,” and a horizontal one, “the unity of all humanity”, in a strong eschatological dynamism. Communion is a journey in which we are called to grow, “until all of us come to the unity of faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ” (Eph 4:13).

47. We receive an anticipation of that moment in the liturgy, the place where the Church on its earthly journey experiences communion, nourishes it and builds it up. If the liturgy is in fact the “outstanding means whereby the Faithful may express in their lives, and manifest to others, the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Church” (SC 2) then it is to the liturgy that we must look in order to understand the synodal life of the Church. First and foremost, **it is through shared liturgical action, and in particular the eucharistic celebration, that the Church experiences radical unity, expressed in the same prayer** but in a diversity of languages and rites: a fundamental point in a synodal key. From this point of view, the multiplicity of rites in the one Catholic Church is an authentic blessing, to be protected and promoted, as was also experienced during the liturgies of the Continental Assemblies.

48. A synodal assembly cannot be understood as representative and legislative, analogous to a parliamentary structure with its dynamics of majority building. Rather, we are called to understand it by analogy with the liturgical assembly. Ancient tradition tells us that when a synod is celebrated it begins with the invocation of the Holy Spirit, continues with the profession of faith, and arrives at shared determinations to ensure or re-establish ecclesial communion. In a synodal assembly Christ becomes present and acts, transforms history and daily events, and gives the Spirit to guide the Church to find a consensus on how to walk together towards the Kingdom and to help all of humanity to move towards greater unity. Walking together while listening to the Word and our brothers and sisters, that is, in seeking God’s will and mutual agreement, leads to thanksgiving to the Father through the Son in the one Spirit. In a synodal assembly, those who gather in the name of Christ listen to his Word, listen to each other, discern in docility to the Spirit, proclaim what they have heard and recognise it as light for the journey of the Church.

49. In this perspective, synodal life is not a strategy for organising the Church, but the experience of being able to find a unity that embraces diversity without erasing it, because it is founded on union with God in the confession of the same faith. This dynamism possesses an impelling force that continually seeks to widen the scope of communion, but which must come to terms with the contradictions, limits and wounds of history.

50. The first priority issue that emerged from the synodal process is rooted precisely in this point. In the concreteness of our historical reality, preserving and promoting communion requires taking on the incompleteness of being able to live unity in diversity (cf. 1 Cor 12). History produces divisions, which cause wounds that need to be healed and require pathways to be forged for reconciliation. In this context, **in the name of the Gospel, which bonds need to be strengthened in order to overcome trenches and fences, and which shelters and protections need to be built, and to protect whom? Which divisions are unproductive? When does graduality make the path to complete communion possible?** These seem like theoretical questions, but they are rooted in the concrete daily life of Christian communities consulted in the first phase. Indeed, they concern the question of whether there are limits to our willingness to welcome people and groups, how to engage in dialogue with cultures and religions without compromising our identity, and our determination to be the voice of those on the margins and reaffirm that no one should be left behind. The five Worksheets referring to this priority try to explore these questions from five complementary perspectives.

B 2. Co-responsibility in Mission: How can we better share gifts and tasks in the service of the Gospel?

51. “The pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature” (AG 2). Mission constitutes the dynamic horizon from which we are to think about the synodal Church, to which it imparts a drive towards the “ecstasy” that consists in “coming out of ourselves and seeking the good of others, even to the sacrifice of our lives” (CV 163; cf. also FT 88). Mission allows one to receive the experience of Pentecost: having received the Holy Spirit, Peter and the Eleven stand and take the word to announce the crucified and risen Jesus to all those living in Jerusalem (cf. Acts 2:14-36). Synodal life is rooted in the same dynamism. There are many testimonies that describe the lived experience of the first stage in these terms, and even more numerous are those that link synodality and mission in an inseparable manner.

52. In a Church that defines itself as a sign and instrument of union with God and of the unity of all humanity (cf. LG 1), the discourse on mission focuses on the lucidity of the sign and the efficacy of the instrument, without which any proclamation lacks credibility. Mission is not the marketing of a religious product, but the construction of a community in which relationships are a manifestation of God’s love and therefore whose very life becomes a proclamation. In the *Acts of the Apostles*, Peter’s discourse is immediately followed by the account of the life of the primitive community, in which everything became an occasion for communion (cf. 2:42-47), which made the community attractive.

53. In this line, **the first question regarding mission asks what the members of the Christian community are really willing to hold in common, starting from the irreducible uniqueness of each**

member, by virtue of their direct relationship with Christ in Baptism and as a dwelling place of the Spirit. This makes the contribution of each of the Baptized precious and indispensable. One of the reasons for the sense of wonder noted during the first phase is related to this possibility of contribution: “Can I really offer something?”. At the same time, each person is invited to acknowledge his or her own incompleteness, and therefore the awareness that in the fullness of mission everyone is needed. In this sense, mission also has a constitutively synodal dimension.

