



Editorial

Synodal Church, Creative Church

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This issue of *Ekklesia* cannot help but be dedicated to synodality and in particular to the diocesan phase of the synodal process that will involve all of us over the next nine months. Nine months – like those needed for the formation of a child in its mother's womb! Even if further phases will follow, they will culminate in the celebration of the Plenary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in October 2023 and thus open up a process of application throughout the world.

Whatever happens, it will be a change of epoch and one which will affect the way we are Church. We are all involved in a process that has the characteristics of a gestation. It is necessary to give life *not to "another Church" but to a "different Church,"* which is what Pope Francis said at the beginning of the journey last October 9 when he referred to the thinking of Yves Congar, the great theologian of the Second Vatican Council. This is – observes Piero Coda, secretary of the International Theological Commission which issued a special document on synodality in 2018 – the “most important – and also strategically – decisive Church event since Vatican II” (*cf. his article in this issue*).

For a synodal Church: communion, participation, mission is the guiding theme that accompanies us. *Communion and mission* – Francis explained on October 9 – are the two defining terms of Vatican II. However, they “risk remaining somewhat abstract if we do not cultivate an ecclesial praxis” that promotes “the real involvement of each and everyone” at every step.

This is precisely the intent of the synodal process: listening without fixing the outcome beforehand, listening within but also beyond the ecclesial structure – something that has never happened in the two thousand years of Christian history even although the Churches of the East and those born of the Reformation during the 16th century have tended to have a more developed synodal experience than the Catholic Church.

In this regard, it is significant that Cardinal Grech, as Secretary General of the Synod, and Cardinal Koch, as President of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity, issued a joint letter which recommended that Episcopal Conferences invite representatives from other Christian Churches to offer their own contribution to this journey.

As Luxembourg Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich, who serves as the general reporter for the consultation process, reiterated, *everyone* has something to contribute to the great "jigsaw puzzle of many colors" that only the Holy Spirit will know how to put together.

In his homily at the opening Mass of the synodal journey and with his extraordinary ability to draw everything together, Pope Francis condensed the to-do list into three verbs: meet - listen - discern. The synodal path is: an event of encounter - in which we allow ourselves to be challenged by the face and history of others, by their restlessness and their questions, without fear of wasting time; an exercise in listening - done with the heart and not only with the ears, leaving the other person free, without judging him or her or resorting to pre-packaged answers; spiritual and ecclesial discernment - to grasp, in the light of the Word of God, what the Holy Spirit wants to tell us and where he or she wants to lead us (*cf. the article by Card. Grech*).

But the question is this: Can "discerning" be simply the fruit of meetings and reflections, of moments of sharing and discussion? Or is it something much more profound and vital: letting the Word become flesh in a new way, in today's world, as in Mary's womb - in you, in me, among us, in our environment, in our relationships, in the fabric of the Church, society, the world? Let us try to dwell for a moment on this perspective.

The listening. Mary opened herself up to the Angel's message: an unforeseen, demanding proposal, one which was not easy to understand. She expresses her puzzlement and speaks candidly. At the end of the dialogue, she places herself without reservation at God's service with her "here I am" which is more than just words. The listening and responding made a new life come to be within her.

The encounter. The journey to Elizabeth is not to make a speech but to serve. It was born from Mary identifying with Elizabeth's situation and her needs and with a readiness to place herself at her kinswoman's disposal. Then suddenly what they say to each other opens up unimagined horizons: two human-divine stories intersect and the universal scope of God's plans are understood.

The discernment. The moment of Jesus' birth is also a moment which creates distinction: Mary discerns that he is outside of her, beyond her. It is clear who he is - the Word made flesh, a child who grows up, becomes a young man and an adult: the Savior. It is clear who she is: she nourishes him and makes him grow, she does not always understand him and sometimes hears uncomfortable words ("Woman, why turn to me?"), who also shares tragic moments with him beneath the Cross: she is the servant of the Lord. And that is exactly what the Mother of God is.

Looking at Mary, we understand that the synodal journey that involves all of us cannot be contained in a document or even in innovative guidelines for the Church's journey. If we truly engage in this adventure, a synodal Church is called to be and will be able to become a generative Church: a Church that allows a new and more vivid presence of Jesus to grow in her womb and be released from herself for the good of all humanity and which will not confine him solely within "ecclesial precincts". For Jesus is not only the Bridegroom who

makes the life of the Church fruitful, he is also the Prince of Peace (cf. Is 9:5). There is nothing less at stake. And we all share in it. Each and every one of us can contribute to it!