

The Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops  
reflects on the upcoming synod

# Synod: Event of the Spirit

Cardinal Mario Grech

*In addressing a group of bishops from various nations in late July 2021, the Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops reflected on the needed conditions for a discernment of God's plan, guided by the Spirit. "I ask you," Cardinal Grech said at the conclusion, "to keep everyone's attention focused on the spiritual dimension of the journey we are undertaking, to discern God's action in the life of the universal Church and in individual Churches."*

## The situation of today, with God's heart

Psalm 83 (84) says: "Blessed is he who finds his strength in you and decides in his heart the holy journey... Along the way his vigor grows, until he appears before God in Zion" (vs. 6-8). We are all committed to making this journey, also as an ecclesial community. A synodal Church is a people walking together in thinking historically about theology. In fact, our God is a God who walks with us in the course of changing history and together we try to identify his footsteps, to continue along our journey.

As the People of God, we are called to synodically read the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel, and, likewise, read the Gospel in the light of the signs of these times. Paul VI said: "One of the characteristic attitudes of the Church after the Council is that of a particular attention to human reality, considered historically; that is, to the facts, events and phenomena of our time. And he concluded that "the world becomes an open book for us<sup>1</sup>". I would say a book to read and understand with Christian passion that leads us to discern God's plan. Our reading of this world book is different from that of politicians or intellectuals. It is a reading by disciples of Jesus, enlightened by the Spirit.

The Holy Father said: "[T]he Church journeys together to understand reality with the eyes of faith and with the heart of God; it is the Church that questions herself with regard to her fidelity to the *deposit of faith* which does not represent for the Church a museum to view, nor just something to safeguard, but is a living spring from which the Church drinks, to satisfy the thirst of, and illuminate the *deposit of life*."<sup>2</sup> The risk of so many Synods is introspection

that produces one more book for libraries. In reality, documents without *pathos*, without *anointing*, are useless.

### **Welcoming the next cycle of the Spirit**

We need the Holy Spirit to carry out such a reading, the one who "will teach you everything and remind you of all". (Cfr. *Jn* 14:26).

In this regard, an Italian sociologist and person of faith, Giuseppe De Rita, even called for a Synod on the Holy Spirit! As a good sociologist, he notes that in society there is a thirst for spirituality. I find the analysis he makes very stimulating – one that must be read *cum grano salis*: "[E]verything signals the need for a paradigm shift because, in the age of the Spirit, there is no longer room for an 'organized' Church. The synod, of which so much is spoken, risks responding to the logic of the Father, that is, hierarchical . . . or of the Son, in a "mixed" formula, hierarchical but open to the social, open to the contributions of all, from trade unions to cloistered nuns. But even this would be an already old formula, in the end insufficient. [...] The question today is one of welcoming the *coming cycle of the Spirit*, of the interior relationship with God, of openness to the mystery. This is a much more demanding cycle because it is not philosophical, rather it is a dimension that is one of mystery. The Christian is now called to walk until he arrives at the mountain of Zion, without knowing what he or she will find along the way; to walk in the desert as the first peoples did, but without familiar, habitual points of reference..."<sup>3</sup>.

Undoubtedly, the Church is called today to "welcome the next cycle of the Spirit". The next Synod will not be on the Holy Spirit, but invariably it must be a strong ecclesial experience of the Spirit. As Greek Orthodox Patriarch Ignatius Hazim observed: "without him [the Spirit] the Church [is] a simple organization, authority reigns, and mission is information." For his part, Prof. Michele Masciarelli reiterates that "without [the Spirit] and his light, synodality would not happen and claiming it occurs would end up becoming its contradiction: an endless, inclusive babbling, perhaps even a source of injury and serious disagreement."<sup>4</sup>

### **Towards a spirituality of synodality**

At the beginning of July, our General Secretariat organized a seminar on the spirituality of synodality. We invited some institutes of consecrated life and lay movements that represent the multifaceted presence of the Spirit in the Church, in order to listen to their testimonies especially regarding discernment of spirits. We are convinced that they represent an enormous spiritual patrimony that will enrich those who want to participate in this Synod.