54. For this reason, the second priority identified by a Church that discovers itself as missionary and synodal concerns the manner in which it is able to solicit the contribution of all, each with their gifts and roles, valuing the diversity of charisms and integrating the relationship between hierarchical and charismatic gifts^[8]. The perspective of mission places charisms and ministries within the horizon of what is common, and in this way safeguards their fruitfulness, which is compromised when they become prerogatives that legitimise forms of exclusion. **A missionary synodal Church has a duty to ask itself how it can recognise and value the contribution that each Baptised person can offer in mission,** going out of himself/herself and participating together with others in something greater. “[T]o make an active contribution to the common good of humanity” (CA 34) is an inalienable component of the dignity of the person, even within the Christian community. The first contribution everyone can make is towards discerning the signs of the times (cf. GS 4), in order to maintain awareness of our common mission in tune with the breath of the Spirit. All points of view have something to contribute to this discernment, starting with that of the poor and excluded: walking together with them does not only mean responding to and taking on their needs and sufferings, but also respecting their protagonism and learning from them. This is the way to recognise their equal dignity, escaping the traps of welfarism and anticipating as far as possible the logic of the new heavens and new earth towards which we are on our way.

55. The Worksheets linked to this priority try to concretise this basic question with respect to topics such as the recognition of the variety of vocations, charisms and ministries, the promotion of the baptismal dignity of women, the role of the ordained Ministry and in particular the ministry of the Bishop within the missionary synodal Church.

B 3. Participation, governance and authority: What processes, structures and institutions in a missionary synodal Church?

56. “The words ‘communion’ and ‘mission’ can risk remaining somewhat abstract, unless we cultivate an ecclesial praxis that expresses the concreteness of synodality at every step of our journey and activity, encouraging real involvement on the part of each and all” ^[9]. These words of the Holy Father help us place participation in relation to the other two themes. Participation adds anthropological density to the concrete character of the procedural dimension. It expresses concern for the flourishing of human beings, that is, the humanising of relationships at the heart of the project of communion and the commitment to mission. It safeguards the uniqueness of each person’s face, urging that the transition to the “we” does not absorb the “I” into the anonymity of an indistinct collectivity. It guards against falling into the abstractness of rights or reducing persons to subservient instruments for the organization’s performance. Participation is essentially

an expression of creativity, a way of nurturing the relationships of hospitality, welcome and human well-being that lie at the heart of mission and communion.

57. From the vision of integral participation presented above emerges the third priority also addressed at the meetings of the continental stage: **the question of authority, its meaning and the style of its exercise within a synodal Church. In particular, does authority arise as a form of power derived from the models offered by the world, or is it rooted in service?** “It will not be so among you” (Mt 20:26; cf. Mk 10:43), says the Lord, who after washing the disciples’ feet admonishes them: “For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you” (Jn 13:15). In its origin, the term “authority” indicates the capacity to enable others to grow, and therefore it is a service to the uniqueness of each person, supporting creativity rather than being a form of control that blocks it, and a service to the creation of personal freedom and not a binding that restrains it. Linked to this question is a second one, charged with the concern for concreteness and continuity over time: **how can we imbue our structures and institutions with the dynamism of the missionary synodal Church?**

58. From this focus derives a further, equally concrete, theme which aims precisely at sustaining the dynamic of participation over time. The theme of formation appears across all the documents of the first phase. As repeatedly emphasized in the reports of Continental Assemblies and, before them the reports of the local Churches, **institutions and structures alone are not enough to make the Church synodal. A synodal culture and spirituality are needed animated by a desire for conversion and sustained by adequate formation.** The need for formation is not limited to the updating of content, but has an integral scope, affecting all the abilities and dispositions of the person, including mission orientation, the ability to relate and build community, willingness to listen spiritually, and familiarity with personal and community discernment. Also necessary are patience, perseverance, confidence and freedom in speaking the truth (*parrhesia*).

59. Formation is the indispensable means to make the synodal way of proceeding a pastoral model for the Church’s life and action. **We need integral formation, initial and ongoing, for all members of the People of God.** No Baptised person can feel extraneous to this commitment and it is therefore necessary to structure adequate proposals for formation in the synodal way addressed to all the Faithful. In particular, then, the more one is called to serve the Church, the more one must feel the urgency of formation: Bishops, Priests, Deacons, Consecrated men and women, and all those who exercise a ministry need formation to renew the ways of exercising authority and decision-making processes in a synodal key, and to learn how to accompany community discernment and conversation in the Spirit. Candidates for ordained Ministry must be trained in a synodal style and mentality. The promotion of a culture of synodality implies the renewal of the current seminary curriculum and the formation of teachers and professors of theology, so that there is a clearer and more decisive orientation towards formation for a life of communion, mission and participation. Formation for a more genuinely synodal spirituality is at the heart of the renewal of the Church.

60. Numerous contributions highlight the need for a similar effort **to renew the language used by the Church** in its liturgy, preaching, catechesis, sacred art, as well as in all forms of communication addressed to the Faithful and the wider public, including through new or traditional forms of media. Without demeaning or debasing the depth of the mystery that the Church proclaims or the richness of its tradition, the renewal of language must instead aim to make these riches accessible and attractive to the men and women of our time, rather than an obstacle that keeps them at a distance. The inspiration of the freshness of the language of the Gospel, the capacity for inculturation that the history of the Church exhibits, and the promising experiences already underway, even in the digital environment, invite us to proceed with confidence and resolution in a task of crucial importance for the effectiveness of the proclamation of the Gospel, which is the goal to which a missionary synodal Church aspires.

Rome, 29th May, 2023

Memorial of the Blessed Virgin, Mary, Mother of the Church

XVI ORDINARY GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS

FOR A SYNODAL CHURCH:

COMMUNION, PARTICIPATION, MISSION

WORKSHEETS

FOR THE SYNODAL ASSEMBLY

(First Session – October 2023)