

*Bishop Philip writes...*

*A few days ago, Pope Francis gave a speech to the faithful of the Diocese of Rome about the forthcoming Synod.*

Dear Brothers and Sisters, good morning! As you know — it's not a novelty — a *synodal process* is about to begin, a journey in which the whole Church is engaged around the theme: "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission," three pillars. Three phases are foreseen, which will take place between October 2021 and October 2023. This itinerary was thought out as *dynamism of mutual listening*. I want to stress this: a dynamism of mutual listening carried out at all levels of the Church, involving all the People of God. The Cardinal Vicar and the Auxiliary Bishops must listen to one another, the priests must listen to one another, the Religious must listen to one another, the laity must listen to one another and then, all inter-listening to one another; to listen to one another; to talk to one another and to listen to one another. It's not about gathering opinions, no. This is not a survey, but about listening to the Holy Spirit, as we see in the Book of *Revelation*: "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the Churches" (2:7). The first commitment is to have ears, to listen. It's about hearing the voice of God, grasping His presence, intercepting His passage and breath of life. It happened to the prophet Elijah to discover that God is always a God of surprises, also in the way He passes and makes Himself heard: "a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks [. . .] but the Lord was not in the earthquake, and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire and after the fire a still small voice. And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle" (1 *Kings* 19:11-13).

This is how God speaks to us. And it is for this "light breeze" — that the exegetes translate also as "subtle voice of silence" and others as "a thread of sonorous silence" — that we must have our ears ready to hear this breeze of God. The first stage of the process (October 2021- April 2022) concerns the individual diocesan Churches. And it's for this that I am here, as your Bishop, to share because it's very important that the Diocese of Rome be committed with conviction to this journey. It would look bad if the Pope's Diocese wasn't committed to it, no? It would look bad for the Pope and also for you.

The subject of synodality isn't a chapter in a treatise on ecclesiology, and even less so a trend, a slogan, or a new term to use or instrumentalize in our meetings. No! Synodality expresses the nature of the Church, her form, her style and her mission. So we speak of a *Synodal Church*, avoiding, however, that it be a title among others, a way of thinking of her that includes alternatives. I don't say it on the basis of a theological opinion or even as a personal thought, but following what we can consider as the first

and most important “manual” of ecclesiology, which is the Book of the *Acts of the Apostles*.

The word “synod” contains all that is useful to understand what it means to *walk together*.” The Book of the *Acts* is the history of a journey that starts from Jerusalem and, going across Samaria and Judea, proceeding to the regions of Syria and Asia Minor, and then Greece, ends in Rome. This journey tells the story in which the Word of God and the people who turn their attention and faith to that Word, walk together. The Word of God walks with us. All are protagonists; no one can be considered simply an extra. It’s necessary to understand this well: all are protagonists. The Pope, the Cardinal Vicar, the Auxiliary Bishops are no longer the <sole> protagonists, no, we are all protagonists, and no one can be considered a simple extra. The ministries, then, were still considered genuine services. And authority was born of listening to the voice of God and of the people — never separate them — which held back “at the bottom” those that received it. Held at the “bottom” of life, <namely, those> to whom it was necessary to render the service of charity and of faith. However, that story is not only in movement through the geographic places it goes through. It expresses a continuous *interior restlessness*: this is a keyword, *interior restlessness*. If a Christian doesn’t feel this *interior restlessness*, if he doesn’t live it, he is lacking something, and this *interior restlessness* is born of our faith and invites us to assess what it is better to do, what must be kept or changed. History teaches us that to stay still can’t be a good condition for the Church (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 23). And movement is a consequence of docility to the Holy Spirit, who is the director of this story, in which all are restless protagonists, never still.

Peter and Paul are not only two people with their characters; they are visions inserted on horizons that are greater than them, capable of re-thinking themselves in relation to what is happening, witnesses of an impulse that puts them in crisis — another expression to remember always: to put in crisis —, which drives them to dare, to ask, to think again, to be mistaken and to learn from <their> errors, especially to hope despite the difficulties. They are disciples of the Holy Spirit, who makes them discover the geography of divine salvation, opening doors and windows, pulling down walls, breaking chains, freeing borders. Then it can be necessary to leave, to change the way, to exceed convictions held and that hinder us from moving and walking together.