The very diversity of spiritual traditions that we encounter in the Church confirms that there is no single form of spirituality of synodality. If synodality is itself an expression of the life of the Church in all the Churches, then we can expect to see that every Church will find the presence and effective power of the Holy Spirit reflected in the circumstances, history, and traditions of that Church. At the same time, he is the one Spirit, and therefore there will be traits that unite everyone. In fact, synodality itself will find expression in the authentic life of the local Church, but it will always be marked by an orientation towards our common life in the Body of Christ. There is no tension, as such, between the local and the universal:

the one can be understood and lived only in relation to the other; each has the responsibility of the other and is a real, practical solicitude, born in love that transcends time, place, and nationality. This too is a sign of the life of the Holy Spirit because the whole Church has one mission of salvation in Christ and through Christ.

All the traditions heard on that occasion recognized the centrality of the Holy Spirit, especially for their life, governance, discernment, and mission. In a theme common to contemporary Eastern and Western pneumatology, there is the sense of the Holy Spirit as "the unknown beyond the Father and the Son" (Hans Urs Von Balthasar) or as "the infinite passage beyond the dyad" (Vladimir Lossky). Here I think we touch something profound, exciting, and at the same time stimulating: The Spirit is the one who always leads us beyond. It is a going beyond our prejudices and fears, beyond our resistance and divisions, beyond ourselves and even our own lived years! The 'afterlife' is always Christ and the Kingdom "hidden in mystery." All our traditions and movements are born and sustained in response to this "beyond." It is the beyond of God's own self, not outside the world but ever more deeply within it; the encounter with the risen and redeeming Christ that is the hope of all time and every age.

### **Beyond our logic and calculations**

Like on other occasions, the Holy Father emphasized at the beginning of the October 2015 Synod on the Family: "The Synod is also a protected space in which the Church experiences *the action of the Holy Spirit*. In the Synod, the Spirit speaks by means of the tongue of every person who lets himself be guided by God, who always surprises; God who reveals himself to little ones, who hides from the wise and intelligent; God who created the law and the Sabbath for man and not vice versa; by God, who leaves the 99 sheep to go in search of the one lost sheep; God who is always greater than our logic and our calculations. Let us remember, however, that the Synod will be a space for the action of the Holy Spirit only if we participants put on *apostolic courage, evangelical humility and trusting prayer*."<sup>5</sup>

To the Synod of the Greek-Catholic Church of Ukraine, Francis reminded bishops of the danger:

"To think, today, that making a synodal journey or having an attitude of synodality means to sound peoples' opinions, what this or that person thinks, and then to hold a meeting, to agree.... No, the Synod is not a Parliament! Things must be said, discussed as normal but it is not a Parliament. The Synod is not about reaching agreement as in politics: I give you this, in exchange for that. No. The Synod is not about making a sociological survey as some would suppose: "Let's see, we'll ask a group of lay people to make an inquiry, to find out if we should change this, this and this..." . You certainly need to know what your lay people are thinking, but it is not an inquiry; it is different. If there is no Holy Spirit, there is no Synod. If the Holy Spirit is not present, there is no synodality."<sup>6</sup>

On April 30, addressing members of the National Council of Italian Catholic Action, Pope Francis explained the risks of not listening to the Holy Spirit: "The Church of dialogue is a synodal Church, listening together to the Spirit and to the voice of God that reaches us through the cry of the poor and the earth. Sinners are also the poor of the earth. In fact, the synod is not so much a plan to be planned and implemented, a pastoral decision to be taken, but first and foremost a style to be embodied. . . And we must be precise when we speak of

synodality, of synodal journey, of synodal experience. Synodality is not a parliament, synodality is not being a parliament. Synodality is not only the discussion of problems, of different things that there are in society.... It is beyond that. Synodality is not about seeking a majority, for an agreement on the pastoral solutions that we have to do. This alone is not synodality; this is a nice 'Catholic parliament'. But it is not synodality. Because the Spirit is missing. What makes the discussion, the "parliament", the search for things become synodality, is the presence of the Spirit: prayer, silence, discernment of all we share. There can be no synodality without the Spirit, and there is no Spirit without prayer.<sup>7</sup>

### **Characteristics of ecclesial discernment**

There is no synodal path without ecclesial discernment! Synodal spirituality includes joint discernment of spirits – it is what makes the community, "the people of God". The Holy Father emphasizes that a synodal Church is a Church of listening. It is a mutual listening in which "everyone has something to learn. The faithful people, the college of bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the 'Spirit of truth' (Jn 14:17), in order to know what He 'says to the Churches' (Rev 2:7)."

