

Programme



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Aula Magna
Sede Trinitarios
Calle Trinitarios, 3
46003 Valencia

XXI SIMPOSIO INTERNACIONAL TEOLOGÍA HISTÓRICA

*Ubi floret Spiritus: comunión
y sinodalidad en la vida y
misión de la Iglesia*

Valencia 2026

TUESDAY 28 APRIL

MORNING

08:30 am. COLLECTION OF ACCREDITATION

09:15 am OPENING CEREMONY

- Opening prayer and welcome address by the Archbishop and Grand Chancellor.
- Remarks by the Rector of the Catholic University of Valencia (UCV).
- Remarks by the Dean.
- Remarks by the directors of the 21st International Symposium.

10:00 am. OPENING ADDRESS

- *The Final Document of the Synod: an ecclesiological perspective.*

His Excellency and Most Reverend Mr Francisco Conesa Ferrer, Bishop of Solsona and Synod Father.



**THE FINAL DOCUMENT OF THE SYNOD: AN ECCLESIOLOGICAL
PERSPECTIVE**

+ Francisco Conesa Ferrer, Bishop of Solsona

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- 2.- SYNODALITY AS THE “MODUS VIVENDI ET OPERANDI” OF THE CHURCH AS COMMUNION
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THE FINAL DOCUMENT OF THE SYNOD: AN ECCLESIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

+ Francisco Conesa Ferrer, Bishop of Solsona

A distinctive feature of the recent Synod is that in it the Church has once again asked itself questions about its nature and its mission. Whilst previous synods had dealt with specific aspects of the Church's life (such as evangelisation, reconciliation, catechesis, the Eucharist, the Word of God) or with different vocations and ministries (lay faithful, consecrated life, priests, bishops, young people, the family), in this Synod the Church has considered its synodal and missionary nature.

This reflection is deliberately situated in continuity with the ecclesiology developed in "Lumen Gentium". Indeed, there was never any sense in the Synod Hall of a desire to introduce a new conception of the Church, but rather to delve deeper into what the Second Vatican Council had said. The prevailing desire was to put into practice and develop the rich conciliar ecclesiology. Indeed, in the introduction to the Final Document, it is stated that "the synodal journey is putting into practice what the Council taught about the Church as Mystery and People of God, called to holiness through a continual conversion that springs from listening to the Gospel. In this sense, it constitutes a true act of further reception of the Council, prolonging its inspiration and relaunching its prophetic force for today's world"¹.

1.- COMMUNION, A KEY CATEGORY

This desire to extend and deepen the Council is highlighted by the centrality given at the Synod to the category of "communion" which, as we know, is key to understanding the constitution on the Church, "Lumen Gentium". Joseph Ratzinger explained that the word "communion" "can serve as a synthesis of the essential elements of the Christian concept of conciliar ecclesiology"². The Final Document explicitly recognises that "in the context of the conciliar ecclesiology of the People of God, the concept of communion expresses the profound substance of the mystery and mission of the Church"³.

The first chapter of "Lumen Gentium" sets out clearly and brilliantly that the Church is modelled on the Trinitarian *communio* and is, so to speak, an icon of the Trinity. According to the famous expression of St Cyprian, the Church is "a

¹ 16th General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *Final Document*, 5.

² J. RATZINGER, *Lecture on the ecclesiology of "Lumen Gentium"* (Congress on the implementation of the Second Vatican Council, February 2000): https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000227_ratzinger-lumen-gentium_sp.html (accessed 10 February 2025).

³ XVI SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document*, 31.

people gathered together in the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit”⁴

The communion that constitutes the Church has two important dimensions: vertical (communion with God) and horizontal (communion amongst people)⁵. It is a mystery of union between each person and the Divine Trinity, and amongst fellow human beings, as part of a people.

The root of communion lies in baptism, which introduces us to the Trinitarian mystery. For this reason, it can be said that the root of synodality is Trinitarian. Repeatedly, during the Synod, it was emphasised that the whole of Christian life has its source and horizon in the mystery of the Trinity⁶. For this reason, the importance of the three sacraments of Christian initiation is highlighted. In a sense, throughout the synodal process, it became increasingly clear that the primary foundation of synodality is sacramental. The theme of Christian initiation, which was barely touched upon in the preparatory documents, gradually came to occupy a central place. The Final Document expressly states that “the synodal journey of the Church has led us to rediscover that the variety of vocations, charisms and ministries has a single root: ‘we were all baptised in one Spirit to form one body’ (1 Cor 12:13)”⁷.

Communion with God gives rise to the community of believers, which the Council describes as a “community of faith, hope and love”⁸. Unity among human beings is realised in Christ through the Holy Spirit. With regard to ecclesial *koinonia*, the Synod emphasises that the Church is “a communion of the faithful (*communio fidelium*) and at the same time a communion of Churches (*communio Ecclesiarum*), which is manifested in the communion of bishops (*communio episcoporum*)”⁹. For this reason, the Church is conceived as a network of bonds and relationships: between the various local Churches, between groups of Churches, between the various vocations, and between all the faithful and the bishops, and with the Bishop of Rome.

The mystical character of the Church is complemented by the biblical image of the “People of God”. This image has dominated the entire reflection of this Synod. “The synodal process,” it is said, “has enabled us to experience the ‘spiritual flavour’ (EG 268) of being the People of God, gathered from every tribe, language, people and nation, living in different contexts and cultures”¹⁰.

⁴ St. Cyprian, *De Orat. Dom.*, 23 (PL 4, 553). Cf. Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, 4.

⁵ Cf. CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, Letter *Communio-nis Notio* (28 May 1998).

⁶ Cf. XVI SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document*, 15.

⁷ XVI SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document*, 21.

⁸ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, 8.

⁹ XVI SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document*, 18.

¹⁰ 16th ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document*, 17.

The notion of “synodality” seeks to embrace and bring to life what “Lumen Gentium” said about the Church as a mystery of communion and as the People of God, that is, in the first two chapters of the conciliar constitution. Trinitarian communion gives rise to the holy people of God, a people journeying towards the final goal.

The Synod also emphasises that communion in the Church is God’s work and not ours; it is He who gathers people from diverse nations into a single assembly and builds up the body of Christ through the Holy Spirit. The Second Vatican Council clearly stated that it is the Holy Spirit who “brings about that marvellous union of the faithful and gathers them all so intimately together in Christ”¹¹. What matters most is not what we do, but the grace we receive from God through the sacraments. That is why the Synod will state that “the renewal of the Christian community is only possible by recognising the primacy of grace”¹².

2.- SYNODALITY AS THE “MODUS VIVENDI ET OPERANDI” OF THE CHURCH AS COMMUNION

The experience of the Church since the Second Vatican Council has led it to discover that “walking together”, being synodal, is a key category for understanding its being and its action. As the document of the International Theological Commission, “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church”, recalls, the concept of synodality is not explicitly found in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, although it lies at the heart of its work of renewal¹³.

The idea of synodality places the emphasis on the praxis that corresponds to the Church as communion; it seeks to unfold the “being” of the Church as a mystery of communion in its “doing”, in its life. On this point, the Final Document closely follows the aforementioned document of the International Theological Commission. There it is stated that synodality “indicates the specific way of living and acting (*modus vivendi et operandi*) of the Church as the People of God, which manifests and concretely realises its being as communion in walking together, in gathering in assembly, and in the active participation of all its members in its evangelising mission”¹⁴.

a.- Synodality: the People of God walking together

The intuition underlying the concept of “synodality” is the idea of “walking together”, “making the journey together”, as the etymology of the word suggests. This highlights the pilgrim nature of the People of God, who are on a journey towards their final homeland; but, above all, it emphasises the importance of

¹¹ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Decree *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 2.

¹² 16th ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document*, 44.

¹³ Cf. INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (2018), n. 6.

¹⁴ INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (2018), 6; XVI ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document*, 31.

making the journey “together”: it is a journey that cannot be undertaken unless it is undertaken in union with other Christians. This is also the point made by the well-known phrase of St John Chrysostom, that “Church and Synod are synonymous”¹⁵. The Final Document captures this fundamental insight when it states that “synodality is the journeying together of Christians with Christ and towards the Kingdom of God, in union with all humanity”¹⁶.

From the very beginning, within the Church, a series of practices developed with the aim of bringing this “walking together” to fruition¹⁷. From the 4th century onwards, groups of churches or “ecclesiastical provinces” began to emerge, presided over by a metropolitan, and provincial synods were established as instruments for the exercise of ecclesial synodality. This experience was later continued in the Ecumenical Councils. In the second millennium, synodal practice took on diverse forms in the East and the West. In the Eastern Churches, synodal practice continued in accordance with the tradition of the first millennium, whilst in the West the Gregorian Reform led to an emphasis on the primate authority of the Pope. It is worth noting, from the second half of the 19th century onwards, the emergence and consolidation of ‘episcopal conferences’ as a sign of the revival of the collegial understanding of the exercise of the episcopal ministry. The Constitution ‘Lumen Gentium’ of the Second Vatican Council, with its vision of the nature and mission of the Church as communion, contains ‘the theological foundations for a relevant restoration of synodality’¹⁸.

In keeping with the spirit of the Council, and with a view to revitalising the synodal practice of the early Church, Pope Saint Paul VI instituted the “Synod of Bishops” as an instrument of consultation and collaboration with his ministry as Shepherd of the universal Church¹⁹. The Synod is emerging as a forum for the

¹⁵ ST JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *Explicatio in Ps.* 149.

¹⁶ 16th General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *Final Document*, 28. Cf. *Summary Report of the First Session*, 1, h. The definition of synodality in the Final Document, 28, is inspired by the proposal put forward by R. REPOLE, “Sinodalità. Il contributo della teologia”, in *Teologia* 46 (2021) 519. As I stated at the Synod, in my view this definition is incomplete because it regards Christ merely as a fellow traveller. I find the statement by the International Theological Commission much more accurate, when it affirmed that “the Church walks with Christ, through Christ and in Christ. He is the Wayfarer, the Way and the Home” (INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (2018), 50; cf. F. CONESA, *How to Be a Synodal Missionary Church*, Claret, Barcelona 2025, pp. 38–39).

¹⁷ I summarise the overview presented by the INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (2018), 24–41.

¹⁸ INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (2018), 40.

¹⁹ Cf. St. PAUL VI, Apostolic Letter *Apostolica sollicitudo* (15 September 1965). The conciliar decree *Christus Dominus*, 5 incorporated this decision of the Pope.

exchange of information and experiences, for the exercise of episcopal collegiality, and for assisting the Holy Father in the governance of the Church.

The diversity and breadth of synodal experience, initiated by Saint Paul VI and continued and expanded by Saint John Paul II, led to synodality becoming a key ecclesiological category on the threshold of the third millennium. As Pope Leo XIV has acknowledged, “in recent years the Church has been led by the Holy Spirit to develop the Council’s teaching on its communal nature, in accordance with the synodal and missionary form”²⁰.

Pope Francis emphatically underlined the synodal character of the Church when, during the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops, he said that “the path of synodality is the path that God expects of the Church of the third millennium”²¹ and stressed that synodality is a constitutive dimension of the Church and is not merely a chapter in treatises on ecclesiology. A few years later, he promulgated the Constitution “*Episcopalis Communio*”²², which transformed the institution of the Synod, turning it from a one-off event into a process that begins with listening, followed by the phase of deliberation and, finally, the phase of implementation. The final step was taken when, in October 2021, he launched a Synod whose very theme was synodality and, undoubtedly, by making the unexpected gesture of signing and accepting the Synod’s Final Document as part of his ordinary magisterium.

b.- Synodality, a way of being Church

The Final Document adopts the explanation provided by the International Theological Commission on the concept of synodality²³. It clarifies that the concept of “synodality” has three meanings or dimensions²⁴. First and foremost, synodality denotes a distinctive style that characterises the life and mission of the Church, understood as the pilgrim People of God. In a more specific and defined sense, synodality refers to those ecclesial structures and processes in which the synodal nature of the Church is expressed at an institutional level, whether locally (councils, assemblies, synods), regionally (ecclesiastical province, episcopal conference) or universally (ecumenical council and synod of bishops). Finally, synodality refers to the specific holding of those synodal events in which the Church is convened by the Pope to discern a particular matter.

²⁰ LEON XIV, Apostolic Letter *A fidelity that generates the future*, 4.

²¹ POPE FRANCIS, *Address on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Synod of Bishops* (17 October 2015).

²² Cf. POPE FRANCIS, Apostolic Constitution *Episcopalis Communio* (15 September 2018).

²³ Cf. XVI SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document*, 30.

²⁴ Cf. INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (2018), n. 70.

The most important aspect is the first, because it refers to a way of being Church, which is subsequently expressed in bodies and structures. For this reason, the term “synodality” refers above all to a way of life for the Church, a way of living as the people of God whilst journeying towards the definitive Kingdom. This way of life has two fundamental characteristics: listening to everyone and discerning together.

1. The first act of a synodal Church is attentive listening. This involves active listening, first and foremost, to God, because we cannot listen to one another without first listening to God. Therefore, living out synodality requires silence and opening oneself to contemplation and adoration. Only in prayerful silence can we hear what God is asking of us and discern what he is asking of his Church. I believe that, in this regard, the way in which the Church’s tradition is understood is significant, because much of the reluctance and suspicion towards the Synod has stemmed from a mistaken concept of tradition²⁵. The second chapter of “*Dei Verbum*” understands Tradition in a dynamic way, because it progresses within the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit. That is why the Council states that ‘God, who spoke in times past, speaks unceasingly to the Bride of his beloved Son; and the Holy Spirit, through whom the voice of the Gospel resounds vividly in the Church, and through her in the world, leads believers into the full truth, and causes the word of Christ to dwell in them abundantly (cf. Col 3:16)’²⁶. That is why, even today, it is possible to listen to God and discern what “the Spirit says to the Churches” (Rev 2:7).

Listening to God leads us to pay attention to others, to open our hearts to discover what God wishes to tell us through them. Listening is a demanding attitude, for it requires not only giving of one’s time, but more profoundly, making space for the other within oneself. It calls for detachment from oneself and conversion. The Synod states: “When we listen to our brothers and sisters, we share in the attitude with which God, in Jesus Christ, goes out to meet each one of us” (²⁷). The model of listening and welcoming is none other than Jesus Christ.

Authentic listening goes hand in hand with welcoming everyone and showing hospitality. The document marking the end of the continental phase of the Synod was titled after a passage from Isaiah, “Enlarge the space of your tent” (Is 54:2), and invited us to open the doors of the Church to welcome everyone, including those who, for various reasons, have felt marginalised or excluded from it.

²⁵ Some hold a static view of Tradition, seeing it as something immutable, and fear any attempt to make listening to the Word of God relevant today. On the opposite side are those who promote a break with this Tradition, waging ideological battles and – as the Pope said at the opening of the Synod – allowing the world to dictate its agenda. But, as stated in the letter to the People of God, the Synod “is not about ideology, but about an experience rooted in the Apostolic Tradition”.

²⁶ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL; Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*, 8.

²⁷ 16th General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *Final Document*, 51.

For this reason, listening must be transformed into closeness and pastoral accompaniment of people in the various situations in which they find themselves. Synodality implies the “desire for a Church that is closer to people and more relational, which is God’s home and family”²⁸.

In his address to us at the end of the Synod, Pope Francis said: “The vision of the prophet Isaiah invites us to imagine a banquet prepared by God for all peoples. Everyone, in the hope that no one is left out. Everyone, everyone. Let no one be left out, everyone”²⁹. He added that men of the Church who devote themselves to building walls do it great harm and that we must not appropriate the treasure of God’s mercy in order to deny it to anyone.

2. A second key element of the synodal style is the communal discernment of proposals, of the decisions to be taken and of their implementation. The style of a synodal Church is to dialogue, discern and decide together. Every baptised person has the capacity to participate in this discernment and, therefore, no one can be excluded from taking part in the processes leading to decision-making. Common discernment must be a regular practice in a synodal Church and must be practised at all levels (parishes, associations, dioceses, the universal Church).

The Second Vatican Council uses a key expression to understand synodality. The decree on divine revelation speaks of the “singularis antistitum et fidelium conspiratio”³⁰, that is, the marvellous harmony between pastors and the faithful in preserving, practising and professing the faith received. The idea of synodality seeks to provide channels for bringing this harmony between pastors and the faithful to fruition.

3. The implications of synodality for the Church’s practice

The desire to “walk together”, to discern together and to carry out the mission together, must, however, be made concrete and explicit, so that “synodality” does not become an abstract concept or a word that is misused, by applying it indiscriminately to describe certain actions or institutions. Throughout the two sessions of the 16th Assembly, there was always a latent fear that “synodality” might become a vague and imprecise term, ending up meaning nothing, or appearing as a passing fad³¹. To avoid this, “synodality” must be translated into concrete practices.

For this reason, the definition proposed in the Final Document emphasises the consequences that walking together has on the “work” of the Church: “it involves gathering in assembly at the various levels of ecclesial life, mutual listening, dialogue, communal discernment, reaching a consensus as a expression of the

²⁸ 16th General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *Final Document*, 28.

²⁹ POPE FRANCIS, *Address at the conclusion of the second session of the 16th General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops* (26 October 2024).

³⁰ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*, 10.

³¹ Cf. 16th ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Summary Report of the First Session*, 1, j; cf. 1, p and q.

presence of Christ in the Spirit, and decision-making in a differentiated co-responsibility”³².