We can see the Spirit that drives Peter to go to the house of Cornelius, the pagan centurion, despite his hesitation. Remember: Peter had had a vision that disturbed him, in which he was asked to eat things that were considered impure, and, despite the reassurance that what God purifies is no longer regarded as unclean, he remained perplexed. He was trying to understand, and men arrived there sent by Cornelius. He had also received a vision and a message. He was a Roman official, pious, sympathetic to

Judaism, but was not so sufficiently to be fully Jewish or Christian: no religious "customs" would have let him pass. He was a pagan, nevertheless, it was revealed to him that his prayers reached God and that he must send someone to ask Peter to come to his house. In this suspension, on one hand of Peter with his doubts, and on the other of Cornelius who waits in that grey area, it's for the Spirit to loosen Peter's resistance and to open a new page of the mission. The Spirit moves thus, like this. The meeting between the two seals one of the most beautiful phrases of Christianity. Cornelius went to meet him, cast himself at his feet, but, Peter lifted him up saying: "Stand up; I too am a man!" (Acts 10:26), and we all say this: "I am a man, I am a woman, we are human," and we should all say it, also the Bishops, all of us: "stand up; I too am a man." And the text stresses he talked with him familiarly (cf. v. 27). Christianity must always be human, humanizing, reconcile differences and distances, transforming them into familiarity, into proximity. One of the evils of the Church, indeed a perversion, is this clericalism that detaches the priest, the Bishop from the people. A Bishop or priest who is detached from the people is a functionary, not a Pastor. Saint Paul VI liked to quote Terentius' maxim: "I am man, I esteem nothing that is human foreign to me." The meeting between Peter and Cornelius resolves a problem, fosters the decision to feel free to preach directly to pagans, in the conviction — these are Peter's words — "I perceive that God shows no partiality" (Acts 10:34). One cannot discriminate in the Name of God. And discrimination is a sin also among us: "We are the pure ones, we are the elect, we are of this Movement that knows everything, we are . . . " No. We are Church, all of us together.

And see, we cannot understand "catholicity" without referring to this wide field hospital, which never marks the boundaries. To be Church is a journey to enter in this breadth of God. Then, turning to the *Acts of the Apostles*, there are problems that are born regarding the organization of the growing number of Christians, and especially in providing for the needs of the poor. Some point out the fact that the widows are neglected. The way in which the solution was found was to gather the disciples in assembly, taking together the decision to assign those seven men that would be committed full time in the *Diakonia*, in the service of the tables (Acts 6"1-7). And so, with discernment, with the needs, with the reality of life and the strength of the Spirit, the Church goes forward, walks together, is synodal. But it is always the Spirit who is the great protagonist of the Church.

Moreover, there is also a confrontation between visions and different expectations. We must not fear that this will happen again today. Maybe someone could argue like that! But they are signs of docility and openness to the Spirit. Even clashes can be determined, which reach dramatic points, as happened in face of the problem of the circumcision of pagans until the deliberation of what we call the Council of Jerusalem, the first Council. As

happens also today, there is a rigid way of considering the circumstances, which mortifies the *makrothymía* of God, namely, that patience of the gaze that is nourished by profound and wide and long visions; God sees far, God is not in a hurry. Rigidity is another perversion that is a sin against God's patience; it's a sin against the sovereignty of God. This happens also today.

It happened then that some, converted from Judaism, they believed in their self-reference that there couldn't be salvation without subjecting oneself to the Law of Moses. Thus they contested Paul, who proclaimed salvation directly in the Name of Jesus. To oppose his action would have compromised the reception of pagans, who in the meantime were converting. The Apostles and Elders sent Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem. It wasn't easy: in face of this problem the positions seemed irreconcilable. There were long discussions. It was about recognizing God's freedom of action, and that there were no obstacles that could hinder Him from reaching people's hearts, whatever their condition of provenance, moral or religious. The situation was unblocked by adherence to the evidence that "God, who knows hearts," the *cardiognostic* knows hearts, He Himself upheld the cause in favor of the possibility that the pagans could be admitted to salvation, "giving them also the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us" (Acts 15:8), thus giving the Holy Spirit to the pagans as He did to us. Thus respect prevailed for all sensibilities, tempering the excesses; a treasure was made of the experience Peter had with Cornelius: so, in the final document we find the testimony of the leadership of the Spirit in this journey of decisions, and of the wisdom that is always capable of inspiring. "For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things" (Acts 15:28). "Us": in this Synod, we go on the path to be able to say: "it seemed to the Holy Spirit *and to us*," because you will be in continuous dialogue between yourselves under the action of the Holy Spirit, also in a dialogue with the Holy Spirit. Don't forget this formula: "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden": it seemed good to the Holy Spirit *and to us*. This is how you should seek to express yourselves, on this synodal journey, on this synodal path. If the Spirit is not there, it will be a diocesan parliament, but not a Synod. We are not making a diocesan parliament, we are not making a study on this or that topic, no, we are undertaking a journey to listen to one another and to listen to the Holy Spirit. To discuss and to discuss also with the Holy Spirit, which is a way of praying.

