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Preparatory Document for the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops

**For a Synodal Church:
Communion, Participation, and Mission**

Preparatory Document

CONTENTS

I. The Call to Journey Together

II. A Constitutively Synodal Church

III. Listening to the Scriptures

Jesus, the Crowd, the Apostles

A Double Dynamic of Conversion: Peter and Cornelius (Acts 10)

IV. Synodality in Action: Pathways for Consulting the People of God

The Fundamental Question

Different Articulations of Synodality

Ten Thematic Nuclei to be Explored

To Contribute to the Consultation

1. The Church of God is convoked in Synod. The path entitled “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission” will solemnly open on the 9th – 10th of October 2021 in Rome and on the following 17th of October in each particular Church. One fundamental stage will be the celebration of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, in October 2023,[1] which will be followed by the implementation phase that will again involve the particular Churches (cf. EC, arts. 19-21). With this convocation, Pope Francis invites the entire Church to reflect on a theme that is decisive for its life and mission: “It is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium.”[2] This journey, which follows in the wake of the Church’s “renewal” proposed by the Second Vatican Council, is both a gift and a task: by journeying together and reflecting together on the journey that has been made, the Church will be able to learn through Her experience which processes can help Her to live communion, to achieve participation, to open Herself to mission. Our “journeying together” is, in fact, what most effectively enacts and manifests the nature of the Church as the pilgrim and missionary People of God.

2. A basic question prompts and guides us: How does this “journeying together,” which takes place today on different levels (from the local level to the universal one), allow the Church to proclaim the Gospel in accordance with the mission entrusted to Her; and what steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow as a synodal Church?

Addressing this question together requires listening to the Holy Spirit, who like the wind “blows where it wills; you can hear the sound it makes, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes” (*Jn* 3:8), remaining open to the surprises that the Spirit will certainly prepare for us along the way. Thus, a dynamism is activated that allows us to begin to reap some of the fruits of a synodal conversion, which will progressively mature. These are objectives of great importance for the quality of ecclesial life and for accomplishing the mission of evangelization, in which we all participate by virtue of our Baptism and Confirmation. Here, we will indicate the main objectives, which decline synodality as the form, the style, and the structure of the Church:

- recalling how the Spirit has guided the Church’s journey through history and, today, calls us to be, together, witnesses of God’s love;
- living a participative and inclusive ecclesial process that offers everyone—especially those who for various reasons find themselves on the margins—the opportunity to express themselves and to be heard in order to contribute to the edification of the People of God;
- recognizing and appreciating the wealth and the variety of the gifts and charisms that the Spirit liberally bestows for the good of the community and the benefit of the entire human family;
- exploring participatory ways of exercising responsibility in the proclamation of the Gospel and in the effort to build a more beautiful and habitable world;
- examining how responsibility and power are lived in the Church as well as the structures by which they are managed, bringing to light and trying to convert prejudices and distorted practices that are not rooted in the Gospel;
- accrediting the Christian community as a credible subject and reliable partner in paths of social dialogue, healing, reconciliation, inclusion and participation, the reconstruction of democracy, the promotion of fraternity and social friendship;
- regenerating relationships among members of Christian communities as well as between communities and other social groups, e.g., communities of believers of other denominations and religions, civil society organizations, popular movements, etc.;
- fostering the appreciation and appropriation of the fruits of recent synodal experiences on the universal, regional, national, and local levels.

3. This Preparatory Document is at the service of the synodal journey, especially as a tool to facilitate the first phase of listening to and consulting the People of God in the particular Churches (October 2021 - April 2022), in the hope of helping to set in motion the ideas, energy, and creativity of all those who will take part in the journey, and to make it easier to share the fruits of their efforts. With this aim: 1) it begins by outlining some prominent characteristics of the contemporary context; 2) it synthetically illustrates the fundamental theological references for a correct understanding and practice of synodality; 3) it offers some biblical thoughts that can nourish meditation and prayerful reflection along the way; 4) it illustrates some perspectives from which to reread the experiences of lived synodality; 5) it shows some ways of articulating this work of rereading in prayer and sharing. To concretely accompany the organization of the work, a methodological *Handbook*, annexed to this Preparatory Document and available on the dedicated hosting website, is proposed[3]. The site offers some resources for deepening the theme of synodality, as a support to this Preparatory Document; among these, we would like to highlight two that are mentioned several times below: the *Address at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops*, given by Pope Francis on the 17th of October 2015, and the document *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, prepared by the International Theological Commission and published in 2018.

