

Synod – Synodality – Participation

What is the meaning of Synod?

“Synod” is an ancient and venerable word in the Tradition of the Church..., whose meaning draws on the deepest themes of Revelation. Composed of a preposition *συν* (with) and the noun *ὁδός* (path), it indicates the path along which the People of God walk together. Equally, it refers to the Lord Jesus, who presents Himself as “the way, the truth and the life” ... Synodality ought to be expressed in the Church’s ordinary way of living and working. Synodality is an essential dimension of the Church... Through synodality, the Church reveals and configures herself as the Pilgrim People of God and as the assembly convoked by the risen Lord...Synodality ought to be expressed in the Church’s ordinary way of living and working... This *modus vivendi et operandi* works through the community listening to the Word and celebrating the Eucharist, the brotherhood of communion and the co-responsibility and participation of the whole People of God in its life and mission, on all levels and distinguishing between various ministries and roles.

Biblical Texts "Where two or three meet in my name, I am there among them" (*Matthew 18,20*); "look. I am with you always; yes, to the end of the world" (*Mt 28:20*). "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us..." (*Acts 15:28*)

Historical developments

Since the **first centuries**, the word “synod” has been applied, with a specific meaning, to the ecclesial assemblies convoked on various levels (diocesan, provincial, regional, patriarchal or universal) to discern, by the light of the Word of God and listening to the Holy Spirit, the doctrinal, liturgical, canonical and pastoral questions that arise as time goes by. Since the beginning of the Second Millennium, synodal procedure gradually took on different forms in the East and in the West, particularly after the breakdown of communion between the Church of Constantinople and the Church of Rome (11th century) and when ecclesiastical territories belonging to the Patriarchates of Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem came under the political control of Islam.

In response to the crisis triggered off by the **Protestant Reformation**, the Catholic Church held the Council of Trent... The Council established the norm that diocesan Synods should take place annually, provincial Synods every three years. The ecclesial communities born of the Protestant Reformation promote a certain kind of synodal approach, in the context of an ecclesiology and a sacramental and ministerial doctrine and practice which depart from Catholic Tradition.

Saint John Paul II, on the occasion of the Jubilee Year 2000, offered an assessment of the path that had been travelled to incarnate - in conformity with the teaching of Vatican II. Much has been done..."but there is certainly much more to be done, in order to realise all the potential of these instruments of communion ...(and) to respond promptly and effectively to the issues which the Church must face in these rapidly changing times."

Pope Francis

teaches that to “walk together is *the constitutive way* of the Church; *the figure* that enables us to interpret reality with the eyes and heart of God; *the condition* for following the Lord Jesus and being servants of life in this wounded time. The breath and pace of the Synod show what we are... In this way can we truly renew our pastoral ministry and adapt it to the mission of the Church in today’s world; only in this way can we address the complexity of this time, thankful for the journey accomplished thus far, and determined to continue it with *parrhesia*”. The *parrhesia* of the Spirit required the People of God on its synodal journey is the trust, frankness and courage to "enter into the expanse of God’s horizon"... May Mary, Mother of God and Mother of the Church, who "joined the disciples in praying for the coming of the Holy Spirit (*cf. Acts 1,14*), and thus made possible the missionary outburst which took place at Pentecost, accompany the synodal pilgrimage of the People of God, pointing the way and teaching us the beautiful, tender and strong style of this new phase of evangelisation.

Synodality denotes the particular *style* that qualifies the life and mission of the Church, expressing her nature as the People of God journeying together and gathering in assembly, summoned by the Lord Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit to proclaim the Gospel.

Companions on a common journey

Biblical texts

- Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come. So he travelled throughout Galilee. Mc 1:38
- Paul and his companions travelled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia... During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." Apg 16:6.9
- While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them. Lc24:15

Reflections

Jesus began his mission in the town of Capernaum. The way he proclaimed the coming of God's kingdom and his power of healing the sick made him known everywhere overnight. Large crowds came from everywhere to see him. Jesus would have had enough work to do in Capernaum for the rest of his life. But was that what the Father wanted? He spent a whole night in a cave in prayer and the call of his Father was to go to all the villages to preach his message.

Jesus was always on the road, but never alone. He moved around with a crowd of disciples. There was no set plan. They did not know where they would be tomorrow.

Jesus let himself be guided by the spirit, and his small community trusted him enough to follow him.

Over the centuries, the church settled down, organized itself locally into parishes and dioceses, founded monasteries, built schools and hospitals, promoted art and created a legal system. These institutions have done an incredible amount of good, changing society for the better. But the Church became powerful, too powerful, and power corrupts. It believed it was "the perfect society" and needed no change, while the world around it was changing dramatically. The Church seemed to become like a fossil of bygone times.

Thank God, the Second Vatican Council gave us another image of the Church: "the pilgrim people of God," a community that has set out, looking forward, always on the way like Jesus with his disciples. He was always on the road, but never alone. He moved around with a crowd of disciples. There was no set plan. They did not know where they would be tomorrow; Jesus let himself be led by the spirit and his small community followed him trustingly.

In the Synodal Process the whole Church wants to set out on a journey. The goal is neither to create an immediate pastoral programme nor to reinvent the Church. It is a long, difficult journey and we do not know where the Spirit will lead us. Like any journey, it begins with a first step, with the question what the Spirit and our world ask of us now. All the proposals of the local churches will flow into a world synod in 2023.