"The Holy Spirit and us," instead, there is always the temptation to do it oneself, expressing a *substitute ecclesiology* — there are so many substitute ecclesiologies — as if, having ascended to Heaven, the Lord has left us a void to fill, and we fill it. No, the Lord has left us the Spirit! But Jesus' words are clear: "I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Counsellor, to be with you forever. [. . .]" I will not leave you desolate"

(John 14:16.18). The Church is a *sacrament* to implement this promise, as affirmed in *Lumen Gentium* 1: "The Church is, in Christ, in some way the sacrament, namely, the sign and the instrument of the intimate union with God and of the unity of the whole human race." In this phrase, which gathers the testimony of the Council of Jerusalem, is the denial of one who is determined to take God's place, pretending to model the Church on his own cultural, historical convictions, constraining her to armed borders, guilty customs, to spiritualities that blaspheme the gratuitousness of God's engaging action. When the Church is witness, in words and facts, of God's unconditional love, of His hospitable breadth, she truly expresses her catholicity and is *pushed*, interiorly and exteriorly, to go through spaces and times. The impulse and the capacity come from the Spirit: "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). You will receive the power of the Holy Spirit to be witnesses: this is the way of us, Church, and we will be Church if we go on this way.

Synodal Church means Church sacrament of this promise — namely, that the Spirit will be with us — which is manifested by cultivating intimacy with the Spirit and with the world to come. There will always be discussions, thank God, but the solutions are found by giving the word to God and to His voices in our midst; praying and opening our eyes to all that surrounds us; practicing a life faithful to the Gospel, questioning Revelation according to a *pilgrim hermeneutic* that is able to *keep* the journey begun in the *Acts of the Apostles*. And this is important: the way of understanding, of interpreting, a *pilgrim hermeneutic*, that is, one which is on the way. The journey it began after the Council? No. It began with the first Apostles and it continues. When the Church stops, she's no longer Church, but a beautiful pious association because she cages the Holy Spirit. <It must be> a *pilgrim hermeneutic*, which is able to preserve the journey begun in the Acts of the Apostles; otherwise, the Holy Spirit would be humiliated. Gustav Mahler — I've said this at other times — held that fidelity to tradition does not consist in adoring the ashes but in guarding the fire. I ask you; 'before beginning this synodal journey, to what are you most inclined: to guard the Church's ashes, namely, your Association, your group, or to guard the fire? Are you more inclined to adore your things, which close you — I am for Peter, I am for Paul, I am of this Association, you are of the other, I am a priest, I am a Bishop — or do you feel called to guard the *fire* of the Spirit? Gustav Mahler was a great composer, but, with this reflection, he is also a teacher of wisdom. Quoting the Letter to the Hebrews, *Dei Verbum* (n. 8) affirms: "' In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers (*Hebrews* 1:1), He does not cease to speak with the Bride of His Son.'" There is a happy formula of Saint Vincent of Lérins that, comparing the human being in growth and the Tradition that is transmitted from one generation to another, affirms that the 'deposit of the faith' can't be preserved without making it progress: 'consolidating itself

over the years, developing itself in time, going deeper with age' (*Commonitorium Primum*, 23:9) – '*ut annis consolidetur, dilatetur tempore, sublimetur aetate.*' This is the style of our journey: if we don't walk, the realities are like the waters. The theological realities are like water: if the water doesn't run and is stale, it's the first to enter in putrefaction. A stale Church begins to be putrid.

See how our Tradition is leavened dough, a reality in ferment where we can recognize the growth, and, in the mixture, a communion that takes place in movement: to walk together brings about true communion. An again it's the Book of the *Acts of the Apostles* that comes to our aid, showing us that communion doesn't do away with differences. It's the surprise of Pentecost, when the different languages aren't obstacles: notwithstanding the fact they were strangers to one another, thanks to the action of the Spirit "each one heard them speaking in his own native language" (*Acts* 2:8), feeling at home, different but solidary on the way. Sorry for the length of this address, but the Synod is a serious thing, and therefore I have permitted myself to speak . . .