I. The Call to Journey Together

4. The synodal journey unfolds within a historical context marked by epochal changes in society and by a crucial transition in the life of the Church, which cannot be ignored: it is within the folds of the complexity of this context, in its tensions and contradictions, that we are called to “scrutinize the signs of the times and interpret them in the light of the Gospel” (GS, no. 4). Some elements of the global scenario most closely connected to the theme of the Synod are outlined here; but the picture will need to be enriched and completed at the local level.

5. A global tragedy such as the COVID-19 pandemic “momentarily revived the sense that we are a global community, all in the same boat, where one person’s problems are the problems of all. Once more we realized that no one is saved alone; we can only be saved together” (FT, no. 32). At the same time, the pandemic has also made the already existing inequalities and inequities explode: humanity seems increasingly shaken by processes of massification and fragmentation; the tragic condition faced by migrants in all regions of the world shows how high and strong the barriers dividing the single human family still are. The Encyclicals *Laudato si’* and *Fratelli Tutti* document the depth of the fault lines that run through humanity, and we can refer to these analyses to start listening to the cry of the poor and of the earth and to recognize the seeds of hope and of the future that the Spirit continues to sow even in our time: “The Creator does not abandon us; he never forsakes his loving plan or repents of having created us. Humanity still has the ability to work together in building our common home” (LS, no. 13).

6. This situation, which, despite great differences, unites the entire human family, challenges the Church’s ability to accompany individuals and communities to reread experiences of mourning and suffering that have unmasked many false certainties, and to cultivate hope and faith in the goodness of the Creator and his creation. However, we cannot hide from the fact that the Church herself must face the lack of faith and the corruption even within herself. In particular, we cannot forget the suffering experienced by minors and vulnerable people “due to sexual abuse, the abuse of power and the abuse of conscience perpetrated by a significant number of clerics and consecrated persons.”[4] We are continually challenged “as the People of God to take on the pain of our brothers and sisters wounded in their flesh and in their spirit.”[5] For too long the cry of the victims has been a cry that the Church has not been able to hear sufficiently. These are deep wounds that are difficult to heal, for which forgiveness can never be asked for enough and which constitute obstacles, sometimes imposing ones, to advancing in the direction of “journeying together.” The whole Church is called to deal with the weight of a culture imbued with clericalism that she inherits from her history, and with those forms of exercising authority on which the different types of abuse (power, economic, conscience, sexual) are grafted. It is impossible to think of “a conversion of our activity as a Church that does not include the active participation of all the members of God’s People:”[6] together let us ask the Lord for “the grace of conversion and the interior anointing needed to express before these crimes of abuse our compunction and our resolve courageously to combat them.”[7]

7. In spite of our infidelities, the Spirit continues to act in history and to show his life-giving power. It is precisely in the furrows dug by the sufferings of every kind endured by the human family and by the People of God that

new languages of faith and new paths are flourishing, : capable not only of interpreting events from a theological point of view but also of finding in trials the reasons for refounding the path of Christian and ecclesial life. It is a reason for great hope that more than a few Churches have already begun more or less structured meetings and consultation processes with the People of God. Where they have been marked by a synodal style, the sense of Church has flourished and the participation of all has given new impetus to ecclesial life. The desire of young people to be protagonists within the Church and the request for a greater appreciation of women and spaces for participation in the mission of the Church, already signaled by the Synodal Assemblies of 2018 and 2019, are also confirmed. The recent institution of the lay ministry of Catechist and the opening of access to those of Lector and Acolyte to women also move in this direction.

8. We cannot ignore the variety of conditions in which Christian communities live in the different regions of the world. Alongside countries where the Church welcomes the majority of the population and represents a cultural reference point for the whole of society, there are others where Catholics are a minority; in some of these countries, Catholics, together with other Christians, experience forms of persecution, including some very violent ones, and not infrequently martyrdom. If, on the one hand, a secularized mentality tends to expel religion from the public space, on the other hand, religious fundamentalism, without respect for the liberties of others, feeds forms of intolerance and violence that are also reflected in the Christian community and in its relations with society. Christians not infrequently adopt the same attitudes, even fomenting divisions and opposition, including within the Church. It is equally necessary to consider the reverberation, within the Church and in its relations with society, of the fractures caused by reasons of ethnicity, race, caste, or other forms of social stratification or cultural and structural violence, which run through the latter. These situations have a profound impact on the meaning of the expression “journeying together” and on the concrete possibilities of doing so.

