



The Synodal Journey Towards an Ecclesial Communion

Cardinal Mario Grech

Cardinal Mario Grech, Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops, Vatican, shares this message of hope and support to local Church leaders, faith groups and networks in Oceania and Asia who are participating in the River Above Asia Oceania Ecclesial Network (RAOEN) and the process of Ecclesial Synodality.

As the region faces continuous threats to the integrity of the ecosystem and the cultures that live as one with the forests and oceans, Cardinal Grech's message is a major contribution to the RAOEN process, encouraging the importance of listening and discerning with all the members of the People of God, excluding no one, in order to effectively care for the peoples, oceans, and forests as one Church journeying together.

Peace be with you all.

Sincerely, I feel that I am in a dialogue with a community that is already synodal in its approach. What I would like to share with you is only to confirm not only your faith but your method in operating in the Church.

As you know, in a week's time almost, the Holy Father will inaugurate the Synod for the whole Church that will have as a theme, which is fundamental for the life and mission of the Church, for a synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission.

Whereas in the past, the synod was an event, 3-4 weeks event, an assembly of Bishops in Rome, now the Synod has been transformed to a listening process which has two distinct successive phases: the consultation, or as I prefer to call it, the first level of discernment with the People of God at the level of the local churches and the specific discernment of pastors. First on the diocesan level, then the episcopal conferences, then on a continental level, which will be a new phase in this process, and finally, at the level of the universal Church, at the Synod of Bishops in Rome.

For indeed as Pope Francis states, "the Synod of Bishops is the point of convergence of this listening process conducted at every level of the Church's life." Without the real consultation of the People of God, which needs to include the existential periphery, listening to all, there would be no synodal process. The success of this Synod depends on the first phase, conducting a responsible, real consultation with the People of God.

The discernment of pastors culminates in the synodal assembly to be held in Rome in 2023 which gathers the discernment of all episcopal conferences, national, continental, and the council of patriarchs of the eastern churches.



Pope Francis has emphasized how the Church is constitutively synodal. If it is not synodal, that means, that it is not a Church. We fail it. Placing before us the relationship between the People of God, the college of bishops and the bishop of Rome. These three elements are important. In this way, an ecclesial communion takes form, one which involves everyone in the Church. Nobody excluded, each one according to its proper state and function.

This communion exists in view of the Church's own mission, to proclaim the gospel. The Church is called to activate within a synodal synergy the ministries, charisms, present in her life. In order to formulate proposals that respond to real evangelical demands and to discern new paths to bring the gospel to the world.

The fact that the Church needs this missionary "going out" was clearly indicated to us by Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium*, which he himself described as the apostolic frame for the Church today. Taking to account that *Evangelii Gaudium* is, in the words of Christoph Theobald, a draft rewriting of Vatican II, I would say that this exhortation could be a document that accompanies the consultation of the entire People of God.

Precisely in *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis writes "*all the baptized, from first to last, the sanctifying power of the Spirit is at work, impelling us to evangelization. God furnishes the totality of the faithful with an instinct of faith which helps them to discern what is truly of God. This instinct of faith is present in all baptized.*"

I think that here, we have the key that enables us to evaluate and rethink the dynamics present in the Church. It makes us question whether the spirit of synodality has been truly interiorized. Whether we still lack a synodal, ecclesial vision and style, whether we lack the imagination, awareness of what the synodal forum of the Church really means. For indeed, many bishops still have serious concerns about whether a synodal process can lead the Church. Not only bishops.

In this framework, I firmly hope that the coming Church Synod may be timely, timely ecclesial experience, a *Kairos* that would inaugurate a much, much needed spiritual systematic machinery renovation in the Church. After all, a renovation that has already been suggested by Vatican II.

Synodality will not reach its full potential as the expression of ecclesial or as *Communio Mission* unless we are able to energize, to empower all aspects and levels of the Church. If empowerment is about the actualization of potentiality, then the Spirit has already provided this potentiality and continues to do so. Empowering the People of God will lead the Church to, and I use an expression by (Bradford E.) Hinze, to decolonized synodality.

According to this author, there are three verbal images that can attest to Pope Francis' decolonizing approach of synodality. First, he speaks of the need of a sound decentralization in the Church that will reconstitute the relations of the center and the periphery and the exercise of the authority of Rome, the Pope and the Curia, in relation to particular churches. Second, he uses the image of inverted pyramid to depict a reverse of ways that the hierarchy exercises power and authority in relation to the People of God from diverse cultures and especially the poor. And third, he uses the image of polyhedron to reconceive the status of distinctive parts in relation to



the unifying whole. And consequently, to not assume a normative and standardization understanding of the whole's impact on the part.

With this image, Francis aims to promote an expanded vision of unity in the Church that encourages us to recognize and receive the contributions of distinct parts and foster a polycentric approach in matters of cultures, politics, and economics. In the framework of this decolonization process, an ecclesial synodal initiative like the one you are undertaking can listen to the cry of the earth, the cry of the people in that particular region and make a valid contribution that has no equals.