3.- A BAPTISMAL ECCLESIOLOGY

Reflection on the synodal nature of the Church invites us to rediscover the importance of baptism, from which springs our identity as God’s holy and faithful people. Baptism is the source from which the call to holiness and the sending forth on mission flow³³. Baptism is the basis and foundation of the whole of Christian life, because it introduces us into the Trinitarian mystery: closely united to Jesus Christ, we are called and are truly Children of God, and we live driven by the Holy Spirit. The Final Document states: “There is nothing higher than this dignity, granted equally to every person, which causes us to be clothed with Christ and grafted onto Him like branches on the vine”³⁴. The name “Christian” contains the grace that underpins our life.

The Synod advocates a baptismal ecclesiology. Baptism is the fountain of life from which the dignity of each of the faithful flows. Baptism is the root of the various vocations, charisms and ministries that exist in the Church. All who have been incorporated into the Paschal Mystery of Christ through baptism share the same dignity. The life of the Risen Christ reaches every baptised person so that they may embark on a journey as a missionary disciple of the Lord and of his Kingdom. “The various ecclesial vocations are, in fact, multiple and articulated expressions of the single baptismal call to holiness and mission”³⁵.

The appreciation of baptism entails a recognition of the priestly, prophetic and kingly character of all Christians. By virtue of baptism, the whole People of God share in the three functions of Christ: the priestly, the prophetic and the kingly³⁶.

a.- The Synod places particular emphasis on the prophetic dimension in which every Christian participates, above all through the supernatural sense of faith, the “*sensus fidei*”. Through baptism, we have all received an instinct to know and put the Gospel into practice: the sense of faith or “*sensus fidei*”. Let us recall that the Second Vatican Council already referred to the supernatural sense of faith with which the People of God adhere to the faith, penetrate it more deeply and apply it more fully in life³⁷. Pope Francis, in **Evangelii Gaudium**, recalled this conciliar doctrine, emphasising that this supernatural instinct grants the faithful a wisdom that helps them to discern what truly comes from God³⁸. With

³² 16th ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document*, 28.

³³ Cf. XVI SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document*, 15.

³⁴ XVI SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document*, 21.

³⁵ XVI SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document*, 57.

³⁶ Cf. CCC 783.

³⁷ Cf. SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, 12, 35.

³⁸ POPE FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 119.

the sense of faith, all the baptised “contribute to imagining and deciding on steps for the reform of Christian communities and of the whole Church, so that it may experience the sweet and comforting joy of evangelising”³⁹.

However, the sense of the faith must not be confused with a kind of ecclesial public opinion⁴⁰. The People of God can be swayed by the opinion of the media or by social pressure; for this reason, the sense of the faith is always linked to the discernment of the pastors. The synodal process, which aims, above all, to listen to the sense of faith of the faithful and to reach the consensus of the faithful (*consensus fidelium*), which is a sure criterion of faith, is structured taking into account the different vocations and ministries.

b.- The Synod also considers the priestly function, emphasising the value of the common or baptismal priesthood, which must be understood in reciprocity with the ordained or ministerial priesthood. Both are necessary and indispensable and express the unity and diversity of the one Body of Christ, which is the Church.

In addition to ordained ministries, there are other ministries which the faithful exercise by virtue of their baptismal priesthood. “These ministries are the form that charisms take when they are publicly recognised by the community and by those responsible for guiding it, and are placed on a permanent basis at the service of the mission”⁴¹. Some are ritually instituted, such as those of lector, catechist and acolyte; others are exercised on a permanent basis without formal institution, and some are spontaneous. The Synod calls for the lay faithful, both men and women, to be offered “greater opportunities for participation, whilst also exploring other forms of service and ministry in response to the pastoral needs of our time, in a spirit of collaboration and differentiated co-responsibility”⁴².

c.- Christ’s kingly role is lived out, above all, in service, particularly to the poorest. “The People of God realise their ‘kingly dignity’ by living in accordance with this vocation to serve with Christ”⁴³.

Consecration leads to mission. Baptism is also the root of mission. Baptism configures us to Christ and, therefore, also to his mission. Through baptism we are incorporated into a people of missionary disciples. The Synod emphasises that “every baptised person responds to the demands of mission in the contexts in which they live and work, drawing on their own inclinations and abilities, thus manifesting the freedom of the Spirit in the bestowal of his gifts”⁴⁴. It adds that

³⁹ 16th ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Summary Report of the First Session*, 18, a.

⁴⁰ Topic addressed by BENEDICT XVI, *Address to the International Theological Commission* (7 December 2012); cf. XVI SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document*, 22.

⁴¹ XVI SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document*, 75.

⁴² XVI SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document*, 77.

⁴³ CCC 786.

⁴⁴ XVI SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document*, 58.

Christians who proclaim the Gospel within the family and in other states of life—, in the workplace and in their professions, in civic, political, social or ecological engagement, in the development of a culture inspired by the Gospel as well as in the evangelisation of the digital environment—"are sustained by the gifts of the Spirit"⁴⁵.

4.- SYNODALITY HAS ITS SOURCE IN THE EUCHARIST

The understanding of the Church as a mystery of communion entails an appreciation of the Eucharist as the sacrament that brings about the unity in which the Church consists, a unity amidst the diversity of vocations, charisms and ministries. As the Church reflects on what it means to "walk together", she becomes particularly aware that the source and summit of synodality is found in the celebration of the Eucharist⁴⁶. We have said that the ecclesiology of the Synod is baptismal; we might now add that it is also a Eucharistic ecclesiology. It should therefore come as no surprise that the Final Document makes frequent reference to the Eucharist⁴⁷.

The document of the International Theological Commission on Synodality stated clearly: "The synodal journey of the Church is shaped and nourished by the Eucharist"⁴⁸. And it added: "Synodality has its source and summit in the liturgical celebration and, in a unique way, in full, conscious and active participation in the Eucharistic banquet". Indeed, synodality springs from communion, and the Eucharist is the sacrament par excellence of communion. Furthermore, the Eucharist visibly represents and brings about our belonging to the body of Christ and the shared belonging among Christians. We who eat the same bread form one body (cf. 1 Cor 10:17). We are united to Christ in the communion of the Holy Spirit and together we journey towards the Kingdom.

We will grow in synodality to the extent that we nourish our lives at the Eucharistic banquet. Hence the importance of caring for the celebration of the Eucharist, especially the Sunday celebration, which is "the first and fundamental form of gathering and encounter of the People of God"⁴⁹. The Eucharist builds up the Church and expresses unity in diversity. In the Eucharist we experience that being together – united – is not the work of men but of God. It is important, therefore, to rediscover the Sunday celebration. It is worth quoting a very significant text from the Synod, which states: "For many of the faithful, the Sunday Eucharist is their only contact with the Church: ensuring its celebration is carried

⁴⁵ Cf. 16th General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *Final Document*, 58.

⁴⁶ Cf. GENERAL SECRETARIAT OF THE SYNOD, *Instrumentum laboris for the second session*, 7 and 10.

⁴⁷ Cf. XVI SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document*, 16, 26, 30, 31, 32, 59, 70, 116, 117, 142 and 153

⁴⁸ INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (2017), n. 47.

⁴⁹ 16th ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document*, 26.

out in the best possible way, with particular attention to the homily and the ‘active participation’ (SC 14) of everyone, is crucial for synodality. In the Mass, in fact, it is a grace granted from on high, rather than the result of our own efforts: under the presidency of one and thanks to the ministry of some, all may participate at the double table of the Word and the Bread. The gift of communion, mission and participation – the three cornerstones of synodality – is realised and renewed in every Eucharist”⁵⁰.

The Eucharist is the source of communion and the nourishment that sustains our journey together as the Church and our mission. From the Eucharist springs our missionary sending. “The Eucharist is a grace that renews the gift of communion and mission”⁵¹.

5.- THE SHARED RESPONSIBILITY OF ALL THE BAPTISED IN THE LIFE AND MISSION OF THE CHURCH

Taking baptismal ecclesiology as its starting point, the Synod emphasises the shared responsibility of all Christians in the life and mission of the Church. Communion must translate into a fuller participation of all the faithful in the life of the Church.

a.- The concept of “co-responsibility”

The idea of co-responsibility is not new in the history of theology. Shortly after the Second Vatican Council, Cardinal Suenens wrote a book in which he developed the idea of co-responsibility⁵². For Suenens, the richest seed of life from the Council was the discovery of the People of God as a whole and, consequently, the co-responsibility that derives for each of its members.

This concept appears for the first time in a magisterial document in the Apostolic Exhortation “Christifideles laici”. There, Saint John Paul II states that “by virtue of their common baptismal dignity, the lay faithful are co-responsible, together with ordained ministers and men and women religious, for the mission of the Church”⁵³. Pope Benedict XVI developed this idea. In an address to Catholic Action, he explained: “Co-responsibility demands a change of mentality, especially regarding the role of the laity in the Church, who are not to be regarded as ‘collaborators’ of the clergy, but as persons who are truly ‘co-responsible’ for the life and activity of the Church. It is important, therefore, to foster a mature and committed laity, capable of making their specific contribution to the Church’s mission, whilst respecting the ministries and tasks that each person has

⁵⁰ XVI ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document*, 142.

⁵¹ XVI ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document*, 56.

⁵² L. J. CARDENAL SUENENS, *Shared Responsibility in the Church Today*, Desclée de Br., Bilbao 1968 (original French edition 1968), Cf. S. MADRIGAL TERRAZAS, “Cardinal Suenens’s Memories of the Council and Ecumenical Hopes”, in X. QUINZÁ – G. URÍBARRI (eds.), *Responsibility and Dialogue. A Tribute to José Joaquín Alemany Briz*, Comillas University, Madrid 2002, pp. 162–186.

⁵³ JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, 15.

in the life of the Church and always in cordial communion with the bishops”⁵⁴ . Following in these footsteps, Pope Francis, in numerous addresses, has referred to the co-responsibility of the laity in the life of the Church, which he considers “an essential element of the synodal journey”⁵⁵ . “It is time,” he said, “for pastors and the laity to walk together, in every sphere of the Church’s life, in every part of the world”⁵⁶ .

b. The concept of ‘differentiated co-responsibility’

This idea was taken up again at the Synod, and it was clarified that it referred to “differentiated co-responsibility”. This expression is developed in the writings of Cardinal Roberto Repole, who, before becoming Archbishop of Turin, was for many years a professor of systematic theology at the Faculty of Theology in northern Italy. Synodality, he has written, is “a specific way of living and acting, expressed in the communal listening to the Word and in the Eucharistic celebration, in lived fraternity and in the participation and co-responsibility of the whole People of God, notwithstanding the differentiation of ministries and charisms, in the life and mission of the Church”⁵⁷ . Already during the first session of the Synod, Bishop Roberto Repole spoke of “differentiated co-responsibility”⁵⁸ . Alfonse Borrás, professor of canon law (Leuven, Catholic Institute of Paris) and synodal expert, also emphasises that synodality is linked to the co-responsibility of all the faithful by virtue of their baptism, in the diversity and complementarity of their charisms. “Baptismal co-responsibility and ecclesial synodality denote the same reality from two different yet intrinsically linked perspectives, namely, respectively, the ‘Church of subjects’ and the ‘Church-subject’ . Just as co-responsibility (of the Church of subjects) is differentiated by virtue of the diversity of charisms, synodality (of the Church-subject) is plural: every baptised person plays their part and can express their opinion”⁵⁹ . Co-responsibility considers the baptised as individuals, whilst synodality refers to the Church as a community⁶⁰ .

At the Synod, “the aspiration arose to broaden the possibilities for participation and the exercise of differentiated co-responsibility by all the baptised, men and

⁵⁴ BENEDICT XVI, *Message to the International Forum of Catholic Action* (10 August 2012).

⁵⁵ POPE FRANCIS, *Address to the members of the Marianhill Missionaries’ Chapter* (20 October 2022).

⁵⁶ POPE FRANCIS, *Address to the participants of a Congress organised by the Dicastery for the Laity* (18 February 2023).

⁵⁷ R. REPOLE, “Synodality. The contribution of theology”, in *Teologia* 46 (2021) 514. See pp. 515, 519, 520.

⁵⁸ Cf. F. CONESA, *Towards a More Synodal Church*, Claret, Barcelona 2024, p. 70.

⁵⁹ Cf. A. BORRAS, “Ecclesial Synodality. Diversity of Places and Mutual Interactions”, in *Recherches de Science Religieuse* 107 (2019) 275–299.

⁶⁰ A. BORRAS, *Ecclesial Communion and Synodality*, Éditions CLD, Paris 2029, p. 87.

women”⁶¹. By emphasising the “differentiated” nature of co-responsibility, the aim is to highlight the rich diversity of charisms and functions that exist within the Church. The Church is like the body of Christ: there is a diversity of vocations, ministries and charisms, each with its own function. “It is the one and the same Spirit who works all these things, distributing to each one individually as he wills” (1 Cor 12:11). The Synod aims to promote shared responsibility amongst all the baptised; each person possesses gifts to share, each according to their own vocation. Every member is important, even though each one performs a different role. All the baptised are co-responsible for the life of the Church and for evangelisation, but they are so in a “distinct” way, according to their own vocation and the charisms they have received.

Clearly, this is only possible if we have a mature and well-formed laity. For this reason, the Synod emphasises the need for formation. “In order that the holy People of God may bear witness to the joy of the Gospel to all, growing in the practice of synodality, they need adequate formation”⁶². This formation takes Christian initiation as its point of reference and constitutes a process that must be integral, continuous and shared⁶³.

c.- Ordained ministry in a synodal Church

This also requires a re-evaluation of ordained ministry. “In an increasingly synodal and missionary Church, the priestly ministry loses none of its importance or relevance; on the contrary, it will be able to focus more on its own specific tasks”⁶⁴.

The authority of pastors “is a specific gift of the Spirit of Christ the Head for the building up of the whole Body. This gift is linked to the sacrament of Holy Orders, which configures those who receive it to Christ the Head, Shepherd and Servant, and places them at the service of the holy People of God to safeguard the apostolicity of the proclamation and promote ecclesial communion at all levels”⁶⁵. Synodality offers the most appropriate interpretative framework for understanding the hierarchical ministry itself and places in the right perspective the mandate that Christ entrusts, in the Holy Spirit, to pastors. For this reason, it invites the whole Church, including those who exercise authority, to conversion and reform.

Four elements are highlighted in relation to ministerial authority: 1) The pastor’s authority never places him above the other members of the Church, but rather places him at the service of the community; 2) Authority must be exercised after

⁶¹ XVI SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document*, 36.

⁶² XVI ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document*, 141.

⁶³ Cf. XVI SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document*, 142 and 143.

⁶⁴ LEON XIV, Apostolic Letter **A Fidelity that Generates the Future**, 22.

⁶⁵ XVI ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document*, 33. Cf. INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (2018), 67.

listening to the voice of all. This is why the practice of ecclesial discernment is important for the mission; 3) A practice of accountability and structures and forms of periodic evaluation of the way in which ministerial responsibilities are exercised is called for; 4) The Synod recommends that ministers rediscover co-responsibility in the exercise of their ministry. Pope Leo has elaborated on this point when, in his letter “A Faithfulness that Generates the Future”, he writes: “To implement an ecclesiology of communion ever more effectively, it is necessary for the priest’s ministry to move beyond the model of exclusive leadership, which leads to the centralisation of pastoral life and the burden of all responsibilities entrusted solely to him, moving towards an increasingly collegial leadership, through cooperation between priests, deacons and the whole People of God, in that mutual enrichment which is the fruit of the variety of charisms stirred up by the Holy Spirit”⁶⁶.

6.- THE LOCAL CHURCH, THE FUNDAMENTAL SETTING OF COMMUNION

The journey of God’s holy people takes place in specific spaces and places, within a particular context and culture. The universal Church is incarnated and takes on flesh and life in the particular Churches. In each of them the whole Church is present and active, because – according to the apt formulation of *Lumen Gentium* 23 – the particular Churches are formed in the image of the universal Church, “in which, and on the basis of which, the one and only Catholic Church is constituted”. During the Synod, I had the opportunity to take part in a theological forum entitled ‘The Mutual Relationship between the Local Church and the Universal Church’⁶⁷. One of the speakers was the then Cardinal Roger Prevoist, who emphasised that the local Church is the one Church, made present in every place. Local Churches are not administrative parts of a whole. The whole universal Church is found in every local church, although no local church is the universal Church.

The Synod emphasises the value of the local Church because it “is the fundamental setting in which the communion in Christ of all the baptised is most fully manifested”⁶⁸. “The Church cannot be understood without being rooted in a specific territory, in a space and a time where a shared experience of encounter with the saving God is formed. The local dimension of the Church preserves the rich diversity of expressions of faith rooted in specific cultural and historical

⁶⁶ LEON XIV, Apostolic Letter. *A Faithfulness that Generates the Future*, 22.

⁶⁷ It took place on 16 October 2024 at the *Augustinianum* Patristic Institute. Participants included the theologian Miguel de Salis Amaral, Professor Antonio Autiero, the canonist Myriam Wijlens and Cardinal Roger Prevoist. The session was moderated by Professor Anna Rowlands.

⁶⁸ 16th ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document*, 116.

contexts, and the communion of the Churches manifests the communion of the faithful within the one Church”⁶⁹.