Synodal conclusions are not decisions that result from well-conducted reasonings based on good information. Rather, they arise from "tuning in" to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, when discernment is lacking in the synodal process, we will be like a boat without sails and therefore a boat moved by the currents of the sea. And the energy of the wind (of the Spirit) is wasted. "Without the wisdom of discernment, we can easily become prey to every passing trend."<sup>8</sup>

"Discernment is not an advertising slogan, it is not an organizational technique, or a fad of this pontificate, but an interior attitude rooted in an act of faith. Discernment is the method and at the same time the goal we set ourselves: it is based on the conviction that God is at work in world history, in life's events, in the people I meet and who speak to me. For this reason, we are called to listen to what the Spirit suggests to us, with methods and in paths that are often unpredictable."<sup>9</sup>

### **A Church without fear: A pilgrim people of God**

If synodality lives in this "beyond" the Holy Spirit, then it must also be a discerning Church, a Church without fear. It truly becomes "God's pilgrim people" and universal sacrament of salvation, "light for the nations" and hope for a journeying humanity. The Church, in fact, has the greatest freedom of all because she can live the abandonment of the Kingdom, "without thinking of tomorrow" (Mt 6:25). This is neither complacency nor naivety, but faith, because the Church knows she is not a human creation, but the dwelling place made by God.

If the synodal path is not first and foremost a spiritual journey focused on the relationship with God, it certainly cannot bear the desired fruits. Regarding evangelization, Pope Francis urges us, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, to be "firmly rooted in prayer, for without prayer all our activity risks being fruitless and our message empty." (n. 259) And, on another occasion, insists that "changes in the Church without prayer are not changes made by the Church.

They are changes made by groups. [...] Without the light of this lamp [prayer], we would not be able to see the path of evangelization, or rather, we would not be able to see the path in order to believe well; we would not be able to see the faces of our brothers and sisters to draw near and serve; we would not be able to illuminate the room where we meet in community”<sup>10</sup>.

In this period of the synodal process, I ask you to keep everyone's attention focused on the spiritual dimension of the journey we are undertaking, to discern God's action in the life of the universal Church and in individual Churches. Like the Levites and the priests of the Psalm, be "ministers of prayer" for all, be persons who, in praise and intercession, remind all that without communion with God, there can be no communion among us.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul VI, *General Audience*, 16 April 1969.

<sup>2</sup> Francis, *Introduction to the Synod for the Family 2015*, 5 October 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Giuseppe De Rita, in «L'Osservatore Romano», 27 March 2021.

<sup>4</sup> M. Masciarelli, *Alla scuola del Maestro interiore*, in «L'Osservatore Romano», 1 September 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Francis, *Introduction to the Synod for the Family 2015*, cit.

<sup>6</sup> Id., *To the Bishops of the Synod of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church*, 2 September 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Id., *To the members of the National Council of Italian Catholic Action*, 30 April 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christus vivit*, n. 279; cf. Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et exsultate*, n. 167.

<sup>9</sup> Francis, *At the beginning of the Synod dedicated to young people*, 3 October 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Id., *Catechesis on Prayer n. 29: The Church teacher of prayer*, 14 April 2021.

*We recall that the purpose of the Synod and therefore of this consultation,  
is not to produce documents, but  
"to plant dreams, draw forth prophecies and visions, allow hope to flourish,  
inspire trust, bind up wounds, weave together relationships,  
awaken a dawn of hope,  
learn from one another and to create a bright resourcefulness  
that will enlighten minds, warm hearts, give strength to our hands"*