

SYNODALITY OF THE CHURCH

Jakov RAĐA

Catholic Faculty of Theology, University of Zagreb
Vlaška 38, p.p. 432, 10001 Zagreb
jrada@kbf.hr

Pope Francis, in a homily given during the Holy Mass on the occasion of the opening of the Preparatory period ahead of the Synod of Bishops in Rome, to be held in October 2023, highlighted three verbs describing his view of the synodality of the Church: meet, listen, discern. The Pope calls on the Church to be an expert in the art of encounter, not by organizing events and theorizing about problems; a Church that listens to the Word that made flesh, but also to the questions, concerns, hopes of every Church, all people and nation, even the world; a Church whose main pastoral programme and compass is spiritual discernment about the direction to which God leads us and which has recognized discernment not only as an appropriate word, but as a style of life¹. It is in the synodality that the Pope sees the path to which »God calls the Church to the third millennium«² and »a process of healing guided by the Spirit.«³ The Synod should help the Church »live communion, participate and open herself to the mission.«

¹ Cf. Pope FRANCIS, *Omelia del Santo Padre Francesco in occasione della celebrazione dell'eucaristia per l'apertura del Sinodo sulla sinodalità nella Basilica di San Pietro a Roma* (10. X. 2021), <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/homilies/2021/documents/20211010-omelia-sindolo-vescovi.html> (Accessed 15. XII. 2021).

² Pope FRANCIS, *Discorso per la Commemorazione del 50° anniversario dell'istituzione del Sinodo dei Vescovi* (17. X. 2015), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html (Accessed 15. XII. 2021).

³ Pope FRANCIS; *Omelia del Santo Padre Francesco in occasione della celebrazione dell'eucaristia per l'apertura del Sinodo sulla sinodalità nella Basilica di San Pietro a Roma* (10. X. 2021).

By raising the question of the synodality of the Church, the Pope continues to walk on the path of the Second Vatican Council, which marked the Copernican turn in ecclesiology, breaking away with the centuries-old division of the Church as *Ecclesia docens* and *Ecclesia discens*; a Church that teaches, listens and leads, and a Church that concurs with decisions made⁴. Contrary to this image of the Church, the Council had portrayed the Church, in the second and the seventh chapters of the dogmatic constitution *Lumen Gentium*, as God's people and thus, prior to addressing various statuses and positions in the Church, spoke about the commonality of all Christians, the dignity of Children of God gained through the sacrament of christening. The Pope, however, also avoided the danger of the Church being seen as a society among other societies, dynamizing the course of the Church which begins in history but continues in eternity. Although it is a simplification to reduce the conciliar doctrine of the Church to only one image, the one of God's people, it is useful for understanding synodality in the Church because the Synod as a »common walk' [...] realizes and shows the nature of the Church as God's people who are pilgrims and missionaries«⁵. Synodality is, therefore, an expression of the awareness that in the Church there are no differences in dignity and status, but only in service and charisma, and if this truth is to be translated into concrete ways of braving the challenges before the Church today, then the Synod is born as an expression of the co-responsibility of all God's people for discerning the direction to which God has called the community of the faithful.

The challenges the Church has been facing at present are enormous and the Pope does not cease to remind us of them, particularly through his last two encyclicals *Laudato si*⁶ and *Fratelli tutti*⁷ in which he speaks of changing epochs, growing inequalities, cries of the poor and poor countries, migrants drowning in the seas or trapped in inhumane conditions as they seek for an opportunity for a dignified life, a nature that is grappling with the burden of depleted resources. We should not forget the persistence of the Pope in reminding the Church of certain internal, obviously structural problems, such as the abuse of minors and vulnerable people, but also the abuse of power, money and conscience by clerics and consecrated persons. In addition, there is a strong need

⁴ Cf. Dario VITALI, *Lumen gentium*. Storia-commento-ricezione, Roma, 2012, 66.

⁵ SINODO DEI VESCOVI, *Sinodo 2021–2023. Per una Chiesa sinodale: comunione-partecipazione-missione*. Documento preparatorio, 1.

⁶ Cf. Pope FRANCIS, *Laudato si*. Enciklika o brizi za zajednički dom (24. V. 2015), Zagreb, 2015, no. 139.

⁷ Cf. Pope FRANCIS, *Fratelli tutti*. Enciklika o bratstvu i socijalnom prijateljstvu (3. X. 2020), Zagreb, 2021, no. 22.

for opening a new stage of evangelization, for pastoral conversion and for the missionary retreat of the Church, which should not forgo its fundamental mission and task. We may ask, who has the answers to these challenges? Which team of people will adequately respond to them? Who is the person that has the solution for the language of the Church that man today no longer understands, and which is in need of adaptation in order to embody the message of the Gospel in the culture in which we live, if we can speak of one culture at all? Who will shape and direct the work of the Church so that it responds to historical challenges and reflects God's care for man?