The Synod placed great emphasis on the local dimension, seeking to move beyond a pyramidal view of the Church, which conceives of local Churches as branches of the Universal Church. There is a mutual interdependence and a mutual inner relationship between the local Church and the universal Church. The *Instrumentum laboris* stated that the inter-Church relationships () have always been networked rather than linear⁷⁰. For this reason, it was emphasised – in line with conciliar ecclesiology – that the whole Church (*Ecclesia tota*) must be understood as a ‘communion of Churches’ (*Communio ecclesiarum*) or the ‘Body of Churches’. On several occasions, there were also calls for the development of a clearer theology of the local Churches.

Appreciation of the local Church also helps us to understand the rich diversity of contexts in which the baptised live. The local Churches are the *oikos*, the home of the people of God. The Church is present and comes to fulfilment in that place, within a history, a language and a culture, which is taken up and transformed in the light of the Gospel, to make it the home of the whole people of God.

The bishop is the bond of union between this people and with the other churches spread throughout the world. For its part, the ministry of the successor of Peter ensures that legitimate diversity does not harm unity⁷¹.

7.- WALKING WITH OTHER CHRISTIANS. TOWARDS FULL COMMUNION

Viewing the Church as a people advancing in the following of Jesus Christ immediately leads us to think of Christians from other Churches and denominations, who are called to walk alongside us. For this reason, the Synod, from the outset, had a strong ecumenical emphasis. There was a keen awareness that the synodal journey is an ecumenical one, that synodality requires walking together also with the men and women who, like us, profess faith in Jesus Christ. Let us recall that, in accordance with the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council, we recognise that the Church of Christ is present in other Christian communities and that, in the case of the Eastern Churches, we are dealing with authentic particular Churches⁷² and that through the celebration of the Eucharist in each of these Churches, the Church of Christ is built up and grows⁷³. Those who have received baptism and confess Jesus as the Son of God are in communion with

⁶⁹ XVI ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document*, 110.

⁷⁰ Cf. XVI SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Instrumentum laboris for the second session*, introduction to Part III.

⁷¹ See Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution **Lumen Gentium**, 13.

⁷² Cf. SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, *Decree on Ecumenism*, 14.

⁷³ Cf. SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, *Decree on Ecumenism* (), *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 15.

us, a communion that is “real, though incomplete”⁷⁴ . For this reason, we cannot conceive of synodality without considering that we must walk alongside other Christians and work to adjust our pace to theirs, so that imperfect communion may become full communion.

The Final Document makes clear a strong desire to achieve the full and visible unity of all Christians⁷⁵ . It clearly reaffirms “the Catholic Church’s commitment to continue and intensify the ecumenical journey with other Christians, by virtue of our common Baptism and in response to the call to live together in the communion and unity among the disciples for which Christ prayed at the Last Supper (cf. Jn 17:20–26)”⁷⁶ . In the Guidelines for Implementation, it is emphasised that the ecumenical impulse “is not an optional extra, but a requirement against which the dynamism of our journey together must be measured”⁷⁷ . To move forward along this path, it is necessary to recognise the scandal caused by division, to work to heal the wounds of the past, and to be willing to “allow ourselves to be enriched by brothers and sisters in the faith, overcoming prejudices and partisan views”⁷⁸ .

The Synod also makes some practical proposals for continuing on the ecumenical path: to include the memory of the saints of other churches in our liturgical calendar, especially the martyrs⁷⁹ ; to provide for the participation of representatives of other churches in participatory bodies and in ecclesial assemblies⁸⁰ ; a greater presence of the ecumenical dimension in the formation of the People of God and, especially, of candidates for the priesthood⁸¹ ; jointly commemorating the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea and promoting bold initiatives in favour of a common date for Easter⁸² ; deepening our understanding of the manner in which the Bishop of Rome exercises his ministry⁸³ ; to devise forms

⁷⁴ PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY, *Ecumenical Vademecum* (4 December 2020), 2.

⁷⁵ References to ecumenism can be found in the 16th General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *Final Document*, 4, 23, 26, 40, 56, 106, 107, 122, 137, 138, 139, 147 and 148.

⁷⁶ XVI SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document*, 40.

⁷⁷ GENERAL SECRETARIAT OF THE SYNOD, *Guidelines for the Implementation Phase* (2025), 3.1.d.

⁷⁸ XVI SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document*, 147.

⁷⁹ Cf. XVI SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document*, 122.

⁸⁰ XVI SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document*, 106–107.

⁸¹ XVI SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document*, 147–148.

⁸² XVI SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document*, 139.

⁸³ XVI SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document*, 137.

of consultation and discernment in common on matters of interest, suggesting the holding of an ecumenical synod on evangelisation⁸⁴.

Underlying this desire is the conviction, expressed by Pope Francis and reiterated by Leo XIV, that “the path of synodality, which the Catholic Church is following, is and must be ecumenical, just as the ecumenical path is synodal”⁸⁵. For this reason, León calls for: “let us commit ourselves to further developing ecumenical synodal practices and to communicating to one another who we are, what we do and what we teach”⁸⁶.

8.- WALKING IN UNION WITH ALL HUMANITY

The people of God also walk “in union with all humanity”⁸⁷. The Church, “walks alongside all humanity, committing itself with all its strength to human dignity, the common good, justice and peace, and ‘longs for the perfect Kingdom’ (LG 5), when God will be ‘all in all’ (1 Cor 15:28)”⁸⁸.

Pope Francis had a broad vision of synodality. It concerns not only the internal functioning of the Christian community, but is reflected in the attitude of the Church, which walks alongside humanity, nurturing the dream of fraternity. For this reason, synodality forms part of the Church’s relationship with the world. The Church “rediscovers itself as a people who wish to walk together, amongst ourselves and with humanity”⁸⁹.

The preparatory document ⁹⁰ * explained that ‘walking together’ can be understood from two distinct yet interconnected perspectives. The first focuses on the internal life of the particular Churches, on the relationships between the members who constitute them, and on the communities within which they are organised. The second perspective considers how the People of God walk alongside the entire human family. In this case, the focus is on the state of relations, dialogue and joint initiatives with believers of other religions, with people who have drifted away from the faith, as well as with specific social environments and groups, institutions and civil society. The Final Document states: “A synodal Church commits itself to walking, in the various places where it lives, alongside believers of other religions and people of other convictions, freely sharing the joy of

⁸⁴ Cf. XVI SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document*, 138. This proposal was supported by Bishop Matthieu Rougé of Nanterre at the XIV General Congregation (22 October 2024)

⁸⁵ POPE FRANCIS, *Address to His Holiness Mar Awa III* (19 November 2022); cf. XVI SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document*, 23.

⁸⁶ LEON XIV, *Homily II, Vespers during Christian Unity Week* (26 January 2026).

⁸⁷ XVI SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document*, 28.

⁸⁸ XVI SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document*, 20.

⁸⁹ POPE FRANCIS, *Address to the faithful of the Diocese of Rome* (18 September 2021)

⁹⁰ XVI ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Preparatory Document* (2021); 28–29.

the Gospel and gratefully welcoming their respective gifts, so that together, as brothers and sisters, in a spirit of exchange and mutual aid (cf. GS 40), justice, fraternity, peace and interreligious dialogue”⁹¹.

We must adopt God’s way and be a Church of closeness, compassion and tenderness. “A Church that does not separate itself from life, but takes on the frailties and poverty of our time, healing the wounds and mending the broken hearts with the balm of God”⁹². That is why it asks, “Do we embody the style of God, who walks through history and shares in the vicissitudes of humanity?”⁹³.

9.- SYNODALITY DRIVES MISSION

Communion in the Church is not an end in itself; the Church as communion exists to evangelise; communion and participation are for mission. Pentecost set in motion a centrifugal movement within the Church. The Council emphasised that “Ecclesia peregrinans natura sua missionaria est”⁹⁴; the nature of the Church is missionary. She exists to evangelise⁹⁵; communion is always missionary⁹⁶.

It was also repeated many times at the Synod that synodality is for the sake of mission. Growth in communion is intended to place the Church “on the move” in a missionary sense. We must avoid the danger of self-referentiality, of remaining closed off in discussions about ourselves and failing to open ourselves to the proclamation of the Gospel, which is the mission we have as a Church. If we wish to grow in synodality and promote the active participation of all vocations and ministries, it is so that everyone may also be involved in proclaiming the Gospel. For this reason, the Final Document states that “synodality and mission are intimately linked: mission illuminates synodality and synodality drives mission”⁹⁷. In the “Guidelines for Implementation”, it is emphasised that “The synodal form of the Church is at the service of her mission, and any change in the life of the Church is intended to make her better able to proclaim the Kingdom of God and to bear witness to the Gospel of the Lord to the men and women of our time”⁹⁸.

Every vocation in the Church is involved in the mission: all disciples, all missionaries. The Synod thus endorses the idea from the Aparecida document, so often

⁹¹ XVI SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document*, 123.

⁹² POPE FRANCIS, *Address during the moment of reflection at the opening of the synodal process* (9 October 2021)

⁹³ POPE FRANCIS, *Homily at the Mass marking the opening of the synodal process* (10 October 2021)

⁹⁴ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Decree *Ad Gentes*, 2.

⁹⁵ Cf. PAUL VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi*, 14.

⁹⁶ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, 32.

⁹⁷ 16th ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document*, 32.

⁹⁸ GENERAL SECRETARIAT OF THE SYNOD, *Guidelines for the Implementation Phase* (2025), introduction.

repeated by Pope Francis, that we are all “missionary disciples”. Every baptised person is a protagonist of the mission. There is a single mission, carried out through various ministries. The diverse vocations and charisms within the Church must be involved in proclaiming the Gospel.

Our communities and parishes, too, exist for the mission. The Final Document notes that Christian communities must avoid the temptation to focus on themselves and their organisational needs, and instead place themselves at the service of the mission that the faithful carry out in the midst of the world⁹⁹. Like the first communities, we must repeat: “We have seen, we bear witness, and we proclaim to you eternal life” (1 Jn 1:2)

Furthermore, there was a conviction at the Synod that a synodal Church is a sign for a world living in tension and polarisation, in division and conflict. If the Church lives out synodality, it will become a prophetic voice for this world. “Authentic practices of synodality enable Christians to develop a culture capable of critically prophesying against the prevailing mindset and thus offering a distinctive contribution to the search for answers to many of the challenges facing contemporary societies and to the building of the common good”¹⁰⁰.

10.- SOME PENDING ECCLESIOLOGICAL ISSUES

This in-depth exploration of the synodal nature of the Church opens up numerous perspectives and, at the same time, raises many questions. The Final Document does not overlook the fact that there remain outstanding issues that warrant further study. For this reason, “the Assembly invites theological institutions to continue research aimed at clarifying and deepening the meaning of synodality and the formation that accompanies it in the local Churches”¹⁰¹.

Throughout the Final Document, a number of issues are highlighted that remain open and require further exploration: clarifying the meaning of synodality¹⁰², the link between liturgy and synodality¹⁰³, the permanent diaconate¹⁰⁴, discernment regarding matters that should be reserved to the Pope and those that should be restored to the bishops¹⁰⁵; the theological nature of episcopal conferences¹⁰⁶, the canonical status of continental ecclesial assemblies and councils of

⁹⁹ Cf. XVI SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document*, 59.

¹⁰⁰ XVI SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document*, 47.

¹⁰¹ XVI SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document*, 67.

¹⁰² Cf. XVI SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document*, 67.

¹⁰³ Cf. XVI SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document*, 27.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. XVI SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document*, 73.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. XVI SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document*, 134.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. XVI SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document*, 125.

episcopal conferences¹⁰⁷, the identity of the Synod of Bishops¹⁰⁸, the manner of exercising the Pope's primacy¹⁰⁹ and the implementation of forms of synodality with other Christians¹¹⁰.

The document "Guidelines for the Implementation Phase" calls for experimentation and deeper reflection on how certain polarities and tensions that structure the life of the Church might be articulated. Among the polarities mentioned are: the universal Church and the local Church; the Church as the People of God, as the Body of Christ and as the Temple of the Spirit; the participation of all and the authority of some; synodality, collegiality and primacy; the common priesthood and the ministerial priesthood; ministeriality (ordained and instituted ministries) and participation in mission by virtue of the baptismal vocation without a ministerial form.

These are not new themes in ecclesiology, although they take on special importance from the perspective of synodality. For my part, I consider three issues to be particularly relevant. The first is the articulation of the local with the universal, of the particular church and the *Ecclesia tota*. In the synod, as has been said, the emphasis is on the church's insertion into a place, a culture and a language, but we must not lose sight of the elements that guarantee the unity of the Church. The "Instrumentum laboris" called for the recognition of Episcopal Conferences as ecclesial entities endowed with doctrinal authority and for the promotion of "liturgical, disciplinary, theological and spiritual expressions" suited to each local context, which was seen by some as a threat to unity¹¹¹. One point in the Final Document also states that "adopting a synodal style allows the Churches to move at different paces" and that these differences in pace should be valued as an expression of legitimate diversity¹¹². However, some express the fear that, if these differences in pace are emphasised, it will give rise to first-class and second-class Churches, with some Churches (generally in the first world) being more "progressive" and advanced whilst others lag behind. A challenge, therefore, is to articulate unity and plurality, the universal whilst respecting the local. The second important theme is the relationship between synodality, collegiality and primacy. This is an issue that has been on the table since the beginning of the Synod. The Summary Report of the first session already calls for clarification of the relationship between synodality and collegiality¹¹³ and, given that members without episcopal status participated in the Synod as full members, it states: "the question remains, however, as to the impact of their presence, as full

¹⁰⁷ Cf. XVI SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document*, 126.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. XVI SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document*, 136.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. XVI SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document*, 137.

¹¹⁰ Cf. XVI SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document*, 139.

¹¹¹ XVI SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Instrumentum laboris* for the second session, n. 97.

¹¹² XVI SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document*, 124.

¹¹³ Cf. XVI SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Summary Report of the First Session*, 1, j.

members, on the episcopal character of the Assembly. Some see a risk that the specific task of the Bishops may not be properly understood. The criteria on the basis of which non-episcopal members may be called to form part of the Assembly will also be clarified¹¹⁴. In my opinion, this issue was not resolved. It remains to be explored in greater depth how to articulate in concrete terms the involvement of all (synodality), the ministry of some (collegiality) and the presidency of one (primacy) in discernment and decision-making processes.

The third issue is the relationship between the baptismal priesthood and the ministerial priesthood. The Synod emphasises the importance of the common or baptismal priesthood and explicitly calls for “the promotion of more forms of lay ministry”¹¹⁵. It would be appropriate to clarify what is proper and distinctive to the baptismal priesthood and what is unique and non-transferable to the ministerial priesthood, so as not to clericalise the laity or blur the ordained ministry. In this context, the question also arises as to whether the power of order is required to exercise certain positions of responsibility within the Church. It seems that for the laity not merely to be co-workers, but to truly exercise authority, the power of jurisdiction would need to be separated from the power of order. As we know, this was the practice of Pope Francis, which is set out in the constitution on the Curia “*Praedicate evangelium*”, where it is expressly stated that the reform of the Curia “must provide for the participation of the laity, including in roles of governance and responsibility”¹¹⁶. However, according to many experts, this would run counter to the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, which linked the power of jurisdiction to the power of order¹¹⁷.

11.- A PATH TOWARDS THE RENEWAL OF THE CHURCH

With the celebration of the Synod, a process has been set in motion for “the renewal of the Church in following the Lord, in commitment to the service of the mission, and in the search for ways to be more faithful to him”¹¹⁸.

This renewal affects both its spiritual life and the existing structures at the service of the mission. At one point in the Final Document it is stated: “In simple and concise terms, we can say that synodality is a path of spiritual renewal and structural reform to make the Church more participatory and missionary, that is, to make her more capable of walking with every man and woman, radiating the light of Christ”¹¹⁹. Without spiritual renewal, any attempt at structural reform remains empty, becoming merely bureaucratic. In this sense, the Synod is, above

¹¹⁴ XVI SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Synodal Report of the First Session*, 20, d.

¹¹⁵ 16th ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document*, 66.

¹¹⁶ POPE FRANCIS, Apostolic Constitution *Praedicate Evangelium* (19 March 2022), art. 10.

¹¹⁷ Cf. SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, 21–24 and explanatory note 2

¹¹⁸ 16th ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document*, 3.

¹¹⁹ 16th ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document*, 28.

all, a spiritual event. No reform can be limited to structures alone, but must be rooted in inner transformation, “in the same mindset as Christ Jesus” (Phil 2:5). The Church—faithful and pastors alike—is preparing to listen to the voice of the Spirit, to discern which paths it must take to be more faithful to its Lord. But it is also true that inner renewal needs to take concrete form and be expressed in practices that help to make it a reality. “The synodal Church for mission,” said Pope Francis at the closing of the Synod, “now needs the words we have shared to be accompanied by deeds. This is the way forward”¹²⁰.

In his opening address at the first General Congregation, Cardinal Grech referred to a classic work by Yves Congar, written in 1950, in which he spoke of “true and false reform in the Church”¹²¹. The title of this work is in itself a programme, because it is not a question of reform “of” the Church, but of reform “in” the Church. Since the Church is not the work of men, it is not in our hands to reform her. However, we are part of her; we are “in” the Church and we may fail to be faithful to her nature and her mission. For reform to be genuine, Mario Grech said, the Holy Spirit must have primacy, and priorities must be established under his guidance. Only those driven by the action of the Holy Spirit are true reforms of the Church.