9. Within this context, synodality represents the main road for the Church, called to renew herself under the action of the Spirit and by listening to the Word. The ability to imagine a different future for the Church and her institutions, in keeping with the mission she has received, depends largely on the decision to initiate processes of listening, dialogue, and community discernment, in which each and every person can participate and contribute. At the same time, the decision to “journey together” is a prophetic sign for the human family, which needs a shared project capable of pursuing the good of all. A Church capable of communion and fraternity, of participation and subsidiarity, in fidelity to what she proclaims, will be able to stand beside the poor and the least and lend them her own voice. In order to “journey together,” we need to let ourselves be educated by the Spirit to a truly synodal mentality, entering with courage and freedom of heart into a conversion process that is indispensable for the “continual reformation of which [the Church] always has need, in so far as she is a human institution” (UR, no. 6; cf. EG, no. 26).

II. A Constitutively Synodal Church

10. “It is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium. What the Lord is asking of us is already in some sense present in the very word ‘synod’,”[8] which is “is an ancient and venerable word in the Tradition of the Church, whose meaning draws on the deepest themes of Revelation.”[9] It is “the Lord Jesus who presents Himself as ‘the way, the truth, and the life’ (Jn 14:6),” and “Christians, His followers, were originally called ‘followers of the Way’ (cf. Acts 9:2; 19,9.23; 22,4; 24,14.22).”[10] Synodality, in this perspective, is much more than the celebration of ecclesial meetings and Bishops’ assemblies, or a matter of simple internal administration within the Church; it is “the specific *modus vivendi et operandi* of the Church, the People of God, which reveals and gives substance to her being as communion when all her members journey together, gather in assembly and take an active part in her evangelizing mission.”[11] Thus are intertwined the main axes of a synodal Church that the title of the Synod proposes: communion, participation, and mission. In this chapter, we will briefly illustrate some fundamental theological references on which this perspective is based.

11. In the first millennium, “journeying together”—that is, practicing synodality—was the ordinary way in which the Church, understood as “People united in the unity of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,”[12] acted. To those who were creating divisions in the ecclesial body, the Church Fathers opposed the communion of the Churches scattered throughout the world, described by St. Augustine as “*concordissima fidei conspiratio*,”[13] that is, the agreement in faith of all the Baptized. Here are the roots of the broad development

of a synodal praxis at all levels of the Church's life—local, provincial, and universal—that reached its highest manifestation in the Ecumenical Council. Within this ecclesial horizon, inspired by the principle of the participation of all in the life of the Church, St. John Chrysostom was able to say that “Church and Synod are synonymous.”[14] Even in the second millennium, when the Church emphasized more strongly the hierarchical function, this way of proceeding did not cease: if, alongside the celebration of ecumenical councils, and that of diocesan and provincial synods is well attested, when it came to defining dogmatic truths, the Popes wished to consult the Bishops in order to know the faith of the whole Church, by appealing to the authority of the *sensus fidei* of the entire People of God, which is “infallible ‘*in credendo*’” (EG, no. 119).

12. The Second Vatican Council is anchored in this dynamic of Tradition. It emphasizes that “God, however, does not make men holy and save them merely as individuals, without bond or link between one another. Rather has it pleased Him to bring men together as one people, a people which acknowledges Him in truth and serves Him in holiness.” (LG, no. 9). The members of the People of God are united by Baptism, and “if by the will of Christ some are made teachers, pastors and dispensers of mysteries on behalf of others, yet all share a true equality with regard to the dignity and to the activity common to all the Faithful for the building up of the Body of Christ” (LG, no. 32). Therefore, all the Baptized, participants in Christ's priestly, prophetic, and kingly functions by “exercising the variety and ordered richness of their charisms, their vocations and their ministries,”[15] are active subjects of evangelization, both individually and as the entire People of God.