Turning to the synodal process, the diocesan phase is very important, because it carries out the listening of the totality of the baptized, subject of the *sensus fidei* infallible in *credendo*. There are many resistances to overcome the image of a Church rigidly different, between heads and subalterns, between one who teaches and one who must learn, forgetting that God likes to overturn the positions: "He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree" (*Luke* 1:52), Mary said. Walking together discovers the horizontality rather than the verticality of her line. The synodal Church restores the horizon from which the sun Christ rises. To erect hierarchical monuments means to cover it. The Pastors walk with the people: we, Pastors, walk with the people, sometimes in front, sometimes in their midst to encourage them and not forget the odor of the flock, sometimes behind because the people also have a "scent." It has a scent in finding new ways for the journey, to find again the lost way. I want to stress this, and also to the Bishops and priests of the diocese. In their synodal journey, they must ask themselves: "But am I capable of walking or moving in front, in the midst or behind them, or am I only in the chair, miter and staff?" Interfering Pastors, but Pastors, not flock: the flock knows we are Pastors, the flock knows the difference. In front to point out the way, in their midst to hear what the people feel and behind to help those that remain somewhat behind and let the people see, somewhat with their scent, where the herbage is better.

The *sensus fidei* qualifies *all* in the dignity of the prophetic function of Jesus Christ (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 34-35), so as to be able to discern the ways of the Gospel in the present. It's the "scent" of the sheep, but let us pay attention <to the fact> that, in the history of salvation, we are all sheep in regard to the Shepherd who is the Lord. The image helps us to understand

the two dimensions that contribute to this "scent." One is personal and the other communal: we are sheep and we are part of the flock, which in this case represents the Church We are reading in the Breviary, Office of Readings, Augustine's *De pastoribus*, and there he says to us: "With you, I am a sheep, for you, I am a Pastor. "These two aspects, personal and ecclesial, are inseparable: the *sensus fidei* can't be exercised without participation in the life of the Church, which is not only Catholic activism but, above all, must be that "feeling" which is nourished on Christ's sentiments" (*Philippians* 2:5).

The exercise of the *sensus fidei* can't be reduced to communication and to the comparison between the opinions we can have regarding this or that subject, to that single aspect of the doctrine, or that rule of discipline. No, those are instruments, they are verbalizations; they are dogmatic or disciplinary expressions. However, the idea must not prevail to distinguish <between> majorities and minorities: a parliament does this. How many times the "rejected" have become the "cornerstone" (cf. *Psalm* 118:22; *Matthew* 21:42), the "distant" have become "close" (*Ephesians* 2:13). The marginalized, the poor, those without hope have been elected sacrament of Christ (cf. *Matthew* 25: 31-46). The Church is like this. And when some groups wanted to be distinguished more, these groups always ended badly, even in the negation of Salvation, in heresies. We think of these heresies that attempted to take the Church forward, such as Pelagianism, then Jansenism. Every heresy has ended badly. Gnosticism and Pelagianism are constant temptations of the Church. We take such trouble, rightly, for everything to honor the Liturgical Celebrations, and this is good – even if often we end up by comforting only ourselves – but Saint John Chrysostom warns us: "Do you want to honor the body of Christ? <If so> do not allow Him to be an object of contempt in His members, namely, the poor, deprived of clothes to cover themselves. Do not honor Him here in church with silk fabrics, while you neglect Him outside when He suffers from the cold and nakedness. He who said: 'This is my Body,' confirming the fact with the word, also said 'You saw me hungry and you did not give me to eat' and: 'Every time that you did not do these things to one of the least among these, you did not do it even for Me'" (*Homily on Matthew's Gospel*, 50,3). "But, Father, what are you saying? Are the poor, the beggars, the young drug addicts, all these that society rejects, part of the Synod?" Yes, dear, I don't say it, the Lord says it: they are part of the Church. To such a point that, if you don't call them, a way will be found, or if you don't go to them to be somewhat with them, to *feel* not what they say but what they feel, including the insults they give you, you are not doing the Synod well. The Synod goes to the limits; it embraces all. The Synod is also to make room for dialogue on our miseries, the miseries I have as your Bishop, the miseries the Auxiliary Bishops have, the miseries the priests and the laity have, and those that belong to Associations; take up all this misery! But if we don't include the miserable – in quotation marks – of the society, those rejected we will never be able to take charge

of our miseries. And this is important: that in the dialogue our own miseries can emerge, without justifications. Don't be afraid!