At the start of the synodal process, Pope Francis referred to the book by Congar that we have mentioned, in which he wrote: “We must not create *another* Church, but, in a certain sense, we must create a *different* Church”¹²². And the Pope added: “For a ‘different Church’, open to the newness that God wishes to show us, let us invoke the Spirit with greater force and frequency, and let us prepare ourselves to listen to him with humility, walking together, just as He—the creator of communion and mission—desires, that is, with docility and courage”¹²³. *Adsumus, Sancte Spiritus!*

11.15 am COFFEE BREAK

¹²⁰ POPE FRANCIS, *Address at the conclusion of the 17th General Congregation of the Synod* (26 October 2024).

¹²¹ M. GRECH, *Address to the First General Congregation* (2 October 2024). In Spanish, see Y. CONGAR, *True and False Reforms in the Church*, Sígueme, Salamanca 2014.

¹²² Y. CONGAR, *True and False Reforms in the Church*, Sígueme, Salamanca 2014, p. 213.

¹²³ POPE FRANCIS, *Address during the moment of reflection at the start of the synodal process* (9 October 2021).

12:00 pm. READING OF PAPERS

Room 17: moderated by Fr. Adrián Taranzano.

- *Communion and synodality in the origins: the so-called Council of Jerusalem. An approach to Acts 15:1-35 from the perspective of Second Temple Judaism, Fr. Ricardo Lázaro Barceló.*
- *Synodality and the theology of neighbourliness: the theological and ecclesiological task in a Church on the move, Rev. Mark Joseph Zammit.*
- *'There will be one flock and one shepherd' (John 10:16). Ecclesial communion as the foundation and form of synodality, Rev. Jesús Girón Izquierdo.*

Room 18: moderated by Rev. Joaquín Mestre Ferrer.

- *Hilary of Poitiers' ecclesiological reflection on the role of synods in maintaining the universal communion of the Church, Ms Almudena Alba López.*
- *Father Gabriele Allegra, OFM, and the fulfilment of the mandate of the Primum Concilium Sinense, Mr Miguel Moss Ferrer.*
- *The synodal witness of Ignatius of Antioch. The Church and the Mystery of Unity, Mr Manuel Ortuño Arregui.*
- *The synodality of the Church in the Diocese of Valencia. The synods of Archbishop Juan de Ribera, Mr Miguel Ángel Bondia Brisa.*

Room 19: moderated by Mr Domingo Pacheco Machado.

- *On the path towards synodality with Pedro Mogila, Mr Lionel Cedric Mele.*
- *Authentic synodality and instrumentalised synodality in the Antiochian Councils (324-361), Mr José Cebrián Cebrián.*
- *The powerful rationale for the universal priesthood in Paul Evdokimov, Ms Ana María Bernat Aguado.*
- *Synodality and primacy in Catholic-Orthodox dialogue: a reading based on Hervé Legrand, Mr Antonio Rafael Medialdea Villalba.*

Room 20: moderated by Mr José Ignacio Llópez Guasp.

- *The sensus fidei as a gift of the Holy Spirit for communion and synodality in the Church's mission, Mr Gregorio Aboin Martín.*
- *The original 'Let us make': the Trinitarian basis of ecclesial synodality, Mr Javier Navarro Quijada.*
- *Trinitarian communion as the source of ecclesial synodality, Mr Domingo García Guillén.*
- *Some pneumatological resources of synodality in the Second Vatican Council: the case of Lumen Gentium and Gaudium et Spes, Rev. Ignacio Andrés Castro Ortega.*

AFTERNOON

4.30 pm 1ST ROUND TABLE: SPIRITUALITY

- *Synodality viewed through the mysticism of St John of the Cross.*
Fr. Secundino Castro Sánchez, O.C.D., Comillas Pontifical University, Madrid (Spain).
- *The spiritual experience of synodality.*
Fr. Julián de Cos Pérez de Camino, O.P. San Vicente Ferrer Faculty of Theology-UCV, Valencia (Spain).
- *Ecclesia, societas Spiritus (cf. St Augustine, Sermon 71, 19, 32). Prioritising and revitalising Baptism as a source of spiritual life.*
Mr Luis Miguel Castillo Gualda. Faculty of Theology, San Vicente Ferrer-UCV, Valencia (Spain).

Chair: **Mr Leopoldo Quílez Fajardo.**

6.30 pm INTERFAITH PRAYER

Chapel at the Trinitarios Campus - UCV

WEDNESDAY 29 APRIL

MORNING

09:15 am. PRESENTATION

- *Participation in Leadership and Governance: Using and Developing Canonical Windows of Opportunities in Light of a Baptismal Ecclesiology.*

Ms Myriam Wijlens, University of Erfurt (Germany).



10.30 am. COFFEE BREAK

11:00 am. 2nd ROUND TABLE: ECCLESIOLOGY

- *Synodality: a re-interpretation of Vatican II.*
Mr Eloy Bueno de la Fuente. Faculty of Theology of Northern Spain, Burgos (Spain).
- *Conciliar ecclesiology and lay participation: creatively rethinking the possibilities we already have.*
Ms Raquel Pérez Sanjuán. Teresian Association, Madrid (Spain)
- *Some considerations regarding the term “synodality”.*
Mr Mariano Ruiz Campos. San Vicente Ferrer Faculty of Theology-UCV, Valencia (Spain).

Moderator: **Mr Santiago Pons Doménech**.

12.45 pm. PRESENTATION OF PAPERS

Room 20: moderated by Mr Mariano Ruiz Campos.

- *Communion and justice in the synodal Church: the tension between the bishop's fatherhood and the exercise of punitive power*, Mr Adam Jaszcz.
- *Synodality and participation. A note from philosophical anthropology*, Mr Rafael M. Mora Martín.
- *The political reflection of synodality: lay and ecclesial understanding of a journey together in today's world*, Mr Vincenzo Serpe.
- *The dynamics of synodal culture. Inward or outward?*, Mr Domingo Pacheco Machado.

Room 19: moderated by Fr. Germán Pravia Silvera, O.P.

- *Liberation theology: the reasons for the crisis*, Mr Néstor R. Rodríguez Galvis.
- *"God wished to sanctify men as a people" (LG 9). Synodal spirituality in light of Pope Francis' call to holiness*, by Pedro L. Vives Pérez.
- *Liberation theology and synodality: theological convergences between On the Side of the Poor (Gutiérrez-Müller, 2013) and the Final Document of the Synod on Synodality (2024)*, Mr Gonzalo de la Morena Barrio.
- *Walking together ad extra. Possibilities for interreligious dialogue from the perspective of fundamental and Trinitarian theology*, Mr Leopoldo Quílez Fajardo.

Room 18: moderated by Fr. Vicente Botella Cubells, O.P.

- *Ecumenism and synodality*, Mr José Carlos Martín de la Hoz.
- *The Eucharist and synodality based on the Apostolic Letter *Desiderio desideravi* and the Final Document of the Synod on Synodality*, Ms Szilvia Kovács.
- *Inner Truth, Ecclesial Communion: Newman and the Synodal Form of the Church*, Mr Juan Pedro Rivero González.

- *Synodality, diverse and complementary*, Mr Andrés J. Valencia Pérez.

Room 17: moderated by Mr José Fco. Castelló Colomer.

- *Disability and synodality: Walking together towards a Church that welcomes, listens and evangelises*, Mr José Manuel Montaner Isnardo.
- *Solidarity as the axiological foundation of synodality*, Fr. José Antonio Heredia Otero, O.P.
- *The ministry of listening in the synodal Church: the proposal of diocesan listening centres to accompany suffering*, Ms Yolanda Ruiz Ordóñez and Mr Vicente Tur Palau.
- *Communion with the Church in the Eucharistic Prayers of the East and West*, Mr Jaime Sancho Andreu.

AFTERNOON

4.30 pm 3RD ROUND TABLE: CULTURE OF ENCOUNTER

- *Science, Reason and Faith in the transition of paradigms of knowledge.*
Mr José María Tormos Muñoz. Catholic University of Valencia (Spain).
- *The synodal spirit in contemporary life.*
Mr Jesús Conill Sancho. University of Valencia, Valencia (Spain).
- *In the beginning it was not so (Mt 19:8). The nature and culture of encounter.*
Ms Ana Belén Álvarez Haya. Veritatis Gaudium Institute-UCV, Valencia (Spain).

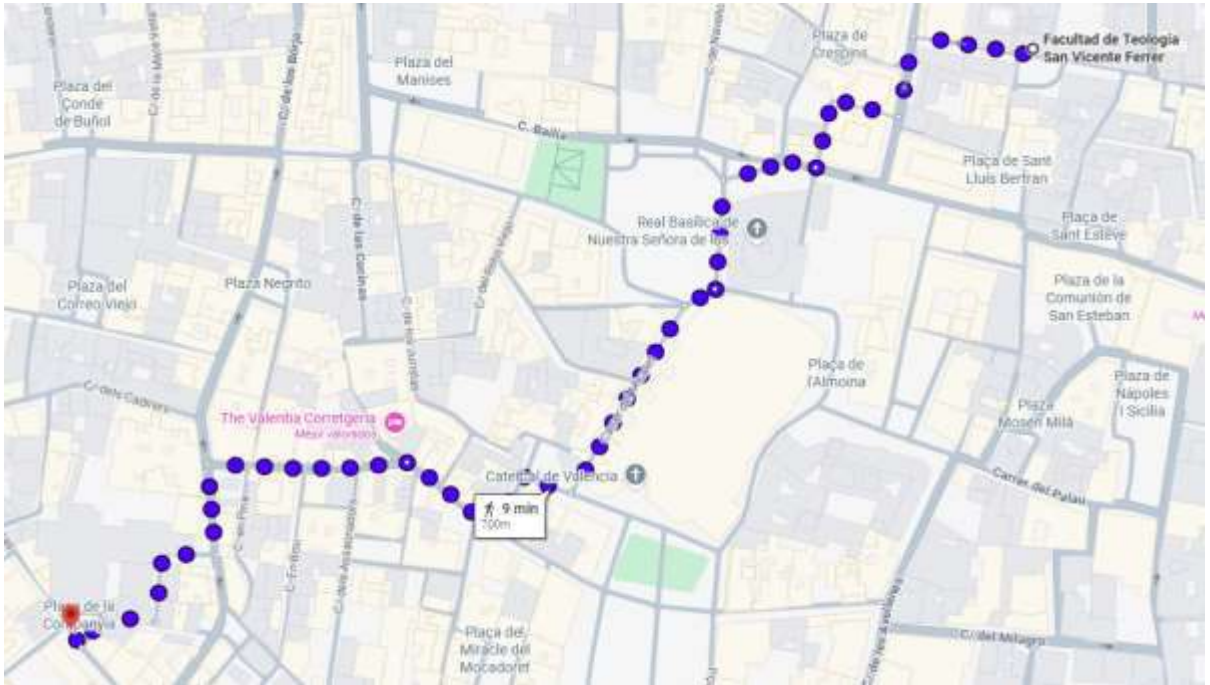
Moderator: Mr Antonio Praena Segura, O.P.

6.45 pm. CULTURAL EVENT: MUSIC AND POETRY

With organist Carlos Paterson and poet Antonio Praena, O.P.

At the Basilica of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Valencia (Plaza de la Compañía, s/n).

How to get there



THURSDAY 30 APRIL

09:15 am. 4TH ROUND TABLE: *ECUMENISM*

- *Synodality, diverse and complementary.*
Mr Alfredo Abad Heras. Standing Commission of the Spanish Evangelical Church, Madrid (Spain).
- *Synodality and challenges in Orthodoxy ten years after the Council of Crete.*
Mr Dimitrios Keramidas. Pontifical University of St Thomas Aquinas - *Angelicum*, Rome (Italy).
- *Synodality and ecumenism.*
Mr Rafael Vázquez Jiménez. Spanish Episcopal Conference, Madrid; ISCR San Pablo, Málaga (Spain).

Moderator: **Mr Andrés J. Valencia Pérez**

10.45 am. COFFEE BREAK

11.15 am. CLOSING ADDRESS

- *The local Church as a subject of synodality,*
Mr Dario Vitali. Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome (Italy).



**The local Church as a subject of synodality.
Proposals for the good practice of synodality,
in the light of the Final Document of the Synod**

prof. Darío Vitali

It is not customary to address the theme of synodality by taking the local Church as the point of reference. Perhaps this is due to the emphasis on the assembly aspect of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod, which drew attention to the universal dimension of the process; perhaps it is due to the scant attention the diocesan synod has received in the practice of most Churches since the close of the Council to the present day: the fact remains that there is a lack of careful and reasoned reflection on the local Church as the subject of synodality.

Yet, even a cursory reading of the Synod's *Final Document – Towards a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission* – reveals how deeply the local Church features in the text, not merely as the object of discussion, but as an active agent that has contributed decisively to the synodal process, of which the *Final Document* is the mature fruit. This oversight is evidently due to a lack of familiarity with the legislation introduced by the promulgation of the Apostolic Constitution **Episcopalis Communio**, which, by transforming the Synodal Assembly from an event into a process, provides for the involvement of the whole Church and of everyone within the Church.

It is therefore worth first revisiting the brief history of this body to see how the whole Church and all the Churches are involved in the celebration of Synodal Assemblies (1); highlighting what in *the Final Document* concerns each local Church (2); outlining the synodal profile of the local Church (3); and seeing how each Church is called to exercise synodality (4).

1. The Synod of Bishops

The Church of the first millennium was synodal: from the first assembly in Jerusalem, where decisions were taken whilst listening to the Spirit (cf. Acts 15:1–29), to the era of the ecumenical councils, it was the *conspiratio* that served as the principle and method guiding the Church on

its journey¹. Before becoming a structure, the Synod was a way of being, from which the Eastern Churches say they continue to draw inspiration. In the Latin Church, this principle was weakened by the construction of a pyramidal ecclesiology, which strongly emphasised the *plenitudo potestatis* of the successor of Peter at the expense of the bishops. Although the synodal practice survived at various levels of ecclesial life – diocesan, provincial, universal – it was thus subordinated to the principle of authority to the point of losing the relevance it had in the Church of the Fathers.

The Synod of Bishops is therefore a recently established body, the fruit of the experience of listening and communion lived by the Catholic episcopate during the Second Vatican Council. The prolonged experience of mutual listening in the council hall enabled the Fathers to experience the Council as a *Sancta Synodus*, rediscovering the synodal principle and embarking on a journey to restore this aspect of the early Church, rethought within the framework of conciliar ecclesiology. The Church gave canonical form to this restoration by establishing the Synod of Bishops even before the Council’s conclusion.

a. The establishment of the new body

On 14 September 1965, opening the final session of the Second Vatican Council, Paul VI announced to the assembly ‘the establishment, desired by this Council, of a *Synod of Bishops* which, composed of prelates, appointed for the most part by the Episcopal Conferences, will be convened, according to the needs of the Church, by the Roman Pontiff, for his consultation and collaboration when, for the general good of the Church, it seems appropriate to him’². The Pope, who concluded the announcement by stating that ‘details and regulations will be brought to

¹ I would like to refer the reader to: D. Vitali, ‘Synodality and Tradition: Learning from the Church of the First Millennium’, in *Rivista Liturgica*, 109(2022), no. 1, 11–31; ‘Synodality Put to the Test by the History of Doctrines’, in N. Becquart and Ph. Renczes (eds.), *The Theology Responding to the Challenge of Synodality – La teologia alla prova della sinodalità* (Proceedings of the International Conference held at the Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome, 27–29 April 2023, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City 2024, 295–331; ‘From *Apostolica sollicitudo* to *Episcopalis Communio* and beyond’, in General Secretariat of the Synod, *Toward a missionary synodal Church: becoming who we are*, LEV, Vatican City 20025, 51–88.

² Paul VI, *Address In hoc laetamur* (Session VI, 14 September 1965), in AAS 57 (1965), 804.

the attention of this assembly as soon as possible’, promulgated the *motu proprio Apostolica Sollicitudo* the very next day, by which he established the new body:

Having carefully considered all matters, out of Our esteem and respect for all Catholic bishops, and to give them the opportunity to participate more visibly and effectively in Our concern for the universal Church, of Our own initiative and by Our apostolic authority We establish and constitute in this beloved City a permanent council of Bishops for the universal Church, subject directly and immediately to Our authority, which We specifically name *the Synod of Bishops*³.

The timing of the publication, whilst on the one hand revealing the desire to proceed with the establishment of the new body in response to *the wishes* of the assembly, on the other hand betrays Paul VI’s concern over a possible resurgence of the debate on collegiality, which had already marred the third session of the Council with the famous ‘black week’⁴. In fact, the tasks assigned to the Synod of Bishops seemed to draw more on *the Nota explicativa praevia* than on the doctrine of collegiality proposed in LG 22⁵, as the former subordinated the action of the college to the judgement of the Pope, to whom it falls to determine the manner in which the care of Christ’s flock ought to be carried out⁶. The harmony of

³ Paul VI, *Motu proprio Apostolica Sollicitudo* (15 September 1965), in AAS 57 (1965), 776.

⁴ The expression ‘black week’ refers to the third period of the Council, in particular the period between 15 and 21 November 1964, when the discussion on collegiality reached its climax due to the opposition of the minority to the doctrine of collegiality, which, in their view, endangered the doctrine of primacy. In this climate, Paul VI, with the aim of defusing the tension, sent the *Nota explicativa praevia* to the assembly, specifying that ‘the doctrine set out in the third chapter [of the Constitution on the Church] must be explained and understood in accordance with the spirit and meaning of this note’.

⁵ The Council recognised “the college, always with the head and never without him, as the subject of full and supreme authority over the whole Church” (LG 22). The *Nota explicativa praevia*, on the basis of the necessary presence of the Head, states that the distinction is not between two subjects – the Roman Pontiff and the body of Bishops – but between the Roman Pontiff alone and the Roman Pontiff together with the Bishops’: *NeP*, 3.