13. The Council emphasized how, by virtue of the anointing of the Holy Spirit received in Baptism, the totality of the Faithful “cannot err in matters of belief. They manifest this special property by means of the whole Peoples' supernatural discernment in matters of faith when ‘from the Bishops down to the last of the lay Faithful’ they show universal agreement in matters of faith and morals” (LG, no. 12). It is the Spirit who guides the faithful “to all truth” (*Jn* 16:13). Through action of the Spirit, “this tradition which comes from the Apostles develops in the Church” so that the People of God may grow “in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down. This happens through the contemplation and study made by believers, who treasure these things in their hearts (cf. *Lk* 2:19, 51) through a penetrating understanding of the spiritual realities which they experience, and through the preaching of those who have received through Episcopal succession the sure gift of truth” (DV, no. 8). In fact, this People, gathered together by its Pastors, adheres to the sacred deposit of the Word of God entrusted to the Church, perseveres constantly in the teaching of the Apostles, in fraternal communion, in the breaking of bread, and in prayer, “so that holding to, practicing, and professing the heritage of the faith, it becomes on the part of the Bishops and Faithful a single common effort” (DV, no. 10).

14. The Pastors, established by God as “authentic guardians, interpreters and witnesses of the faith of the whole Church,”[16] should not be afraid to listen to the Flock entrusted to them. The consultation of the People of God does not imply the assumption within the Church of the dynamics of democracy based on the principle of majority, because there is, at the basis of participation in every synodal process, a shared passion for the common mission of evangelization and not the representation of conflicting interests. In other words, this is an ecclesial process that can only take place “at the heart of a hierarchically structured community.” [17] It is in the fruitful bond between the *sensus fidei* of the People of God and the magisterial function of the Pastors that the unanimous consensus of the whole Church in the same faith is realized. Every synodal process, in which the Bishops are called to discern what the Spirit is saying to the Church, not by themselves but by listening to the People of God, who “shares also in Christ's prophetic office” (LG, no. 12), is an evident form of that “journeying together” which makes the Church grow. St. Benedict emphasizes how “the Lord often reveals the most prudent course to be followed”[18] to those who do not occupy important positions in the community (in that case, the youngest); thus, the Bishops should take care to reach out to everyone, so that, in the orderly unfolding of the synodal journey, what the apostle Paul recommends to the communities may be realized: “Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophetic utterances. Test everything; retain what is good” (*1 Thess* 5:19-21).

15. The meaning of the journey to which we are all called is above all that of discovering the face and form of a synodal Church, 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).”[19] The Bishop of Rome, as the principle and foundation of the Church's unity, asks all the Bishops and all the particular Churches, in which and from which the one and only Catholic Church exists (cf. LG, no. 23), to enter with confidence and courage into the path of

synodality. In this “journeying together,” we ask the Spirit to help us discover how communion, which brings together in unity the variety of gifts, charisms, and ministries, is for the mission: a synodal Church is a Church “going forth,” a missionary Church “whose doors are open” (EG, no. 46). This includes the call to deepen relationships with other Churches and Christian communities, with which we are united by the one Baptism. The perspective of “journeying together,” then, is even broader, and embraces all humankind, whose “joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties” we share (GS, no. 1). A synodal Church is a prophetic sign, above all for a community of nations incapable of proposing a shared project, through which to pursue the good of all: practicing synodality is today for the Church the most evident way to be “the universal sacrament of salvation” (LG, no. 48), “a sign and instrument of intimate union with God and of the unity of the whole human race” (LG, no. 1).

III. Listening to the Scriptures

16. The Spirit of God, who illuminates and vivifies this “journeying together” of the Churches, is the same Spirit who works in the mission of Jesus, promised to the Apostles and to the generations of disciples who hear God’s Word and put it into practice. The Spirit, according to the Lord’s promise, does not limit himself to confirming the continuity of the Gospel of Jesus, but will illuminate the ever-new depths of his Revelation and inspire the decisions necessary to sustain the Church’s journey (cf. *Jn* 14:25–26; 15:26–27; 16:12–15). It is, therefore, appropriate that our journey of building a synodal Church be inspired by two “images” from Scripture. One emerges in the representation of the “community scene” that constantly accompanies the journey of evangelization; the other refers to the experience of the Spirit in which Peter and the early community recognize the risk of placing unjustified limits on faith sharing. The synodal experience of journeying together, following the Lord and in obedience to the Spirit, will be able to receive decisive inspiration from meditation on these two traits of revelation.