For this reason, I commend you for holding this dialogue. Because in adopting a synodal approach, you can achieve more empowerment. Empowerment is a theological reality before it is a personal or social one. Indeed, it flows from the presence of the gifts of the Holy Spirit in the believers in the Church. Empowerment then is always understood in terms of a *missio Spiritus*, giving for the building up of the Church and the establishment of God's kingdom of the world.

But before we reflect on who can benefit from this empowerment (perhaps it is not thoroughly correct theologically what I'm going to say) but we need seriously to empower the Holy Spirit in the sense that we need to recognize the power of the Holy Spirit in the Church. Not that the action of the Holy Spirit really depends on us, but surely, the Holy Spirit must be given more breathing space. We cannot lock the Holy Spirit in a cage.

In this respect, I am saying that we need to empower, recognize the Holy Spirit. I get the impression that we do not really believe that the Holy Spirit abides in all the baptized. Our lack of trust in the People of God, confirms that enunciations such as "*We are temples of the Holy Spirit,*" can be merely empty words.

Hopefully the synod will empower the People of God. The whole People of God must be involved in this synod. In fact, the consultation in the first phase of the process, I call it the founding act of the Synod. All the faithful have a place in the synod and the opportunity to express themselves. We need to give them this opportunity to express themselves. This listening is a true pastoral conversion of the Church, a decision-making process in the Church always begins with listening, because only in this way can we understand how and where the Holy Spirit wants to lead the Church.

The Holy Father states that the synod process begins by listening to the People of God which shares also in Christ's prophetic office according to a principle dear to the Church of the first millennium: "*Quod omnes tangit ab omnibus approbari debet*" --what affects everyone must be deliberated on by everyone. This is not about democracy; this is not populism. A synodal journey is a process listening to the Spirit who speaks through all the members of the People of God, a shared discernment of his will for the Church.

The theologian Urman Traz, rightly notes that there are two reasons why Pope Francis believes that listening to the *sensus fidelium* this sense of the faith, a sense for faith is essential. First from the pedagogical point of view. Bishops need to listen to the People of God to communicate effectively and in a credible way. To find what the Lord asks of his Church today, we must lend



an ear to the debates of our time and perceive the fragrance of the man and woman of this age, so as to be permeated by their joys and hope, with their griefs and anxieties. At that moment, we will know how to propose the good news with credibility.

Secondly, the *sensus fidelium* must be listened to because it is a *locus theologicus*. If we want to find truth, there is Jesus Christ, the Word of God, the magisterium, but even the People of God they are the first theologians. In the Pope's words, "*We to listen to the **sensus fidei**, to find out what the Lord asks of his Church today. We cannot miss this opportunity.*" The hierarchy has no exclusive access to that ongoing dialogue with God. Let us trust in our people, in their memory, in their sense of smell. Let us trust that the holy spirit acts in and with our people and that this spirit is not merely the property of the ecclesial hierarchy.

In other subject, the ones who will truly get empowered in this synod on synodality are the bishops themselves. Because of their specific ministry, they shoulder a great responsibility in the Church. There is a fruitful circularity between the *sensus fidei* of the People of God and the magisterium of the pastors, which *Dei Verbum* emphasizes in an extraordinary way. It is in this close relationship between the People of God and their pastors, between the *sensus fidei* and the magisterium, that the synodal walk of the Church is brought about. The walk that is founded on listening. The bishops' discernment is in fact, founded on that which the Holy Spirit says to the Church through the totality of the baptized. *Infallibili in credendum*.

In this way, as Pope Francis has said it is possible to activate episcopal collegiality within an entire synodal Church. As I highlighted above, when bishops listen to *sensus fidelium*, they have the possibility to listen to the Holy Spirit, what the Holy Spirit is saying to the churches, and they will be in a position to express the new things of Christ to gospel that albeit present in the word of God, have not yet come to the light. This explains why the Holy Father speaks about episcopal collegiality within an entire synodal Church.

The fact that the synod of bishops has been located as the end point of this process of discernment throughout these two years should not be interpreted as an affirmation of clericalism, which is the desire to keep the Church in positions of power. We must not forget that the council teaches that bishops are the principal foundation of unity in their particular churches. The bishops therefore have a function of discernment which belongs to them because of the ministry they carry out for the good of the Church. The strength of the process lies in the reciprocity between consultation and discernment. Here lies the fruitful principle that can lead to furthering development of synodality, of the synodal Church and of the synod of bishops.

In conclusion, the *communio* synodality to which we are summoned will certainly have order and hierarchy but to be an effective instrument of a synodal Church, this must be freed from a false, dialectical idea that to empower one office or structure inevitably means to disempower another. The Church must resist these strategies of destructive disempowerment which can rob the *communio* of its harmony and consolation. All relationships are empowered by the Holy Spirit in order for the whole *communio* of the Church so that we may glorify the Lord. Thank you.