⁶ ‘It is for the Supreme Pontiff, to whom the care of the whole flock of Christ is entrusted, to determine, in accordance with the needs of the Church, which vary over the centuries, the manner in which this care is to be exercised, whether personally or collegially. The Roman Pontiff, in ordering, promoting and approving collegial exercise, proceeds according to his own discretion, having in view the good of the Church’: *Nota explicativa praevia*, General Observation 3.

Apostolica Sollicitudo with this conception is already very evident from the very first article of the legislation concerning the new body:

The Synod of Bishops, through which bishops chosen from various parts of the world provide the supreme shepherd of the Church with more effective assistance, is constituted in such a way that it is: a) a central ecclesiastical institution; b) representing the entire Catholic episcopate; c) perpetual by its nature; d) carrying out, as regards its structure, its tasks in a temporary and occasional manner⁷.

The primary task of the Synod of Bishops conceived by Paul VI is ‘to provide information and advice. It may also enjoy deliberative power, when this has been conferred upon it by the Roman Pontiff; to whom it falls, in such a case, to ratify the decisions of the Synod’⁸. From that moment, albeit with this limited configuration, a form of synodality other than the ecumenical council re-emerged within the Catholic Church⁹, and the era of Synods began that has characterised the post-conciliar Church. Since then, 16 Ordinary General Assemblies, 3 Extraordinary General Assemblies and 10 Special Assemblies have been held. The trajectory of these assemblies, which, from an initial enthusiasm, have experienced a gradual waning of enthusiasm, has shown how true was the observation of Paul VI, who said that ‘this Synod, like every human institution, may be further perfected over time’¹⁰.

It is on this refinement that attention must be focused if one wishes to understand the role of the local Churches in the exercise of ecclesial synodality. Synods celebrated in accordance with the provisions of *Apostolica Sollicitudo*, incorporated into the Code of Canon Law¹¹, are understood within the framework of Chapter III of *Lumen Gentium*. The exercise of synodality consists in the participation of the Bishops in the

⁷ Paul VI, *Motu proprio Apostolica Sollicitudo* (15 September 1965), in AAS 57 (1965), 776.

⁸ Paul VI, *Motu proprio Apostolica Sollicitudo* (15 September 1965), in AAS 57 (1965), 777.

⁹ In the documents of the Second Vatican Council, the formula *Sancta Synodus* is used several times to refer to the conciliar assembly, particularly in the case of passages of significance from the point of view of the doctrine expressed or the authority manifested. For the occurrences, see X. Ochoa, *Index Verborum cum documentis Concilii Vaticani II*, Institutum Iuridicum Claretianum, Rome 1967, 484–485.

¹⁰ Paul VI, *Motu proprio Apostolica Sollicitudo* (15 September 1965), in AAS 57 (1965), 776.

¹¹ See Code of Canon Law, Book II, Part II, Chapter II: The Synod of Bishops, canons 342–348.

care of the whole Church, a prerogative which, until the Council, was exclusively reserved to the Pope by virtue of *his plenitudo potestatis*. For Paul VI, the practical possibility of extending participation in the care of the whole Church to the body of bishops rested on the recognition of the Episcopal Conferences as subjects of at least partial collegiality.

The idea that no intermediary body should stand between the Pope's authority over the universal Church and that of the Bishop in the local Church – a principle affirmed at the Extraordinary Synod of 1969 ⁽¹²⁾ – has led to a weakening not only of the Episcopal Conferences, but also of the Synod of Bishops, which has been deprived of the capacity to represent the Catholic episcopate, as proposed in **Apostolica Sollicitudo**. The consequence has been the inability of the Synods to mark a decisive turning point on the issues addressed from time to time: with rare exceptions, the Synods and, consequently, the post-synodal apostolic exhortations have not had a lasting impact on the life of the Church¹³.

b. The 'refinement' of the Synod: from event to process

When Pope Francis promulgated *Evangelii Gaudium*, there were those who saw in the decision not to describe an apostolic exhortation that took up the themes of the XIII Ordinary General Assembly¹⁴ as 'post-synodal' an announcement that the era of Synods was coming to an end. This was true of the assemblies of bishops conceived as limited events, not of the Synod as such: "From the very beginning of my ministry, I have sought to promote the Synod, which constitutes one of the most precious legacies of the last Council"¹⁵. The statement is taken from the address delivered on 17 October 2015, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Synod of the Bishops, on the sidelines of the XIV

¹² See Synod of Bishops, Report on the Ecumenical Council from a doctrinal perspective (13 October 1969), in *Enchiridion of the Synods*, 1, 636–665.

¹³ One exception is the Extraordinary Synod of 1985, held twenty years after the Council, which was not, however, followed by a post-synodal exhortation. Notable among the exhortations are *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975: the exhortation is not classified as post-synodal), *Christifideles Laici* (1988), *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (1992) and *Vita Consecrata* (1996).

¹⁴ Synod of Bishops, XIII Ordinary General Assembly on the New Evangelisation for the Transmission of the Christian Faith (October 2012).

¹⁵ Francis, Commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Synod of Bishops (15 October 2015), in AAS 107(2015), 1139.

Ordinary General Assembly, which had as its theme “The vocation and mission of the family in the Church and in the contemporary world”.

The novelty was already evident in the decision to first convene an Extraordinary Assembly on the same theme – ‘Pastoral Challenges to the Family in the Context of Evangelisation’ – which effectively transformed the two assemblies into a process. Added to this was the decision to replace the *Lineamenta* prepared by experts with a questionnaire to be submitted to families as well, because “it would not have been possible to speak of the family without consulting families, listening to their joys and hopes, their sorrows and anxieties”¹⁶. In a climate marked by numerous episodes of opposition and open dissent, the Pope offered an interpretation of synodality that effectively altered the very structure of the Synod of Bishops.

The ‘refinement’ of the institution he proposed was based on a fuller reception of the Second Vatican Council. Envisioning the Synod of Bishops as ‘the focal point of a dynamic of listening carried out at every level of the Church’, capable of involving all participants in ecclesial life, the Pope outlined the face of the synodal Church as a ‘Church of listening’: “It is a mutual listening, in which everyone has something to learn. The faithful, the College of Bishops, the Bishop of Rome: each listening to the others; and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the ‘Spirit of truth’ (Jn 14:17), to know what He ‘says to the Churches’ (Rev 2:7)”¹⁷. “The synodal journey begins by listening to the People”; “it continues by listening to the Pastors”; it culminates in listening to the Bishop of Rome.” Conceived as a process, the Synod of Bishops becomes “the most evident manifestation of a dynamic of communion that inspires all ecclesial decisions”, which are formed at the various levels of the exercise of synodality: in the particular Churches, in the intermediate bodies of collegiality (ecclesiastical provinces and regions, particular councils and episcopal conferences) and at the level of the universal Church, where the Synod “becomes an expression of *episcopal collegiality* within a wholly synodal Church”¹⁸.

¹⁶ Francis, Commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Synod of Bishops, in AAS 107(2015), 1140.

¹⁷ Francis, Commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Synod of Bishops, in AAS 107 (2015), 1141.

¹⁸ Francis, Commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Synod of Bishops, in AAS 107 (2015), 1143.

The vision outlined here is one in which the whole Church and everyone within the Church participates in an exercise of synodality that is clearly process-oriented. Every subject participates in the synodal process according to their specific role: the People of God, finally recognised as active participants, insofar as they share in the prophetic office of Christ (cf. LG 12); the Pastors of the Church, described as ‘authentic guardians, interpreters and witnesses of the faith of the whole Church’; the Bishop of Rome, who “does not stand alone above the Church; but within it as a baptised person among the baptised, and within the College of Bishops as a bishop among bishops, called at the same time – as Successor of the Apostle Peter – to guide the Church of Rome, which presides in love over all the Churches” (19).

The Apostolic Constitution *Episcopalis Communio* sought to translate this ecclesiological framework into a norm, transforming the Synod of Bishops from a limited event into an assembly of Bishops with a process divided into phases: preparatory, assembly, and implementation²⁰. To make this body “a suitable channel for the evangelisation of today’s world”²¹, the narrow path indicated by *Episcopalis Communio* is the conversion of the Bishop, who is “both teacher and disciple”, and who must teach but also listen to the people entrusted to him. Starting from this listening, ‘the Synod of Bishops too must increasingly become a privileged instrument for listening to the People of God’:

Although in its composition it is essentially an episcopal body, the Synod does not exist in isolation from the rest of the faithful. On the contrary, it is an instrument suited to giving voice to the entire People of God precisely through the Bishops, whom God has established as ‘authentic guardians, interpreters and witnesses of the faith of the whole Church’, proving itself, from Assembly to Assembly, an eloquent expression of synodality as ‘a constitutive dimension of the Church’²².

¹⁹ Francis, Commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Synod of Bishops, in AAS 107 (2015), 1141.

²⁰ Francis, Apostolic Constitution *Episcopalis Communio* on the Synod of Bishops (15 September 2018), art. 4, 1, in AAS 110 (2018), 1369.

²¹ Francis, *Episcopalis Communio*, doctrinal preamble, no. 1, in AAS 110 (2018), 1360, citing *EG* 27.

²² Francis, *Episcopalis Communio*, doctrinal preamble, no. 6, in AAS 110 (2018), 1363.

c. Beyond *Episcopalis Communio*: the synodal process

The Apostolic Constitution involves both the People of God and the particular Churches in the synodal process: having clarified that ‘the purpose of the preparatory phase is to consult the People of God on the theme of the Synod Assembly’ (Art. 5.2), the text specifies that “the consultation of the People of God takes place in the particular Churches” (Art. 6.1), evidently because it is there that the People of God lives in relationship with the Bishop as the principle of unity of his Church (cf. LG 23). The constitution stipulates that ‘in each particular Church, the Bishops shall carry out the consultation of the People of God by making use of the participatory bodies provided for by law, without excluding any other method they deem appropriate’ (Art. 6.1).

Each Church compiles a contribution from the consultation of the People of God, which the Bishop sends to the Episcopal Conference, which is responsible for drawing up a summary to be submitted to the General Secretariat of the Synod (Art. 7.1)²³. It is not specified how the Secretariat is to use this vast amount of material: it is likely that the rule of proceeding ‘in accordance with particular law’ (Art. 15.1), which

²³ The article confines itself to determining the method of transmission, without characterising the value of the diocesan contributions as the result of consultation with the People of God, nor the synthesis produced by the Episcopal Conference as the final outcome of the discernment of the Bishops gathered in assembly. This lack of theological clarification may stem from the fact that this is a regulatory text, intended to govern the synodal process. It would have been possible to specify these aspects in the theological preamble, where, however, there are no direct references to the discernment function of the Episcopal Conferences, which appear as an intermediate body for the transmission of diocesan contributions, and where the consultation of the People of God cannot be understood as a manifestation of *the sensus fidei*, because it does not have the People of God as such as its subject. Indeed, the constitution states: ‘The Bishops, following the guidelines of the General Secretariat of the Synod, submit the questions to be dealt with in the Synodal Assembly to the Priests, Deacons and lay faithful of their Churches, both individually and in groups, without neglecting the valuable contribution that may come from men and women in consecrated life’ (EC 7). Clearly, this is a collection of subjects who do not constitute the People of God and do not express the *consensus fidelium*, but rather a collection of opinions. Moreover, the consultation leads directly to the Assembly, without any further mediation: “The consultation of the faithful is followed, during the celebration of each Synodal Assembly, by discernment on the part of the Pastors specially designated...” (EC 7). This alone suffices to justify the additions to the process made during the first phase of the synodal process, with discernment carried out by the Episcopal Conferences and the Continental Assemblies, prior to drafting *the Instrumentum laboris* for the first session of the Assembly.

provided for the drafting of an *instrumentum laboris*, applies to this stage of the synodal process. After the second phase, which concludes with the drafting of the final document to be submitted to the Pope, the local Churches come back into play for the implementation phase, during which ‘the diocesan or eparchial Bishops shall ensure the reception and implementation of the conclusions of the Synod Assembly approved by the Roman Pontiff, with the assistance of the participatory bodies provided for by law’ (Art. 19.1).

In the context of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly – ‘Towards a Synodal Church: communion, participation, mission’ – the regulations proposed by *Episcopalis Communio* revealed many limitations, due not so much to the transformation of the Synod from an event into a process, but to the ecclesiological framework of the constitution. Whilst it is the People of God in the particular Churches who are to be consulted (Art. 6.1), but this is extended to religious families (Art. 6.2) and movements (Art. 6.3) and even to the Dicasteries of the Roman Curia (Art. 6.4), with the possibility for the General Secretariat of the Synod to ‘identify other forms of consultation with the People of God’ (Art. 6.5), it is clear that the ecclesiological framework of reference is that of the universal Church.

But it is equally clear that consulting the People of God within particular Churches is not on the same level as consulting religious families and movements. If it were, the Synod Secretariat could have – and could in future – initiated consultation with the People of God within particular Churches without going through the Bishops, who are the principle of unity within their Churches. The fact that the local Ordinaries must be asked to initiate consultation within their Church responds to a fundamental principle of Christian life: there is no baptised person who does not belong to a Church. This implies that consultation of the People of God in particular Churches is consultation of all the baptised, without exception as to membership or state of life, ministry or any other difference that may exist within the ecclesial body. By virtue of this principle, the Synod Secretariat itself requested that the consultation of the People of God take place entirely within the particular Churches: to separate the People of God into groups of affiliation would mean no longer conceiving of them as such, but as a sum of distinct individuals. This would have had the consequence of depriving it of its capacity as a subject of *the sensus fidei*: it is the People of God (that is, the Church) that participates in the prophetic function of Christ, not the sum of the baptised

(cf. LG 12). If this were the case, the contributions would be reduced to a mere sum of opinions.

The first phase of the Synod demonstrated the fruitfulness of this insight, lending strength and depth to every stage of the synodal process. Through consultation with the People of God in the individual Churches, alongside the People of God—recognised as the subject of the synodal process—the Bishop was also recognised as the principle of unity of *the portio Populi Dei* entrusted to him: it is his responsibility to initiate consultation with the People of God, and it fell to him to validate the diocesan contribution to be sent to the Episcopal Conference; through him, his Church, which participates in the communion among the Churches, has been recognised, and thus the Church has been recognised as a communion of Churches. Here, every subject plays its part in a dynamic of fruitful circularity: the Bishop of Rome, the principle of unity of the Church, to whom it falls to call the Church to synodal action, to initiate the synodal process, to accompany it, and to bring it to a close; the People of God, as the subject of the prophetic function, exercised through consultation within the local Churches; the Bishops, to whom it falls to convene, accompany and conclude the consultation of the People of God of whom they are shepherds; the individual Churches, which are represented by their own Bishop at the various levels of ecclesial *communion*, where they are called to exercise a collegial function of discernment. The conclusion is inevitable: the model of the Church that makes the synodal process possible is that of *the communio Ecclesiarum*, by virtue of which every Church is always involved in the entire process as an active participant, through the logic of restitution and²⁴ .

²⁴ Listening to what the Spirit says to the Church is ensured by the mutual listening of those involved in the synodal process: the People of God, as participants in the prophetic office of Christ (cf. LG 12); the Bishops, as the principle and foundation of unity in their Churches (cf. LG 23), to whom the function of pastoral discernment at the various levels of ecclesial *communion* is entrusted. If the synodal process were to unfold in a linear fashion, the prophetic function would be exhausted in the first stage of the first phase (the consultation of the People of God), giving way to the various moments of ecclesial discernment within the Episcopal Conferences, the Continental Assemblies and the General Assembly. The principle governing the synodal process, however, in keeping with the Church as *a communio Ecclesiarum*, is that of restitution: the outcome of each level of discernment, expressed in the documents of the synodal process, has always been returned to the People of God as the bearers of the prophetic function, thereby restarting, in a virtuous cycle, the dynamic of prophecy and discernment. Through the dynamic of restitution, practised in the case of *the Document for the Continental Phase*, the *Summary*

2. The *Final Document* of the Synod

The *Final Document* of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly marks the culmination of the synodal process, which, during the first two phases of the Synod, involved the whole Church and everyone within the Church: the People of God, through the consultation within the particular Churches as recorded in the diocesan contributions; every Bishop, as the principle of unity within his Church, who initiated, accompanied and concluded the consultation of the People entrusted to him; the Bishops gathered in the Episcopal Conferences, who were asked to draw up a synthesis of the diocesan contributions as the fruit of pastoral discernment; the Continental Assemblies, which reflected on *the Document for the Continental Phase*; the Assembly, which in two separate sessions discussed a first and a second *Instrumentum laboris*. The listening process in the assembly hall was recorded in *the Summary Report* at the conclusion of the first session and in *the Final Document* at the conclusion of the second;

The Pope's decision to approve it as the fruit of ecclesial discernment matured throughout the synodal process, and to return it to the Churches, confers great value upon the *Final Document*, not only because this recognition makes it part of the Pope's ordinary magisterium²⁵, but because 'it contains guidelines which, in the light of its fundamental orientations, can already be implemented in the local Churches and in groupings of Churches, taking into account the different contexts, what has already been done and what remains to be done to better learn and develop the style proper to the missionary synodal Church'²⁶.

a. The ecclesiology of *the Final Document*

It is therefore worth re-reading the *Final Document*, especially in regard to the local Church and its participation in the synodal process.