Jesus, the Crowd, the Apostles

17. An original scene appears, in its fundamental structure, as the constant of the way in which Jesus reveals himself throughout the Gospel, as he announces the coming of the Kingdom of God. Essentially, three actors (plus one) are involved. The first, of course, is *Jesus*, the absolute protagonist who takes the initiative, sowing the words and signs of the coming of the Kingdom without “showing partiality” (cf. *Acts* 10:34). In various ways, Jesus pays special attention to those who are “separated” from God and those “abandoned” by the community (the sinners and the poor, in gospel language). Through his words and actions, he offers liberation from evil and conversion to hope, in the name of God the Father and in the power of the Holy Spirit. Even in the diversity of the Lord’s calls, their receptive responses, the common trait is that faith always emerges as a valuing of people: their plea is heard, their difficulty is helped, their availability is appreciated, their dignity is confirmed by God’s gaze and restored to the community’s recognition.

18. In fact, the work of evangelization and the message of salvation would not be comprehensible without Jesus’ constant openness to the widest possible audience, which the Gospels refer to as the *crowd*, that is, all the people who follow him along the path, and at times even pursue him in the hope of a sign and a word of salvation: this is the second actor on the scene of Revelation. The proclamation of the Gospel is not addressed only to an enlightened or chosen few. Jesus’ interlocutor is the “people” of ordinary life, the “everyone” of the human condition, whom he puts directly in contact with God’s gift and the call to salvation. In a way that surprises and sometimes scandalizes the witnesses, Jesus accepts as interlocutors all those who emerge from the crowd: he listens to the impassioned remonstrances of the Canaanite woman (cf. *Mt* 15:21–28), who cannot accept being excluded from the blessing he brings; he allows himself to dialogue with the Samaritan woman (cf. *Jn* 4:1–42), despite her condition as a socially and religiously compromised woman; he solicits the free and grateful act of faith of the man born blind (cf. *Jn* 9), whom official religion had dismissed as outside the perimeter of grace.

19. Some follow Jesus more explicitly, experiencing the fidelity of discipleship, while others are invited to return to their ordinary lives: yet all testify to the power of the faith that has saved them (cf. *Mt* 15:28). Among those who follow Jesus, the figure of the *apostles*, whom he himself calls from the beginning, having given them the

task of mediating authoritatively the crowd's relationship with Revelation and with the coming of God's Kingdom, clearly becomes prominent. The third actor's entrance on the scene occurs not thanks to a cure or a conversion, but because it coincides with Jesus' call. The election of the apostles is not the privilege of an exclusive position of power and separation but the grace of an inclusive ministry of blessing and fellowship. Thanks to the gift of the Spirit of the Risen Lord, they are to guard the place of Jesus, without replacing him: not to put filters on his presence, but to make it easy to encounter him.

20. Jesus, the crowd in its diversity, the apostles: this is the imagery and the mystery that must be constantly contemplated and explored in depth so that the Church may increasingly become what she is. None of the three actors can leave the scene. If Jesus is absent, and someone else takes his place, the Church then becomes a contract between the apostles and the crowd and whose dialogue will end up following the plot of the political game. Without the apostles, authorized by Jesus and instructed by the Spirit, the relationship with the evangelical truth is broken, and the crowd, whether it accepts or rejects Jesus, remains exposed to a myth or an ideology about him. Without the crowd, the apostles' relationship with Jesus becomes corrupted into a sectarian and self-referential form of religion, and evangelization, which emanates from the direct self-revelation that God addresses personally to all, offering His salvation, loses its light.

21. Then, there is the "extra" actor, the antagonist, who brings to the scene the diabolical separation of the other three. Faced with the perturbing prospect of the cross, there are disciples who leave and mood-changing crowds. The insidiousness that divides—and, thus, thwarts a common path—manifests itself indifferently in the forms of religious rigor, of moral injunction that presents itself as more demanding than that of Jesus, and of the seduction of a worldly political wisdom that claims to be more effective than a discernment of spirits. In order to escape the deceptions of the "fourth actor," continuous conversion is necessary. Emblematic in this regard is the episode of the centurion Cornelius (cf. *Acts* 10), the antecedent of that "Council" of Jerusalem (cf. *Acts* 15) which constitutes a crucial reference point for a synodal Church.

