

Pope on Synod: The participation of everyone, guided by the Holy Spirit

By Robin Gomes

As the Universal Church is about to embark on the synodal journey, Pope Francis on Saturday invoked the Holy Spirit on the People of God so that they will be able to move forward together, to listen to one another and discern our times, in solidarity with the struggles and aspirations of all humanity.

The Pope prayed as he presided over a moment of reflection in the Vatican's Synod Hall, on the eve the official inauguration of the diocesan phase of the Synod for all the dioceses around the world, marked by a solemn Mass in Rome's St. Peter's Square on Sunday, Oct. 10. Dioceses across the world will inaugurate the synodal journey at the local level on Oct. 17.

A special Synod

The theme of the upcoming 16th Synod of Bishops is: "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission". Synodality indicates walking together and listening to one another but above all to the Holy Spirit. To deepen this essential characteristic of the Church, the upcoming synod is unlike any previous one. It starts with, and involves all the faithful at local Churches across the world, promising to listen to all, especially to laypeople. That is why this Synod is a 2-year process, starting from October 10, 2021, to October 2023.

The diocesan listening phase will run until April 2022 and will be followed by a continental phase from September 2022 to March 2023. The final "universal Church phase" will culminate in the traditional assembly of the Synod of Bishops in the Vatican in October 2023.

The protagonist of the Synod – the Spirit

In his discourse at Saturday's moment of prayer and reflection, Pope Francis dwelt on how the synodality of the Church is achieved, namely, through communion, participation, and mission. He also pointed out the dangers it can run into, as well as the opportunities it offers.

"In the one People of God, therefore, let us journey together, in order to experience a Church that receives and lives this gift of unity, and is open to the voice of the Spirit,"

Pope Francis said, stressing that the Synod is an “ecclesial moment”, not a parliament or an investigation into opinions, but “an ecclesial moment” whose protagonist is the Holy Spirit. “Without the Spirit, there is no Synod,” he stressed.

Communion, participation, mission

Explaining the Synod’s three key words - communion, participation, and mission – he said that communion and mission describe the mystery of the Church. Communion expresses the very nature of the Church, according to the Second Vatican Council.

According to Saint Paul VI “communion, that is, cohesion and interior fullness, in grace, truth and collaboration... and mission, that is, apostolic commitment to the world of today”. Saint John Paul II stressed that *koinonia* gives rise to the Church’s mission of serving as a sign of the human family’s intimate union with God.

For this reason, Pope Francis said, Synods must be well prepared for, especially at the local level with the participation of all.

All are called to participate

He pointed out that ‘communion’ and ‘mission’ can risk remaining somewhat abstract, unless synodality is concretely expressed at every step of the synodal journey and activity, encouraging real involvement on the part of each and all”. “All the baptized are called to take part in the Church’s life and mission.”

He acknowledged the frustration and impatience felt by many pastoral workers, members of diocesan and parish consultative bodies, and women, who frequently remain on the fringes. “Enabling everyone to participate is an essential ecclesial duty!” he stressed, adding, it is an indispensable ecclesial commitment based on the “identity card” of the baptism.

Three risks to avoid

The Pope warned that a Synod can run the risk of being a mere formal external event, instead of being “a process of authentic spiritual discernment that we undertake, not to project a good image of ourselves, but to cooperate more effectively with the work of God in history”. For this, “we need content, means, and structures that can facilitate dialogue and interaction within the People of God, especially between priests and laity”. He noted that at times there is a type of “elitism” among the clergy that distances them from the laity, which makes them the “lord of the house” and not a shepherd. This, the Pope said, requires changing certain overly vertical, distorted, and partial visions of the

Church, the priestly ministry, the role of the laity, ecclesial responsibilities, roles of governance, and so forth.

Another risk that a Synod can run into is becoming intellectual, offering learned but abstract approaches to the problems of the Church and the evils in our world, which are far removed from the reality of the holy People of God and the concrete life of communities around the world.

A third danger that a Synod should avoid, the Pope said, is the temptation to complacency, which says, we have always done it this way” and it is better not to change. The word ‘complacency’ “is a poison in the life of the Church”. People with such an attitude apply old solutions to new problems. The Holy Father stressed that the synodal process should involve the local Churches, in different phases and from the bottom up, in an exciting and engaging effort that can forge a style of communion and participation directed to mission”.

Three opportunities

Pope Francis pointed out that the synodal process of encounter, listening, and reflection help the People of God, the Church, to recognize at least three opportunities. First, it must move not occasionally but structurally towards a synodal Church, where all can feel at home and participate.

Second, the Synod offers us the opportunity to become a listening Church, to break out of our routine in order to stop and listen, firstly to the Spirit in adoration and prayer, and then to our brothers and sisters, their hopes, the crises of faith around the world, the need for renewed pastoral life.

Keeping in mind that God’s style is one of closeness, compassion and tenderness, the Pope said the Synod is also an occasion for the People of God not to be aloof but to become a Church of closeness by her very presence, bandaging wounds and healing broken hearts with the balm of God.

Not another Church but a different Church

For this, the Holy Father said, we need the ever new breath of God, the Spirit, who sets us free from every form of self-absorption, revives what is moribund, loosens shackles, and spreads joy. “There is no need to create another Church, but to create a different Church,” the Pope said citing Dominican priest Father Yves Marie-Joseph Congar. “For a ‘different Church’, the Pope urged all to invoke the Holy Spirit with greater fervour and frequency and humbly listen to Him.