Report following the first session of the Assembly, and the *Final Document* at the conclusion of the second session, the local Churches and their Bishops have always been participants in the synodal process.

²⁵ 'Recognising the value of the synodal journey undertaken,' said the Pope, 'I now entrust to the Church all the guidelines contained in *the Final Document*, as a restitution of what has matured over the course of these years, through listening and discernment, and as an authoritative guide for her life and mission'; and he added that, albeit with the necessary adjustments, the *Document* commits "the Churches, from this moment onwards, to make choices consistent with what is indicated therein"

²⁶ Francis, Accompanying Note to *the Final Document* of the Synod (24 November 2024).

The first aspect to clarify concerns the ecclesiology of *the Final Document*. Its foundations are found in Part I: ‘The Heart of Synodality’, where the call to conversion, expressed in the subtitle, is not merely or primarily personal, but ecclesial. In the statement that ‘the Church exists to bear witness to the world of the decisive event of history: the resurrection of Jesus’ (FD 14), the invitation to be a ‘Church that goes forth’ (EG 46) resounds. Yet the document does not merely repeat Francis’s formulations on the Church, not even that of the synodal Church as a ‘Church of listening’, upon which the participation of all in the synodal process was founded: “The faithful, the College of Bishops, the Bishop of Rome: each listening to the others; and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the ‘Spirit of truth’ (Jn 14:17), to know what He ‘says to the Churches’ (Rev 2:7)”²⁷ .

More fundamentally, the *Final Document* offers a hermeneutic of conciliar ecclesiology, which is already evident in the title of the most ecclesiological section: “The Church, People of God, Sacrament of Unity”. The perspective adopted by the text is that of the first two chapters of *Lumen Gentium*, on the Church as mystery (I) and as the People of God (II). The wording of the title shows, however, that the relationship has been reversed: the focus is not first on the subject—the Church—from the perspective of mystery and then as a historical subject, but rather the Church is identified with the People of God as a historical subject, before specifying that this Church—the People of God—is a sacrament of unity. It could not be otherwise when the entire discourse on the Church is grounded in ‘Baptism in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit’: if ‘the identity of the People of God springs from Baptism’, it is ‘from Baptism... that the synodal missionary Church is born’ (DF 15).

In line with this statement, the *Final Document* echoes LG 9: ‘It pleased God to sanctify and save men not in isolation and without any bond between them, but he wished to form them into a People who would recognise him in truth and serve him in holiness’: here lies the idea of the synodal Church as the ‘People of God journeying towards the Kingdom’ (Final Document 16), which Pope Francis expressed with the iconic phrase ‘walking together’. The fact of also citing the images of the Church as the Body of Christ and the Temple of the Holy Spirit in no way detracts

²⁷ Francis, Commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Synod of Bishops, in AAS 107 (2015), 1140.

from the identification of the Church with the People of God, inasmuch as “it is never merely the sum of the baptised, but the communal and historical subject of synodality and mission, still journeying through time and already in communion with the Church in heaven” (DF 17)²⁸.

The identification of the Church with the People of God marks the definitive overcoming of an ideological vision of the People of God which, in the immediate post-conciliar period, had set a ‘Church from below’ against a ‘Church from above’, charism against institution, the People of God against the hierarchy. To avoid any drift in this direction, the *Final Document* further clarifies this identification in a paragraph where every term is carefully weighed: ‘In the holy People of God, which is the Church, the communion of the Faithful (*communio Fidelium*) is at the same time the communion of the Churches (*communio Ecclesiarum*), which is manifested in the communion of the Bishops (*communio Episcoporum*), by virtue of the ancient principle that “the Bishop is in the Church and the Church is in the Bishop” (St Cyprian, *Epistle* 66,8)’ (DF 18). The truth of this description is confirmed by the complementary perspective of the Petrine primacy: ‘To serve this manifold communion, the Lord has placed the Apostle Peter (cf. Mt 16:18) and his successors. By virtue of the Petrine ministry, the Bishop of Rome is ‘the perpetual and visible source and foundation’ of the Church’s unity (cf. LG 23)’ (DF 18).

In summary, it can be said that, for the *Final Document*, the Church is the People of God in the form of *the communio Ecclesiarum*. This is not an abstract statement, but the outcome matured through the experience of the synodal process, founded on the ecclesiological principle of the Church as the ‘body of the Churches’, ‘in which and from which the one and only Catholic Church exists’ (LG 23). Far from calling into question the universal dimension of the Church, this vision shows how this “People of God, gathered from every tribe, language, people and nation, living in

²⁸ The text goes on to bring together, within a unified framework, ecclesiological elements that have emerged in the other chapters of **Lumen Gentium** and in the other documents of the Council: ‘In the various contexts in which the individual Churches are rooted, the People of God proclaims the Good News of salvation; living in the world and for the world, it walks alongside all the peoples of the earth, engages in dialogue with their religions and cultures, recognising in them the seeds of the Word, and advancing towards the Kingdom. Incorporated into this People through faith and baptism, we are supported and accompanied by the Virgin Mary, ‘a sign of sure hope and consolation’ (LG 68), by the Apostles, by those who bore witness to their faith even unto death, and by the saints of every age and every place’ (DF 17).

diverse contexts and cultures” (DF 17), is the Church, of which it can and must be said that it is a “sacrament of unity”, “the seed and beginning of the Kingdom” (LG 5). As the ‘messianic People’ (LG 9), *‘the people gathered together in the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit’* (LG 4), the Church—the People of God—is in Christ a sacrament, that is, a sign and instrument of intimate union with God and of the unity of the human race’ (LG 1) and, as a sign of this saving unity, is sent out to the whole world (cf. LG 9).

b. Attention to the local Church and its relationships

Already in Part I of *the Final Document*, which lays down the foundations of the synodal Church, the profile of the Church as a communion of Churches emerges. Emphasising ‘unity as harmony’, which leads us to conceive of the Church ‘as a space where relationships can flourish’ (DF 34), it is stated that ‘the synodal process has also highlighted the spiritual heritage of the local Churches, in and through which the Catholic Church exists, and the need to articulate their experiences. By virtue of catholicity, ‘the individual parts offer their gifts to the other [parts] and to the whole Church, so that the whole and the individual parts may benefit from mutual communication and from striving in unity towards fullness’ (LG 13)” (DF 37).

The text attempts here to set out, though unfortunately without citing them, the two principles found in the conciliar documents that underpin the idea of the Church as *a communio Ecclesiarum*: LG 23, according to which the Church exists in and through the particular Churches; and LG 13, which sets out the principle of the exchange of gifts, applied by the Council to the diversity of functions, conditions or states of life, and to communion between the Churches. The *Final Document* refers to this third case, proposing the description of the ‘whole Church’ – it would have sufficed to say ‘Church’²⁹ – as ‘a plurality of peoples and languages, of Churches with their particular rites, disciplines and theological and spiritual heritage, of vocations, charisms and ministries at the service of the common good’ (DF 38). This perspective explains why “the appreciation of contexts, cultures and diversities, and of the relationships

²⁹ The adjective “entire” stands for *tota*, or *universa*, and is intended to express the Church as a communion of Churches without using the formula “universal Church”, which is considered unsuitable for expressing the historical reality of Churches in communion with one another.

between them, is key to growing as a synodal missionary Church and moving, under the impetus of the Holy Spirit, towards the visible unity of Christians” (DF 40).

If these are the foundations, the most direct reference to the local Churches is found in Part II: ‘In the boat, together. The conversion of relationships’. Originally, the structure of *the Final Document* was intended to set out in sequence the distinct levels of ecclesial communion – the local Church, groupings of Churches, the universal Church – with the service of unity of the Bishop of Rome. The decision to focus instead on conversion – of relationships, processes, and bonds – led to a breaking down of this sequence, weakening the distinction between the levels and thus the circularity of the synodal process. The theme of the local Church remains central, however, even if it emerges indirectly, starting from the conversion of relationships – ‘with the Lord, between men and women, in families, in communities, among all Christians, among social groups, between religions, with creation’ (DF 50) – “in the diversity of contexts in which His disciples live and carry out the Church’s mission” (DF 53).

The section on ‘charisms, vocations and ministries for mission’ (nos. 57–67) describes the richness of the gifts that the Spirit brings forth in the Church. There is no explicit reference here to the local Churches, because the discussion is framed by the ‘single baptismal call to holiness and mission: the Spirit distributes his gifts to all in the Church as he wills (cf. 1 Cor 12:7, 11). The ecclesial dimension is expressed through a reference to the ‘Christian community’, without further specification: within it, ‘all the baptised are enriched with gifts to be shared, each according to their own vocation and state of life’, ‘the various ecclesial vocations are manifold and varied expressions of the one baptismal call to holiness and mission’ (DF 57).

Of course, the fact that ‘every baptised person responds to the demands of mission in the contexts in which they live and work’ (DF 58) inevitably points to the Church to which they belong, and thus to the local Churches. But the text does not explore this dimension in depth until – and it could not be otherwise – it introduces the theme of the ‘ordained ministry in the service of harmony’ (nos. 68–74). After recalling the Council’s decision to restore the ordained ministry to its ancient form of Bishops, Priests and Deacons (cf. LG 28), the *Final Document* first presents ‘the ministry of the Bishop’, immediately stating that his task ‘is

to preside over a local Church, as a principle of unity within it and a bond of communion with all the Churches’ (DF 69).

The identity of the Bishop is understood “within the fabric of sacramental relationships with Christ and with the ‘portion of the People of God’ (CD 11) entrusted to him and which he is called to serve in the name of Christ the Good Shepherd”, “working within the sacramental bond with Priests and Deacons, who share with him responsibility for ministerial service in the local Church” (DF 69). The model of the Church proposed by the text is clearly that of *the communio Ecclesiarum*. This is indirectly confirmed by the reference to titular bishops, on whom the Assembly asks for further reflection, because their role overshadows “the constitutive relationship of the Bishop with the local Church” (DF 70). This relationship is evident in the bond that unites the Bishop, Priests and Deacons, whom the Assembly invites to ‘rediscover co-responsibility in the exercise of ministry, which also requires collaboration with the other members of the People of God’ (DF 74).

c. The local Church in the *communio Ecclesiarum*

Although the discourse is framed in general terms, the proper setting for ecclesial relationships – and therefore for their renewal – is first and foremost the local Church. This is required by the choice to frame the entire discourse on relationships starting from baptism: to view the Church from the perspective of the totality of the baptised; to emphasise the richness of the charisms, vocations and ministries that the Spirit stirs up in the Church; insist on the participation of all in ecclesial life, which requires situating oneself where the People of God lives and journeys, who are never an undifferentiated mass, but ‘*the holy people gathered and organised under the bishops*’ (SC 26)³⁰. If every particular Church is ‘a *portion of the People of God* entrusted to the pastoral care of the Bishop assisted by his presbyterate’ (CD 11), it is ‘in and from the particular Churches [that] the one and only Catholic Church exists’ (LG 23), because in every Church ‘the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church of Christ is present and active’ (CD 11).

Many fear that conceiving of the Church as a communion of Churches undermines its unity, with the risk of also weakening the exercise of the Petrine primacy. It was this concern that motivated and underpinned the

³⁰ The Council quotes here Cyprian of Carthage, *De catholicae Ecclesiae unitate*, 7.

ecclesiology of communion, according to which the Church can never be the sum of the particular Churches, or their federation: ‘it is not the result of their communion, but, in its essential mystery, is a reality *ontologically* and *temporally* prior to every *single* particular Church’³¹. But when we recognise that ‘the formula of the Second Vatican Council: *The Church in and from the Churches (Ecclesia in et ex Ecclesiis)*, is inseparable from this other: *The Churches in and from the Church (Ecclesiae in et ex Ecclesia)*’³², the link between them is so close that the universal and the particular can never be separated, but must be conceived in a necessary correlation.

This means that starting from one aspect does not exclude, but always implies the other. It also means that it is possible to construct ecclesiology starting from one aspect or the other: if from the universal Church, one must necessarily conclude with the particular Churches; if from the particular Churches, one cannot exclude the universal dimension of the Church. But the choice is not insignificant, as if changing the order of the factors did not alter the result. The treatise *De Ecclesia*, framed from the perspective of *the universalis Ecclesia*, in fact focused on the prerogatives of the Pope, binding every other aspect of ecclesial life to the exercise of primacy within the framework of a pyramidal ecclesiology. This was the extreme outcome of a conception of the Church that viewed relationships in hierarchical terms, starting from differences – of status, function, and ultimately of power – rather than the equality of the Church’s members.

The Council’s ‘Copernican revolution’ consisted above all in the choice to conceive of the Church starting from the equal dignity of all the baptised before the differences within the ecclesial body. The inclusion in *Lumen Gentium* of the chapter on the People of God before that on the hierarchy of the Church led to the collapse of the pyramid: there is no greater title of belonging to the Church than being children of God, children in the Son through the gift of the Holy Spirit. The consequences of this approach can be seen in the restoration of the common priesthood as the central theme of the chapter on the People of God, which leads to a rethinking of the proper function of the ministerial priesthood: if ‘the common priesthood and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood, whilst

³¹ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Letter *Communiois Notio*, in AAS 85(1993), 848.

³² Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Letter *Communiois Notio*, in AAS 85(1993), 848.

differing in essence and not merely in degree, are nevertheless ordered to one another, because both, each in its own way, share in the priesthood of Christ' (LG 10), the ministerial priesthood ceases to be a function of power over the People of God, and returns to being a function in the service of the People of God.

In this light, both the Petrine ministry and the episcopal ministry are seen in a new light. Part IV of *the Final Document* emphasises how 'synodality articulates in a symphonic manner the communal ("all"), collegial ("some") and personal ("one") dimensions of the individual Churches and of the whole Church. In this perspective, the Petrine ministry of the Pope is inherent in the synodal dynamic, just as the communal aspect, which includes the whole People of God, and the collegial dimension of the episcopal ministry" (FD 130)³³. The Synod does nothing other than make explicit the principle of the catholicity of the People of God, according to which 'within ecclesial communion, particular Churches legitimately exist, each enjoying its own traditions, without prejudice to the primacy of the See of Peter, which presides over the universal communion of charity, guarantees legitimate diversity and, at the same time, ensures that the particular not only does not harm unity, but rather serves it' (LG 13). On closer inspection, the function of the Petrine ministry is best understood starting from the conception of the Church as *communio Ecclesiarum*: without the primacy as the principle of the visible unity of the Church, the *Catholica* would not be the *communio*, but the sum of the Churches or their result.

3. Synodality and the local Church

In a Church understood as a communion of Churches, the ministry of the Bishop also takes on new significance, in that he is the 'visible principle and foundation of unity in his particular Church', which he represents at the various levels of ecclesial communion: within groupings of Churches, as a member by right of the Episcopal Conference; at the level of the universal Church, as a member of the College which, being composed of many, expresses the diversity and universality of the People of God; being gathered under a single head, it expresses the unity of Christ's flock" (LG 22).

³³ The *Final Document* cites here the document of the International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (2018), n. 64.

The *Final Document* highlights the fruitfulness of the Petrine ministry and the episcopal ministry within a Church as *a communio Ecclesiarum*. As the principle of the Church's unity, the Bishop of Rome has the task of calling the Church to synodal action, initiating it, accompanying it, concluding it, and suspending it if necessary. By virtue of this decision, 'the Church of God is convened in Synod' (³⁴): that is, all the Churches; the entire People of God living within the Churches; all the Bishops, who in their Churches are the principle of unity of the People of God. The stages of the synodal process have shown how these subjects truly fulfil their specific role, making possible a joint exercise of synodality, collegiality and primacy³⁵.

a. The local Church in the synodal process

To outline the synodal profile of a local Church – in this case the Church of Valencia – and to see how it can exercise synodality, it is worth reviewing the participation of each local Church in the synodal process currently underway. The particular Churches are always involved in the three phases that make up the process. Seeing how each Church is called to participate in the Synod already means understanding how it can exercise synodality and develop a synodal form and style.

The importance of the local Churches is already evident from the very first act of the synodal process. The XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops officially began on 9 October 2021, with the Pope's opening address in the Synod Hall and the Eucharistic celebration the following day in St Peter's. Few have highlighted the opening of the synodal process within individual Churches, which the General Secretariat of the Synod requested of every bishop for the following Sunday. The request was a recognition that there is no dual level of ecclesial life without mutual interaction: the universal level, which depends directly on the Bishop of Rome, who may decide on everything at his discretion, as the 'visible and perpetual principle and foundation of the unity of all bishops and of all the faithful'³⁶; the local level, where the

³⁴ Synod of Bishops, XVI Ordinary General Assembly, *Preparatory Document*, 1.

³⁵ I would refer the reader to D. Vitali, 'Synodality, collegiality, primacy: a synodal re-interpretation', in *Mater Clementissima*, 2024, no. 9, 213–262.

³⁶ Here *LG 23* takes up, with a slight modification (Bishops instead of Priests), the formula of the prologue to *Pastor Aeternus*: First Vatican Council, *Constitutio prima de Ecclesia Pastor Aeternus*, prologue, in DH 3051.

Bishop, without prejudice to the Pope's prerogatives, may act as he wishes within the confines of his diocese, without any interference.

In a Church as a communion of Churches, governed by the principle of 'mutual interiority', no one – not even the Pope – can initiate a synodal process in a local Church without or against its Bishop. This is because the Bishop is 'the principle of unity' of the *portio Populi Dei* entrusted to him: he is not a delegate of the Pope, but is the vicar and ambassador of Christ, with his own ordinary and immediate authority over the Church entrusted to him (cf. LG 27). It was his alone to convene the People of God, of whom he is the shepherd, in a Synod: in the case of the synodal process, he did so not because he decided independently to initiate a synodal consultation within his Church, but as a participant in *the communio hierarchica*, in the shared responsibility to act for the edification of the whole Church, *cum et sub Petro*.

