

Ecumenism in the Final Synod Document

Walking together!

curated by Mervat Kelli

In the synodal process initiated by the Catholic Church between 2021 and 2024, one of the most important underlying themes to emerge was ecumenism. The Final Document of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, entitled For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission, points out that the path towards Christian unity, rather than a question of theological dialogue, is an essential feature of synodality itself.

The Final Document of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (2021-2024) dedicates significant space to ecumenism, as an essential feature of synodality. The text thus manifests a profound continuity with the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council and with the subsequent magisterium, in particular with the encyclical *Ut unum sint* (1995) of Saint John Paul II, which indicated the path of unity as an obligatory path for the mission of the Church in the world.

The link between synodality and ecumenism is articulated in the Document by three main ideas: (1) synodality as a laboratory of communion among the baptized; (2) ecumenism lived in the ordinary life of communities; (3) missionary collaboration between Christian confessions. From this it follows that the synodal Church is open by its very nature to dialogue and mutual listening, both within the Catholic Church and in its ecumenical relations with other Churches and Christian communities. Synodality is therefore a practical and ecclesiological path toward unity.

A shared way of being church. The biblical image at the beginning of the Document – the three disciples running to the tomb (Jn 20:1-2) – is the model of a Church on a journey: Mary Magdalene, Peter and the beloved disciple represent three complementary ways of following the Risen One (n. 13). This icon is a model for synodality, as well as being a light for ecumenism: every Christian tradition, with its own charism and history, is called to journey towards unity in Christ, in a spirit of differentiated communion. Synodality does not seek uniformity, it values reconciled diversity: a communion where every voice is heard and every gift accepted (n. 23, 39-40). In this sense, the Document adopts the perspective of *Ut Unum Sint*, affirming that unity is already present because we share "one Baptism", faith in Christ and attentiveness to the Word (UUS 42-43). Visible unity is not an artificial construction, but a gift of the Spirit that grows through mutual recognition and shared life.

Listening to the Spirit and the exchange of gifts. Both synodality and ecumenism are based on listening to the Holy Spirit, who guides the Church through Scripture, Tradition and the *sensus fidei* of the People of God (nos. 22-23). Listening is not only personal, but also communitarian and guided by spiritual dialogue. The Document affirms that synodality implies a permanent ecclesial "conversion" (nos. 5, 6, 11, 33, 43), it means welcoming the diversity of gifts as an enrichment and not as an obstacle.

This is the meaning of the "exchange of gifts", central to *Ut unum sint*. Every Church or Christian community possesses riches that can be shared with a view to building unity (n. 122). The "exchange of gifts" becomes a way of synodal ecumenism. It is not only a diplomatic or theological practice, but a spiritual exchange that encompasses ecclesial life, liturgy, catechesis and pastoral care (n.11, n. 122).

The Church as a sacrament of unity. The Synodal Document takes up the Council's vision of the Church as the "universal sacrament of salvation" and the "sacrament of unity" (LG 1, 48), interpreting synodality as an expression of the missionary nature and openness to dialogue of the Church. Synodality is not something optional for the Church, but a way of living catholicity in a shared and relational manner (n. 28). Ecumenism should not be a separate activity, or something reserved for specialists, but a comprehensive vision informing the lives of the entire People of God (n. 23). In this way, synodality leads to an understanding of ecumenism that is not limited to doctrinal dialogue but involves local communities in a practical way (n. 40).

A shared mission. From a synodal point of view, ecumenism is an integral part of the Church's mission. The Document insists that the call to mission is also a call to conversion (No. 5, No. 11). This conversion means putting the logic of competition between Christian confessions behind us and opening ourselves to ways of evangelical cooperation. As John Paul II affirmed, unity is a condition for effective evangelization: "the quest for Christian unity is not a matter of choice or expediency, but a duty which springs from the very nature of the Christian community " (UUS 49).

According to the Document, the fruits of ecumenical dialogue must be accepted not only by ecclesial authorities, but by all the People of God. In paragraph n. 8 the task of reflecting on the "reception of the fruits of the ecumenical journey in the People of God" is entrusted to the Synodal Study Groups. The experience of listening and "conversation in the spirit" are identified as theological places where the wounds of division can be healed.

Conclusion. The synodal journey is not something closed within itself but is directing the Church towards a full and visible unity of Christians. As the Document states: "Unity ferments within the holy Church of God, prophetically so, for the entire world." (n. 4). Synodality thus offers an ecclesiological form of ecumenism, capable of integrating theological dialogue, community practice and spiritual experience into a dynamic vision of communion. Ultimately, synodality makes the Catholic Church more able to live an authentic ecumenism, which is dialogical, spiritual and missionary. In full continuity with *Ut Unum Sint*, the Synod outlines a model of the Church capable of walking together with her Christian brothers and sisters, under the guidance of the Spirit, towards that full unity which is both a gift and a task.