It is necessary to feel part of one great people recipient of the divine promises, open to a future that hopes that everyone will be able to participate in the banquet prepared by God for *all peoples* (cf. *Isaiah 25:6*). And here I want to specify that also on the concept of "People of God" there can be rigid and antagonistic hermeneutics, remaining trapped in the idea of exclusivity, of privilege, as happens with the interpretation of the concept of "election", which the prophets corrected, indicating how it should be properly understood. To be "People of God" is not about a privilege, but about a gift that someone receives . . . for himself? No, for all, the gift is to be given: this is the vocation. It's a gift that someone receives for all, which we have received for others; it is a gift that is also a responsibility; the responsibility to witness in deeds and not only in words, the wonders of God that, if known, help people to discover their existence and to receive their salvation. Election is a gift, and the question is: how do I give, donate my being Christian, my Christian confession? God's universal salvific Will is offered to history, to all of humanity through the Incarnation of the Son, so that all, through the mediation of the Church, can become His children, brothers, and sisters among themselves. It's in this way that the universal reconciliation between God and humanity is realized, that unity of all the human race of which the Church is sign and instrument (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 1). Already before Vatican Council II the reflection matured, elaborated on the careful study of the Fathers, that the People of God is striving towards the realization of the Kingdom, towards the unity of the human race created and loved by God. And the Church as we know her and experience her, in the apostolic succession, this Church *must feel herself in relation with this universal election* and, therefore, carry out her mission. I wrote *Fratelli Tutti* with this spirit. As Saint Paul VI said, the Church is the teacher of humanity, which today has the object to become the school of fraternity.

Why do I say these things to you? Because in the synodal journey, listening must take into account the *sensus fidei*, but it must not neglect all those incarnated "misgivings" where we can't expect it: one can be a "scent without citizenship," but no less effective. In his freedom, the Holy Spirit knows no borders, nor does He allow Himself to be limited by memberships. If the parish is the home of all in the neighborhood, not an exclusive club, I recommend: leave the doors and windows open, don't limit yourselves to take into consideration only those that frequent it or thinks of it as you do — which will be 3,4 or 5%, not more. Allow all to enter . . . Allow yourselves to go to encounter and let yourselves be questioned, may their questions be your questions, allow yourselves to walk together: the Spirit will lead you, have trust in the Spirit. Don't be afraid to enter into dialogue and let yourselves be disturbed by the dialogue: it's the dialogue of salvation.

Don't be disenchanted, *prepare yourselves for surprises*. There is an episode in the Book of *Numbers* (chapter 22) that talks of a donkey that will become a prophetic voice of God. The Jews are ending the long journey that will lead them to the Promised Land. Their passage scares King Balak of Moab, who entrusts himself to the powers of the magician Balaam to block those people, hoping to avoid a war. The magician, a believer in his own way, asks God what to do. God tells him not to second the King, who however insists, and so he gives in and goes out on a donkey to carry out the command received. However, the donkey changes the way because it sees an Angel with an unsheathed sword that is there to represent God's opposition. Balaam pulls it, beats it, without being able to make it turn on the way. Until the donkey begins to talk, starting a dialogue that will open the magician's eyes, transforming his mission of malediction and death into a mission of blessing and life.

This story teaches us to trust that the Spirit will always have his voice heard. Even a donkey can become God's voice, open our eyes and change our mistaken directions. If a donkey can do it, how much more a baptized man, a baptized woman, a priest, a Bishop, a Pope can do it. Suffice it to entrust oneself to the Holy Spirit who uses all creatures to speak to us <but> only those that ask to have their ears cleaned to hear well.

I came here to encourage you to take this synodal process seriously and to tell you that the Holy Spirit needs you. And this is true: the Holy Spirit needs us. Listen to Him by listening to one another. Don't leave anyone outside or behind. It will do the Diocese of Rome good and all the Church, not to reinforce itself only by reforming the structures — this is a great deception! — by giving instructions, by offering retreats and conferences, or by virtue of directives and programs — this is good, but as part of something else — but it will rediscover itself to be people that want to walk together, among ourselves and with humanity. A people — that of Rome — that contains a variety of all peoples and all conditions: what extraordinary richness, in its complexity! But we must come out of the 3-4% that represents those that are closest and go beyond to listen to others, who sometimes will insult you, throw you out, but it's necessary to hear what they think, without wanting to impose our things: let the Spirit speak to us.

In this time of pandemic, the Lord pushes the mission of a Church that is the sacrament of care. The world has raised its cry, has manifested its vulnerability: the world is in need of care. Courage and forward! Thank you!