Far from being a purely formal act, the diocesan opening has conferred extraordinary ecclesial significance upon the consultation of the People of God. Paradoxically, this is evident from the opposite choice: those bishops who refused to initiate the synodal process in their Church – whatever their reasons may have been – have effectively excluded it from *the communio Ecclesiarum*; they deprived them of the opportunity to be an active voice in the synodal process; they impoverished them by removing them from that exchange of gifts which a synodal process can always kindle. Moreover, if the purpose of the first phase of the Synod is to listen to the People of God in the particular Churches, insofar as they share in the prophetic function of Christ (cf. LG 12), the Bishop's failure to convene the Synod means that the *portion of the People of God* entrusted to him is prevented from fulfilling its function and participates in the synodal process merely as a collection of the baptised. In which case, however, the result of this listening is not an expression of *the sensus fidei*, but a collection of opinions from individuals or groups.

On the positive side, the participation of every Church in the synodal process ensures that consultation of the People of God in each Church is effectively a listening to the entirety of the baptised, and therefore a genuine manifestation of *the sensus omnium fidelium*. If, on the contrary, many have dismissed the contributions of the local Churches as an expression of public opinion, perhaps conveyed and influenced by the media, it is because they have not clearly grasped the idea that a local Church is truly a subject of *the sensus fidei*, because it is truly the Church,

‘a portion of the People of God in which the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church of Christ is present and active’ (CD 11). Listening to the holy People of God in the particular Churches therefore means listening to the whole Church, to the whole People of God who are the subject of Christ’s prophetic office. Of course, its voice will not be a monody, but a symphony of voices coming from the Churches, with all the variety of places and languages in which the Gospel resounds; it is by listening to these voices that it becomes possible to discern ‘what the Spirit says to the Church’.

If we recall that the entire synodal process began – and depended – on this first act of listening, we can understand the importance of the local Churches. This importance is confirmed by the fact that the results of every subsequent act of discernment at the various levels of ecclesial *communion* – in the Episcopal Conferences, in the Continental Assemblies, in the two sessions of the Ordinary General Assembly – have always been returned to the local Churches, where the process began.

b. Every local Church is inherently synodal

Just how decisive the role of the local Churches is in the synodal process can be understood from the third phase of the Synod, which consists in the reception and implementation of *the Final Document* as the fruit of the ecclesial discernment that has matured throughout the first two phases of the process. Every Church is called to experience and verify whether and to what extent the Synod’s proposals constitute a good to be received and implemented in its life. If, as Thomas Aquinas said, ‘the act of faith does not consist in a formula, but in reality itself’³⁷, it goes without saying that synodal discernment, as an act of listening to the Spirit, cannot be said to be concluded with the *Final Document*, but rather with the salutary effects that this may produce on the ecclesial body, bringing about a conversion of relationships, processes and bonds, with a view to a clearer witness to the Gospel.

Thus, the synodal process as a whole, and the third phase in particular, challenge every Church to develop a synodal form and style. To do so, there is no need to invent new structures or create new bodies: the only body that can serve this purpose is *the diocesan synodal team*, provided

³⁷ “*Actus fidei non terminatur ad enuntiabile sed ad rem*”: *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 1, a. 2, ad 2.

that it genuinely practises a participatory style. If this were the case, synodal practice would suffer – as has unfortunately happened in many local Churches during the first phase of the synodal process – a sort of ‘heterogenesis of ends’: reducing synodality to a space of power reserved for the few.

In reality, synodality is more a matter of mindset than of structures. It is about thinking differently about the life of the Church, particularly its decision-making processes: ‘Do not quench the Holy Spirit. Do not despise prophecies. Test everything; hold on to what is good’ (1 Thess 5:19–21). This practice of discernment was customary in the early communities and in the Churches of the first centuries, which practised *conspiratio* as a criterion for discerning the truth: a *conspiratio* that also underlies the dogmatic definitions of the Immaculate Conception (8 December 1854) and the Assumption of Mary into heaven (1 November 1950)³⁸.

The recovery of synodality as a constitutive dimension of the Church depends on overcoming the pneumatological *deficit* in Catholic ecclesiology: an ecclesiology built upon the relationship between the invisible Head of the Church and his Vicar on earth, originally established by Christ himself, could only result in a hierarchical structure, governed by the relationship of authority and obedience, where the freedom of the Spirit could even constitute a threat. Where it is reaffirmed that ‘the Spirit guides the Church into all truth (cf. Jn 16:13), unifies her in communion and service, builds her up and directs her through the various hierarchical and charismatic gifts, and enriches her with his fruits (cf. Eph 4:11–12; 1 Cor 12:4; Gal 5:22)’ (LG 4), it follows that the Church’s first act is to listen to the Holy Spirit.

This applies not only in the case of a synodal process, but always. If anything, the synodal process has shown that it is possible to practise synodality in the local Church, and has demonstrated that, if practised

³⁸ “In the first millennium, ‘walking together’, that is, practising synodality, was the customary way of proceeding for the Church understood as the ‘People gathered by the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit’. To those who divided the ecclesial body, the Fathers of the Church set against them the communion of the Churches scattered throughout the world, which St Augustine described as ‘*concordissima fidei conspiratio*’, that is, the agreement in faith of all the Baptised. [...] Even in the second millennium, when the Church placed greater emphasis on the hierarchical function, this way of proceeding did not cease’: Synod of Bishops, XVI Ordinary General Assembly, *Preparatory Document*, no. 11.

correctly, it guarantees abundant fruits of growth in communion, participation and mission. On the other hand, synodality is not an entirely new development in the post-conciliar journey of the Church. The era of participatory bodies must be regarded as a genuine synodal season, which unfortunately resulted in a weak practice of ecclesial discernment due to the decision to defend, as a matter of principle, the functions of authority, both at the level of the universal Church and of the local Churches. In the universal Church, the configuration of the Synod of Bishops as a consultative body has not yet been resolved in the direction of an effective exercise of collegiality. In the local Churches, too, the various Councils are of an advisory nature. It is surprising, moreover, that greater decision-making power is accorded to a Council for Economic Affairs than to the Presbyteral Council or the Diocesan Pastoral Council, which should represent the presbyterate and the *portio Populi Dei*.

This discrepancy is further proof of the struggle the Church faces when it must rethink its decision-making processes. Yet it is through this path that the whole Church and every single local Church can emerge from a *deadlock*, through effective participation in the life of the Church, which entails ‘ecclesial discernment, care for decision-making processes, and a commitment to give an account of one’s actions and to evaluate the outcome of the decisions taken’ as habitual practices of exercising synodality, which the *Final Document* identifies as privileged ‘places’ of the Church’s synodal conversion (cf. DF 79). ‘These three practices are closely intertwined. Decision-making processes require ecclesial discernment, which in turn requires listening in a climate of trust, supported by transparency and accountability’ (FD 80).

c. The challenge of synodality in the local Church

When taking stock and indicating how synodality can be exercised in the local Church, it must be reiterated that synodality is more a matter of mindset than of structures. Every ecclesial moment, every choice, every pastoral project, every relationship can be lived in a synodal manner; but one can proceed in a diametrically opposite way, even in the name of synodality.

To assess whether and to what extent a Church lives out synodality, we may recall the three aspects or levels of the exercise of synodality formulated by the International Theological Commission and taken up in

the Final Document to explain the meaning and dimensions of synodality (nos. 28–33).

- Synodality is first and foremost ‘the distinctive style that characterises the life and mission of the Church, expressing its nature as the journeying together and gathering in assembly of the People of God, called by the Lord Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit to proclaim the Gospel. It must be expressed in the ordinary way of living and working within the Church. This *modus vivendi et operandi* is realised through the communal listening to the Word and the celebration of the Eucharist, the fraternity of communion, and the shared responsibility and participation of the whole People of God, at its various levels and in the distinction of different ministries and roles, in its life and mission” (CTI 70a).
- ‘Synodality then designates, in a more specific and defined sense from a theological and canonical perspective, those *ecclesial structures and processes* in which the synodal nature of the Church is expressed at the institutional level, in a similar manner, at the various levels of its realisation: local, regional, universal. These structures and processes serve the authoritative discernment of the Church, called to identify the direction to be followed in listening to the Holy Spirit” (CTI 70b).
- Finally, synodality refers to ‘the specific occurrence of those *synodal events* in which the Church is convened by the competent authority and in accordance with specific procedures determined by ecclesiastical discipline, involving in various ways, at the local, regional and universal levels, the whole People of God under the presidency of the Bishops in collegial and hierarchical communion with the Bishop of Rome, for the discernment of its path and of particular issues, and for the adoption of decisions and guidelines in order to fulfil its evangelising mission” (CTI 70c).

It must be admitted that within the Church, at various levels, the process proceeds in reverse order: there is an ordinary pastoral ministry, onto which extraordinary events are grafted. A Synod is always perceived as an extraordinary event, and it is hoped that it will conclude swiftly, or at least within a definite timeframe, so as to return to full operation within the ordinary dimension of ecclesial life. Herein lies one of the reasons behind the impatience felt by many towards the synodal process, which, across its three phases, is spanning seven years of ecclesial life: too long for a Church accustomed to moving from one event to the next but incapable of bearing the weight of a process.

This means that the synodal style is not rooted in the Church, at its various levels; this style implies the choice to enter into a process, to

accept the lengthy timescales of ecclesial discernment, to believe that ‘time is superior to space’, ‘unity prevails over conflict’, ‘reality is more important than the idea’, ‘the whole is superior to the part’³⁹. It means not only affirming that listening is the principle of the synodal Church, but practising it, exercising it until it becomes the rule of ecclesial life to which all submit. Unless one is convinced that the Church’s journey depends on listening to the Holy Spirit, and that his voice is heard in listening to those who have received the Spirit, it will be difficult to implement processes of ecclesial discernment involving all those engaged in ecclesial life. Without the conviction that synodality is ‘the ordinary way of living and working in the Church’ (DF 30), it will be difficult to ensure that existing participatory structures and bodies – *first and foremost* the Diocesan Pastoral Council and the Presbyteral Council – operate in a synodal manner; nor will there be any sense of the need to create spaces and opportunities for listening, leaving every choice and decision to those entrusted with the leadership of the ecclesial community, be it the parish priest or the bishop.

In this way, however, the emphasis inevitably falls on functions and competences, with all that this entails. To disregard synodality means moving towards a form and style of Church built on asymmetrical relationships, with all due respect to the Council’s ‘Copernican revolution’, which affirmed equality before differences; it means admitting in practice – even if the opposite is stated in words – that one counts only for what one does rather than for what one is; it means fuelling competition, exposing ecclesial functions – from the most important to the most marginal – to the temptation of power, which transforms service into possession.

4. The exercise of synodality in the local Church

When the order of the levels of the exercise of synodality is re-established, one understands that the first priority is that of synodal conversion, which applies to all and commits all: the People of God, the College of Bishops, the Bishop of Rome in *the Ecclesia tota*; the *portio Populi Dei* and the Bishop, together with his presbytery (), in the local Church. This aspect cannot be clarified by starting with synodal structures or practices: we must first reflect on the description of the local Church –

³⁹ Cf. Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, nos. 217–241.

'*portio Populi Dei* entrusted to the Bishop assisted by his presbyterate' (CD 11) – and re-examine, in a synodal sense, the relationships between these subjects which constitute the organic structure of the local Church.

To do this does not mean treating a minor aspect of ecclesiology, as though understanding the Church were limited to the universal Church, above and beyond its historical manifestations. When we understand that the Church is the People of God, 'the historical and communal subject of synodality and mission' (DF 17), we cannot ignore the local Churches in which this People journeys.

The clearest formulation of the relationship between the universal and local dimensions of the Church is that put forward by Paul VI in **Evangelii Nuntiandi**⁴⁰. Recalling how the early Christians were 'fully aware of belonging to a great community which neither space nor time could limit. [...] A universal Church without boundaries or frontiers except, alas, those of the heart and spirit of the sinner' (EN 61). But he immediately added: 'Nevertheless, this universal Church is in fact embodied in the particular Churches, which in turn are made up of one or another concrete portion of humanity, speaking a given language, and drawing upon their own cultural heritage and a specific human context' (EN 62).

On the basis of this dynamic of incarnation, Paul VI clarified how the relationship between the universal Church and each particular Church is to be understood:

We must be careful not to conceive of the universal Church as the sum, or, so to speak, the more or less heterogeneous federation of essentially different particular Churches. According to the Lord's teaching, it is the Church herself who, being universal by vocation and mission, when she takes root in the variety of cultural, social and human soils, assumes different features and outward expressions in every part of the world. In this way, any particular Church that were to separate itself voluntarily from the universal Church would lose its reference to God's plan and would be impoverished in its ecclesial dimension. On the other hand, the Church 'spread throughout the world' would become an abstraction if it did not take on flesh and life precisely through the particular Churches. Only a constant focus on these two poles of the Church will enable us to perceive the

⁴⁰ Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (8 December 1975), in AAS 58 (1976), 5–76.

richness of this relationship between the universal Church and the particular Churches.

a. Diocese or Church?

The first priority in developing the synodal form and style of the local Church is to learn to conceive of and live it as a Church. After a millennium of pyramidal ecclesiology, which conceived the Church on the model of the Holy Roman Empire, reducing dioceses to administrative districts of the Roman Catholic Church, and bishops to the Pope’s delegates in the provinces, it is not easy to take the opposite path, conceiving the diocese as a particular Church and the *Ecclesia tota* as ‘the body of the Churches’, ‘in which and from which the one and only Catholic Church exists’ (LG 23).

Although the Second Vatican Council endeavoured to restore the theological dimension of the local Church within the concept of the Church as *a communio Ecclesiarum* – a concept typical of the first millennium – the perspective from which the Church is viewed today is profoundly different from that ecclesiology. In ancient times, the idea of *the communio Ecclesiarum* was the result of a process of building the institutional unity of the Churches *toto orbe diffusae*, a process which, moreover, was met with resistance that crystallised the *communio Ecclesiarum* into the scheme of the pentarchy: to put it succinctly, one might say that the movement went from the Churches to the Church. Vatican II moved in the opposite direction, from the Church to the Churches: this was not a process unfolding over time, but a reform initiative aimed at restoring a model of the Church as a consequence of a fundamental choice: a return to the sources as the path to reforming the Church. This explains the difficulty in breaking away from the universalistic understanding of the Church, within which certain constitutive elements of its structure had emerged, such as primacy over all as a pyramidal foundation.

Within the framework of *ressourcement*, the reinterpretation of the Church as *communio Ecclesiarum* would be reduced to a sort of archaeologism, to the repetition of a style belonging to another era and another culture. This is not the case if the impetus to rethink the diocese as a local Church stems from a doctrinal affirmation such as that concerning the sacramentality of the episcopate. If it is recognised that ‘through episcopal consecration the fullness of the sacrament of Holy Orders is conferred, that is, what the liturgical custom of the Church and

the voice of the Holy Fathers call the supreme priesthood, the summit of the sacred ministry' (LG 21), it is no longer possible to reduce the diocese entrusted to the Bishop to an administrative district, to a portion of the vast territory of the universal Church: it is, to all intents and purposes, 'a particular Church, in which the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church of Christ is present and active' (CD 11).

But if we are speaking of a Church, we must also conceive of it as such; we must say of this Church what is said of the Church in general; we must recognise it as the subject of predicates. The subject is this *portio Populi Dei*, of which one may say that it is the Body of Christ, the temple of the Spirit; that it is the Bride; that it is 'the people gathered together in the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit' (LG 4), which 'is the seed and beginning of the Kingdom' (LG 5). If it is said that 'she is in Christ as a sacrament, a sign and instrument of intimate union with God and of the unity of the human race' (LG 1), it must be specified that she is precisely so in this place, for this territory and this portion of humanity that inhabits it: historical and geographical contextualisation does not make the Church's action any less true.

All this can be found within the history of salvation: if the Church, 'already foreshadowed from the beginning of the world, wonderfully prepared in the history of the people of Israel and in the Old Covenant, established in the last days, has been revealed through the outpouring of the Spirit and will find its glorious fulfilment at the end of time' (LG 2), it is between the 'already' of Christ and the 'not yet' of the Kingdom that every local Church is constituted as a 'historical and communal subject of synodality and mission'. On the journey towards the Kingdom of God, every Church can discern the paths to be taken here and now, not only by interpreting the present situation, social conditions and cultural challenges, but by recalling a past that has shaped its very identity. What self-awareness can anyone have who does not know their history? Who does not question their roots? Who does not question the forms of faith that have animated and sustained the journey of this People of God to this day? Who does not rejoice in the witnesses who have made that Church great?