Prayer

*Lead, Kindly Light, amid the encircling gloom,
Lead Thou me on;
The night is dark, and I am far from home,
Lead Thou me on.
Keep Thou my feet;
I do not ask to see the distant scene;
one step enough for me.!*

Cardinal John Henry Newman

African proverb

Nunya, adidoe, asi metunee O. (Akan: Ghana)
„Wisdom is like a baobab, alone no one can embrace it.



Dialog: listening – speaking - celebrating

Biblical texts

- These men...are telling you **the way** to be saved... Apg 16,17... He had been instructed in **the way** of the Lord ... they refused to believe and publicly maligned **the Way**... 19,9.23...I persecuted the followers of **this Way**...22,4.14.22
- Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry. James 1,19

Reflections

How do people experience church as community today? For committed Christians, it can be a lively Sunday service with a community coffee afterwards. In the past, it was primarily catholic youth groups and other religious associations where christian community was experienced. Church institutions, such as kindergartens, hospitals and other social services have often lost their Christian identity and are subject to the same bureaucratic constraints as secular institutions. They no longer bear witness to the joy of the Gospel. The image of the church among secularized people is negatively coloured by the sexual abuse scandals involving priests. Life in the church is far from its original form as a community of faith and life. The way forward should perhaps be to return to the origins.

In the Acts of the Apostles, the Christian message is often called "the way"... "The way of the Lord... the way of salvation." To become a Christian is to begin a life in the company of Jesus, to follow him and his way of life. The Church, the community of those who are on the way with Jesus, are companions on that common journey.



Synodality in the church wants to help us to experience church again as a faith community, where people know each other, are in dialogue with each other, support each other and seek to shape their lives and their environment in the spirit of Jesus. The word synod means "common way" and "dialogue" means "common conversation". We discover the path that God wants to show us and open dialogue with one another and in prayer.

We are no longer used to that. Over the centuries, a **dichotomy** had developed in the Church. There were those who had the right and mandate to speak, the "hierarchy," and those who had to listen, the "laity." Living Synodality in the church means that everyone has something to contribute: bishops, priests, religious and all the laity, women and men, academics and workers, young and old. We all must learn anew to listen to one another and to speak out openly what we think, feel and experience. This is a difficult learning process.

In our meetings, it is often only a few who do the talking; others are too shy to express their opinion. The synodal process wants to **encourage everyone to speak** out what is on their mind. We must be humble enough to accept that each person usually sees only one aspect of the truth and needs the opinion of others to discern God's ways.

The most difficult thing is to **listen in an unbiased, respectful way**, without immediately answering, criticizing, or giving good advice. But this is the only way to create an atmosphere of trust that makes good decisions possible.

Prayer

God, you do not abandon your world and your church, but take care of us. For this we thank you.

And we ask you: Let your creative power work in and through us. Open our ear for your word and let us feel that you are with us.

African proverb

„Someone who does not look for an occasion, will not find it.“ Fulbe (fulfulde)



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Learning from other churches

Biblical texts

There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. 1 Co 12:4-7

Reflections

Pope Francis has called on the local churches to involve the other churches at all levels in their preparations for the World Synod. They have often in their history preserved the synodal character of the Church better than the Catholic Church, which has very strongly emphasized hierarchical structures. We can learn a lot from their strengths and weaknesses.

1. In the **Orthodox Churches**, synodal practice in accordance with the tradition of the Fathers has continued and is still alive today, e.g. the practice of a permanent synod to resolve liturgical, juridical and practical issues. A weakness of Orthodoxy is the close ties between the Church and the State, which exerts influence on ecclesiastical life.

2 In the **Anglican Communion**, synodal practice has remained a constant practise at all levels - local, national and supranational. It creates a synergy between the legislative authority of synods, in which all members of God's people participate, and the executive power of bishops.

3. One cause of the **Reformation** was abuse of power by church authorities. At that time, it was the selling of indulgences and the corruption of the clergy; today it is sexual abuse. The Reformers rightly emphasized the universal priesthood of all baptized and the participation of the laity in decision-making processes. The absence of a final authority and the one-sided emphasis on individual "freedom of the Christian" led to a fragmentation of Protestantism. The synodal process should be aware of this danger.

4 The rapid spread of **charismatic churches**, especially in the global South, shows that the pastoral ministry of the traditional churches does not meet the religious needs of many people. What attracts young people to them in particular is a form of worship in the language and music of today's culture, the experience of a living community and the freedom of individuals to bring in their charisms.

The Synodality of the Church and "the principle of equality between the hierarchical and charismatic gifts in the Church" were rediscovered in the Second Vatican Council and embodied in new pastoral structures at all levels: regular synods of bishops, national and regional episcopal conferences, pastoral councils in dioceses and parishes. The synodal process has several goals:

- To infuse these existing structures with a missionary spirit so that they are not only concerned with internal issues of the Church but know themselves to be primarily responsible for the mission of the Church in the world.
- To involve lay people in the decision-making processes not only as advisors but as co-responsible.
- To see decision-making not as a dispute of opinions, but as the common search for God's will for us today.

Prayer

We stand before you, Holy Spirit, as we gather in your name.
We are weak and sinful; let us not spread disorder,
let not ignorance lead us on a false path nor partiality influence our actions.
Let us find our unity in you, so that we may walk together towards eternal life
and not deviate from the path of truth and what is right.



African Proverb „Ba alu pamvu siri ru“ (Lugbara: Uganda) *The footprint of one person is very small.*