The Pope warns of a culture of clericalism in the Church that is a burden of the past⁸ and that can lead us astray so as to entrust the search for solutions to individuals or certain expert groups, holders of certain offices or people who are experts in certain fields. However, there is no single person or group of people with the answers to all the questions before the Church today. Although everyone can contribute and although not everyone has the same insights and responsibilities, the Pope reminds us that it is not possible to imagine »the conversion of the Church without the active participation of all the constituents of God's people«. ⁹ The Synod is therefore an expression of the ongoing process of ecclesial renewal led by the Holy Spirit which finds strength in the Gospel for courageous decisions. It is neither a scientific symposium, nor a political gathering, nor an arena of democracy, but rather »a grace-filled event«¹⁰ that asks all participants to allow themselves to be »educated by the Spirit for a truly synodal mentality, entering the process of conversion with courage and freedom of heart«¹¹ without which there can be no true reform of the Church.

If the Church is one as God is one, and that means that it is one in communion, all the institutions of the Church are to reflect this fundamental truth that the Church is »people gathered in the unity of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit«. ¹² Certainly this truth will have its clearest expression at

⁸ Cf. SINODO DEI VESCOVI, *Sinodo 2021–2023. Per una Chiesa sinodale: comunione-partecipazione-missione. Documento preparatorio*, 6.

⁹ Pope FRANCIS, *Lettera del Santo Padre al Popolo di Dio* (20. VIII. 2018), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/letters/2018/documents/papa-francesco_20180820_lettera-popolo-didio.html (Accessed 15. XII. 2021).

¹⁰ Pope FRANCIS, *Omelia del Santo Padre Francesco in occasione della celebrazione dell'eucaristia per l'apertura del Sinodo sulla sinodalità nella Basilica di San Pietro a Roma* (10. X. 2021).

¹¹ SINODO DEI VESCOVI, *Sinodo 2021–2023. Per una Chiesa sinodale: comunione-partecipazione-missione. Documento preparatorio*, 1.

¹² Cyprianus CARTHAGINENSIS, *Liber de oratione dominica* 23, in: Jacques Paul MIGNE (ed.), *Patrologia Latina*, Paris, 1844.

the Ecumenical Council, but we should not neglect various local, provincial or universal synods which undoubtedly preserve the awareness of ecclesial unity in diversity, i.e., communion which is an ontological category in ecclesiology, because as the nature of God is communion, so the deepest nature of the Church is communion.¹³ This awareness of the Synod as an expression of ecclesial communion has always been strong in the Christian East, which has recognized in the bishop of the local Church the expression of ecclesial unity, and in the Synod the expression of diversity and communion. While in the Christian West there has been a greater emphasis on the ecclesiology of unity, in the Christian East the ecclesiology of communion has prevailed, emphasizing that »local Churches can do nothing without the presence of 'one' [bishop],« but also that 'one' can do nothing without 'many'«. ¹⁴ There is no Church without community, just as there is no Christ without a body, or »one« without »many«¹⁵. The Pope's intention to dedicate the next Synod of Bishops to the synodality of the Church should be viewed in an ecumenical manner because strengthening the synodality of the Western Church undoubtedly achieves greater fellowship and better understanding between the East and the West, the two lungs of the Church. Certainly, different ecclesiological emphases between the East and the West will remain different in part, however by convening a Synod on synodality, the Pope contributes to building bridges and creating a new synthesis between Eastern and Western ecclesiology, which have been in need of mutual enrichment and complementarity.

In conclusion, we may state that the Church is entering a new period in which it continues to deepen the ecclesiology of communion, which was rediscovered during the Second Vatican Council. This new period will be marked by the synodality of the Church at all levels, diocesan, provincial and universal. In his pontificate, Pope Francis has never ceased to surprise us by initiating processes within the Church, and the latest, which goes in the direction of a greater emphasis on synodality, is of particular significance for all levels across the Church. When claiming that »everyone has something to learn« and that »the faithful, the assembly of bishops and the Bishop of Rome« should »listen to one another« and all together should listen to the Holy Spirit, the Pope, as a visible principle and foundation of ecclesial unity, has shown that he wishes to carry out his ministry not only monarchically, but also syn-

¹³ Cf. John D. ZIZIOLAS, *Being as Communion. Studies in Personhood and the Church*, Crestwood (NY), 1997, 134–135.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 135.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 137.

odally, and it is now the responsibility of all bishops and particular Churches to follow him on that Synodal path¹⁶. We hope that the Pope's call will be recognized as a response to the need to strengthen the intra-Church dialogue at all levels and that it will yield the much-needed pastoral conversion.

¹⁶ SINODO DEI VESCOVI, *Sinodo 2021–2023. Per una Chiesa sinodale: comunione-partecipazione-missione. Documento preparatorio*, 15.