In the succession of generations who have borne witness to the Gospel, every Church finds confirmation of its identity and an example for its journey: 'So then, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight and the sin that so easily entangles

us, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith' (Heb 12:1-2). No tree grows without roots: in the testimonies of its past, every Church finds reasons to live courageously in a present which, in a context of growing secularisation, may not appear quite so glorious, but is nonetheless the 'favourable time' for new forms of witness to the Gospel within a rapidly evolving historical and cultural context.

b. A synodal identity

Theological reflection on the identity of the local Church is not an exercise in itself. Only self-awareness sustains a journey that does not begin today and does not end tomorrow. It is not merely a matter of reconstructing history, listing the chronological succession of bishops, compiling a pantheon of saints and notable figures of the diocese, mapping the geography of places of worship and devotion, recounting popular traditions, or cataloguing the artistic heritage. All this belongs to what is visible in the Church and constitutes a historical heritage – both material and immaterial – which today all too often serves more to enrich the halls of a museum than to nourish the life of the People of God. In the concept of the Church as a sacrament, the visible constitutes the sign that points to a further reality: 'All this is so that what is human in the Church may be ordered and subordinated to the divine, the visible to the invisible, action to contemplation, the present to the future city towards which we are journeying' (SC 2).

Applying this sacramental logic to the local Church means understanding it as the People of God journeying towards the fullness of the Kingdom. What *Lumen Gentium* says of the People of God applies to every *portio Populi Dei*:

Just as the Israel of the flesh, journeying through the desert, is called the Church of God (Dt 23:1 ff.), so too the new Israel, which in the present journeys in search of the future and permanent city (cf. Heb 13:14), is also called the Church of Christ (cf. Mt 16:18); for Christ has indeed acquired her with his blood (cf. Acts 20:28), filled her with his Spirit and provided her with the means necessary for visible and social union. God has gathered together those who look in faith to Jesus, the author of salvation and the source of unity and peace, and has established the Church, so that it may be, in the eyes of all and of each individual, the visible sacrament of this saving unity (LG 9).

This assembly of Christ's disciples is evident in every Eucharistic celebration, especially in that which takes place around the Bishop in the cathedral church, in the awareness that 'the *pre-eminent manifestation of the Church* is found in the full and active participation of the whole People of God in the liturgical celebrations themselves, especially in the Eucharist, in the single prayer around the single altar, presided over by the Bishop surrounded by his presbyterate and ministers' (SC 41). The *Final Document* focuses attention on the link that exists "between *synaxis* and *synodos*, between the Eucharistic assembly and the synodal assembly. Although in different forms, in both the promise of Jesus to be present where two or three are gathered in His name (cf. Mt 18:20) is fulfilled" (DF 27).

This means that those who participate in the *praecipua manifestatio Ecclesiae* are also the principal agents of synodal action in the local Church. The exercise of synodality in every Church depends on the mutual listening of the Holy People of God, the Bishop and the presbyterate, and on their effective synergy. This means that the synodal conversion of the local Church, its configuration as a 'Church of listening', depends on the synodal conversion of these three subjects.

Of the Bishop, first and foremost: he is 'the visible head and foundation of unity in the Church entrusted to him' (LG 23), inasmuch as he possesses the branch of the apostolic root (cf. LG 20). The *Final Document* rightly recalls that 'one who is ordained a Bishop is not burdened with prerogatives and tasks to be carried out alone. Rather, he receives the grace and the task of recognising, discerning and bringing together in unity the gifts that the Spirit pours out upon individuals and communities, working within the sacramental bond with the Priests and Deacons, who are jointly responsible with him for ministerial service in the local Church" (DF 69). This was already what the Council urged: "The sacred Pastors... know that they have been instituted by Christ not to take upon themselves alone the whole salvific mission of the Church towards the world; their eminent function is to shepherd the faithful and to recognise their ministries and charisms, so that all may cooperate harmoniously in the common work in the manner proper to them" (LG 30). A Church that is constitutionally synodal calls for synodal bishops:

that they be and act synodally, that they be bishops with you, Christians with you⁴¹ .

It is the responsibility of the Bishop in his Church to initiate synodal action, so that both the People of God and the presbyterate may play their part in the exercise of synodality: the former as participants in the prophetic and kingly office of Christ, the latter as the ‘senate of the Bishop’, which has always been recognised as a college called to advise the Bishop. In this perspective, the Code of Canon Law has established two participatory bodies that carry out their work in the field of ecclesial discernment, namely the representation of the presbyterate and of the holy People of God: the Presbyteral Council and the Diocesan Pastoral Council. Their legal framework is rather weak, owing to the concern to affirm the principle of authority over the principle of participation, understood evidently as a claim rather than as differentiated co-responsibility in decision-making processes⁴² . Nothing prevents, however, their being characterised in a synodal sense, as effective agents of ecclesial discernment: the regular convening of these bodies to discern the path of the local Church, its fundamental choices, and the priorities of its action, is the sure way to give the local Church a synodal form and style.

c. The synodal style of the local Church

What does it mean for a local Church to choose the path of synodality? The first thought, generally, is to convene a diocesan synod. A laudable initiative, but a laborious one, if a Church has not yet developed a synodal form and style. The Synod belongs to the highest level of synodality – that of synodal events – which the International Theological Commission proposed in its document. Like any event, it can be significant and have an impact on ecclesial life if it constitutes the manifestation of that ‘distinctive style which characterises the life and mission of the Church’, its ‘*modus vivendi et operandi*’ (ITC, 70).

⁴¹ St Augustine, *Sermon* 162.3. For a commentary on the statement by the Bishop of Hippo, see L. M. Castillo Gualda, *Cum vobis et pro vobis. Una meditazione sinodale*, LEV, Vatican City 2024.

⁴² The *Final Document* emphasises differentiated co-responsibility as a mature form of participation in Part III, concerning the conversion of processes. In particular, in the section explaining the structure of decision-making processes (nos. 87–94).

Before convening the local Church in synod, it is necessary to foster a mindset that defines the Christian life of the People of God in a synodal sense. The *Final Document* highlights this urgency: ‘In order that the holy People of God may bear witness to the joy of the Gospel for all, growing in the practice of synodality, they need adequate formation’ (FD 141), which should be “integral, continuous and shared. Its aim is not merely the acquisition of theoretical knowledge, but the promotion of openness and encounter, of sharing and collaboration, of common reflection and discernment, and of a theological reading of concrete experiences” (FD 143). ‘Synodality, in fact, implies a profound vocational and missionary awareness, the source of a renewed style of ecclesial relations, of new participatory dynamics and ecclesial discernment, and of a culture of evaluation, which cannot be established without the accompaniment of targeted formation processes’ (DF 141).

Nor does this apply solely to the People of God, as if ordained ministers were exempt from this formation simply because they are ‘teachers in Israel’. It is surprising how many bishops and priests, who are – or ought to be – well-versed in the theoretical aspects of ecclesiology, are reluctant to embrace a synodal form and style of ministry, which flows from a synodal form and style of the Church. Their resistance, often expressed in words of explicit rejection, acts as an opaque screen that filters a distorted view of synodality. Therefore, a synodal formation of the presbyterate and of candidates for ordained ministry is more necessary than ever. However, the *Final Document* specifies that ‘the shared synodal formation for all the Baptised constitutes the framework within which to understand and practise the specific formation necessary for individual ministries and for the various forms of life’ (FD 147). Without forgetting that the best school for synodality will always be growth within an environment where synodality is breathed as the form and style of the Christian community.

The more this fundamental level is rooted in the lived experience of a Church, the easier it will be to initiate synodal processes and to configure diocesan bodies and structures in a synodal sense. This is where the habitual exercise of ecclesial discernment takes place, generally entrusted to the various Councils, in particular the Presbyteral Council and the Diocesan Pastoral Council. Generally, the two bodies are convened separately, even when dealing with the same matter. Moreover, the two bodies are assigned quite different roles: the Presbyteral Council has the

task ‘of assisting the Bishop in the governance of the diocese, in accordance with the law, so that the pastoral good of the portion of the People of God entrusted to the Bishop may be promoted in the most effective way’⁴³ ; the Diocesan Pastoral Council, composed in such a way as to represent ‘the whole portion of the People of God that constitutes the diocese’, is charged with ‘studying, evaluating and proposing practical conclusions on all matters concerning the pastoral activities of the diocese’⁴⁴ . Nothing prevents them from being convened together, given that they represent the presbyterate and the People of God respectively, or in any case from organising their work in such a way that the listening “to what the Spirit says to the Church” (Rev 2:7) is made manifest in their consensus.

Such listening will find its highest and most significant expression in the diocesan synod, that is, ‘the assembly of priests and other faithful of the particular Church, chosen to assist the diocesan Bishop for the good of the entire diocesan community’⁴⁵ . The synod is the most demanding act of discernment that the local Church can undertake, a privileged time for listening to the Spirit speaking to the Church. For this reason, it is ensured that ‘all the questions proposed are submitted to the free discussion of the members during the sessions of the Synod’⁴⁶ . Celebrated

⁴³ «In every diocese, a presbyteral council shall be established, that is, a group of priests who, representing the presbyterate, act as the Bishop’s senate; it is the responsibility of the presbyteral council to assist the Bishop in the governance of the diocese, in accordance with the law, so that the pastoral good of the portion of the People of God entrusted to him may be promoted in the most effective manner»: CIC, can. 495, §1; without forgetting, of course, the College of Consultors, with more specific responsibilities: ‘From among the members of the presbyteral council, the diocesan Bishop freely appoints a number of priests, not fewer than six nor more than twelve, who for a five-year term constitute the college of consultors, with duties determined by law; however, at the end of the five-year term, it continues to exercise its functions until the new college is constituted’: CIC, can. 502, §1.

⁴⁴ ‘In every diocese, if the pastoral situation so requires, a pastoral council shall be established, which, under the authority of the Bishop, is responsible for studying, evaluating and proposing practical conclusions regarding the pastoral activities of the diocese: CIC, can. 511; ‘The faithful appointed to the pastoral council shall be chosen in such a way that, through them, the entire portion of the People of God constituting the diocese is truly represented, taking into account the various areas of the diocese itself, social conditions, professions and, furthermore, the role they play in the apostolate, both as individuals and as members of associations’: CIC, can. 512 – §2.

⁴⁵ CIC, can. 460.

⁴⁶ CIC, can. 465.

and lived in this way, a diocesan Synod becomes a milestone on the journey of a local Church, which in the conclusions of the Synod will find further reasons to continue its journey here and now. Its decrees, signed and made public by the Bishop, and transmitted to the Metropolitan and the Episcopal Conference, will moreover enrich the great river of Tradition, which flows, transmitting to all generations ‘all that she [the Church] is, all that she believes’ (DV 8); they will become a gift for the other Churches and for the whole Church (cf. LG 13), an example that will nourish and sustain the synodal form and style of the Church, especially if that Church commits itself to living out and bearing witness to what it has heard from the Spirit and endorsed with the Bishop in the synodal decrees.

Concluding note

Nothing prevents a local Church from being synodal, except the refusal to be so. This refusal does not stem from the Church as such; for if it is true that synodality is a constitutive dimension of the Church, the Church cannot but be synodal, but rather from those who form part of it. It is within the ecclesial body that resistance and opposition arise, hindering or slowing down the ‘walking together’. Nor should we immediately conclude that those who oppose synodality are acting in bad faith: it is not uncommon for the truest ideas to have been proposed in the wrong way, or even imposed. The criterion formulated by Gamaliel regarding the early Christian movement applies to synodality: ‘If this plan or this work is of human origin, it will be destroyed; but if it comes from God, you will not be able to destroy them. Do not find yourselves fighting against God’ (Acts 5:38–39). For this reason, it falls to those who have experienced how synodality is a gift from God to his Church to continue to believe in it, to bear witness to it, to explore its reasons more deeply and to explain them. Synodality is a challenge for the Church, which finds itself at a crossroads: either to dismiss the era of synodality as a passing fad, lasting the duration of a pontificate, or to accept Pope Francis’s invitation: ‘We must continue along this path. The world in which we live, and which we are called to love and serve even in its contradictions, demands that the Church strengthen synergies in all areas of its mission.’

The path of *synodality* is precisely the path that God expects of the Church of the third millennium⁴⁷.

The fear that a synodal form of Church, with the corresponding practice of ecclesial discernment in decision-making processes, might become a constraint for those called to exercise leadership and governance, would constitute the clearest admission that ministry continues to be understood as a form of power over others rather than as service to the Holy People of God. But if the Church is constitutively synodal, how can the exercise of synodality constitute an obstacle to her life and her journey? The problem is not the synodal practice in itself, but the difficulty in embracing it, the difficulty in entering into a style that demands the primacy of listening, the recognition of the other, the choice to be ‘ ’ and to act ‘together’. Once again, what is at stake is the conversion of Christ’s disciples; more so and before all others, of ‘those who labour amongst you, who lead you in the Lord and admonish you’ (1 Thess 5:12): ‘But amongst you it is not so; but whoever wishes to become great amongst you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first amongst you shall be your slave. Like the Son of Man, who did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many’ (Mt 20:26–28).

The fruits of synodal practice can serve to convince every local Church of the truth and goodness of the synodal path: the first fruit is the awareness of being the Church of Christ in and for a specific place, a community that receives, lives and transmits the Gospel; the second is the renewal of relationships among the members of the local Church: the People of God with their Bishop, surrounded by his presbyterate; the third is listening to what the Spirit says to this Church today; the fourth is the consensus that matures on matters requiring discernment in view of a decision; the fifth is the joy of this People walking together, men and women united by a fraternity that is of the Spirit and not of the flesh. In the logic of the exchange of gifts, within a Church as a communion of Churches, these fruits enrich the whole Church and every single Church.

12.30 pm. CLOSING OF THE 21ST SYMPOSIUM ON HISTORICAL THEOLOGY

1.00 pm RECEPTION

⁴⁷ Francis, Commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Synod of Bishops, in AAS 107 (2015), 1139.

Opening prayers

TUESDAY 28 APRIL

Opening address:

Bishop: In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Assembly: Amen.

Bishop: The peace of the Lord be with you.

Assembly: And also with you.

Introduction: Brothers and sisters, living our Christian faith in a synodal manner is founded on the **communion** built by the Holy Spirit, harmonising our differences and creating the Church where chaos would otherwise reign. Let us allow ourselves to be penetrated by the power of the Word of God at the start of this theological symposium and recall St Augustine when he says: *'Whoever is an enemy of unity does not share in divine charity'* (Ep. 185, 11, 50).

Reading: 1 Corinthians 12:12-13

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptised into one body – whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

Brief silence

Concluding prayer:

Almighty and eternal God, who gathers together what is scattered and preserves what you have united, look with love upon the people of your Son, so that all who have received the same baptism may live united by the same faith and the same love. Through our Lord Jesus Christ...

Regina Caeli (canto)

Regina caeli, laetare, alleluia.

Quia quem meruisti portare, alleluia.

Resurrexit, sicut dixit, alleluia.

Ora pro nobis Deum, alleluia.

WEDNESDAY 29 APRIL

Opening greeting:

Bishop: In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Assembly: Amen.

Bishop: The peace of the Lord be with you.

Congregation: And also with you.

Introduction: The Holy Spirit, Lord and Giver of Life, helps us to recognise the image of God in our neighbour and teaches us to live in mutual support, so that every baptised person may feel called to **participate** in the building up of the Church.

Reading: Final Document no. 88

The community of disciples called and sent by the Lord is not a uniform, amorphous entity. It is his Body with many and diverse members, a historical, communal entity in which the Kingdom of God comes to pass as a 'seed and beginning' in service to its coming among the whole human family. The Church Fathers already reflect on the communal nature of the mission of the People of God through a threefold "nothing without" (*nihil sine*): "nothing without the bishop" (St Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Trallians*, 2.2), "nothing without your counsel [of the priests and deacons] and without the consent of the People" (St Cyprian of Carthage, *Letter to the brother priests and deacons*, 14.4). When this logic of *nihil sine* is broken, the identity of the Church is obscured and its mission is hindered.

Brief silence

Closing prayer:

Our God, perfect unity and true love; grant that your children may have one heart and one soul, so that your Church may be strengthened in harmony, supported by the confession of the truth, and established in perfect unity. Through our Lord Jesus Christ...

Regina Caeli

Regina caeli, laetare, alleluia.

Quia quem meruisti portare, alleluia.

Resurrexit, sicut dixit, alleluia.

Ora pro nobis Deum, alleluia.

THURSDAY 30 APRIL

Opening greeting:

Bishop: In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Assembly: Amen.

Bishop: The peace of the Lord be with you.

Congregation: And also with you.

Introduction: Brothers and sisters, the Church does not exist for its own sake, but to be a universal sacrament of salvation, proclaiming Christ; therefore, we who are baptised are called to the **mission** of extending the kingdom of Christ, moving forward through history ‘amidst the persecutions of the world and the consolations of God’ (St Augustine, *The City of God* (18, 51, 2)

Reading: *Ad Gentes* n. 1 Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church

The Church, sent by God to the nations to be “the universal sacrament of salvation”, obeying the command of her Founder (cf. *Mk* 16:15), and in accordance with the very demands of her catholicity, strives to proclaim the Gospel to all people. For the Apostles themselves, the “”, upon whom the Church is founded, following in the footsteps of Christ, “preached the word of truth and brought the Churches into being” (St Augustine, *Enarr. in Ps.* 44:23). It is the duty of their successors to ensure the continuity of this work so that “the word of God may be spread and glorified” (2 *Thess* 3:1), and the kingdom of God may be proclaimed and established throughout the earth. [...]

Brief silence

Concluding prayer:

O God, who desire that all men be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth, look upon your immense harvest and send forth labourers, so that the Gospel may be preached to every creature, and your flock, gathered together by the word of life and sustained by the power of the sacraments, may walk in the paths of salvation and love. Through our Lord Jesus Christ...

Regina Caeli

Regina caeli, laetare, alleluia.

Quia quem meruisti portare, alleluia.

Resurrexit, sicut dixit, alleluia.

Ora pro nobis Deum, alleluia.