A Double Dynamic of Conversion: Peter and Cornelius (*Acts* 10)

22. The episode narrates, first of all, the conversion of Cornelius, who even receives a sort of annunciation. Cornelius is a pagan, presumably Roman, a centurion (a low-ranking officer) in the army of occupation, who practices a profession based on violence and abuse. Yet, he is dedicated to prayer and almsgiving, that is, he cultivates a relationship with God and cares for his neighbor. It is precisely in his home that the angel surprisingly enters, calls him by name, and exhorts him to send—the verb of mission!—his servants to Jaffa to call—the verb of vocation!—Peter. The narrative then becomes that of the conversion of the latter, who, on that same day, received a vision in which a voice ordered him to kill and eat animals, some of which were unclean. His response is decisive: "By no means, Lord" (*Acts* 10:14). He recognizes that it is the Lord who is speaking to him, but he emphatically refuses, because that order demolishes precepts of the Torah that are inalienable for his religious identity, and which express a way of understanding election as a difference that entails separation and exclusion from other peoples.

23. The apostle remains deeply disturbed and, while he is wondering about the meaning of what has happened, men sent by Cornelius arrive and the Spirit indicates to him that they are his envoys. Peter responds to them with words that recall those of Jesus in the Garden: "I am the one you are looking for" (*Acts* 10:21). This is a true and proper conversion, the painful and immensely fruitful passage of leaving one's own cultural and religious categories: Peter accepts to eat with pagans the food he had always considered forbidden, recognizing it as an instrument of life and communion with God and with others. It is in the encounter with people, welcoming them, journeying with them, and entering their homes, that he realizes the meaning of his vision: no human being is unworthy in the eyes of God, and the difference established by election does not imply exclusive preference but service and witnessing of a universal breadth.

24. Both Cornelius and Peter involve other people in their journey of conversion, making them companions in their journey. The apostolic action accomplishes God's will by creating community, breaking down barriers, and promoting encounters. The word plays a central role in the encounter between the two protagonists. Cornelius begins by sharing his experience. Peter listens to him and then speaks, reporting in turn what has happened to

him and testifying to the closeness of the Lord, who goes out to meet people individually to free them from what makes them prisoners of evil and mortifies humanity (cf. *Acts* 10:38). This form of communicating is similar to the one Peter will adopt in Jerusalem when the circumcised believers criticize him, accusing him of having broken the traditional norms, on which all their attention seems to be focused, while disregarding the outpouring of the Spirit: “You entered the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them!” (*Acts* 11:3). At that moment of conflict, Peter reports what happened to him and his reactions of bewilderment, incomprehension, and resistance. Precisely this will help his interlocutors, initially aggressive and refractory, to listen and accept what has happened. Scripture will help to interpret the meaning, just as it also will at the “Council” of Jerusalem, in a process of discernment that consists of listening together to the Spirit.

IV. Synodality in Action: Pathways for Consulting the People of God

25. Enlightened by the Word and grounded in Tradition, the synodal path is rooted in the concrete life of the People of God. In fact, it presents a peculiarity that is also an extraordinary resource: its object—synodality—is also its method. In other words, it constitutes a sort of construction site or pilot experience that makes it possible to immediately begin reaping the fruits of the dynamic that progressive synodal conversion introduces into the Christian community. On the other hand, it can only refer to the experiences of synodality lived, at different levels and with different degrees of intensity: valuable elements for discernment on the direction in which to continue to move are offered by their strengths and achievements, and also by their limitations and difficulties. Of course, here, reference is made to the experiences activated by the present synodal journey, but also to all those in which forms of “journeying together” are already being experienced in ordinary life, even if the term synodality is not known or used.

The Fundamental Question

26. The fundamental question that guides this consultation of the People of God, as mentioned at the beginning, is the following:

A synodal Church, in announcing the Gospel, “journeys together.” How is this “journeying together” happening today in your particular Church? What steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow in our “journeying together”?

In order to respond, you are invited to:

- a) ask yourselves what experiences in your particular Church the fundamental question calls to mind;
- b) reread these experiences in greater depth: What joys did they provoke? What difficulties and obstacles have they encountered? What wounds have they brought to light? What insights have they elicited?
- c) gather the fruits to share: Where, in these experiences, does the voice of the Spirit resound? What is he asking of us? What are the points to be confirmed, the prospects for change, the steps to be taken? Where do we register a consensus? What paths are opening up for our particular Church?

Different Articulations of Synodality

27. In the prayer, reflection, and sharing prompted by the fundamental question, it is opportune to keep in mind three levels on which synodality is articulated as a “constitutive dimension of the Church.”[20]

·the level of the style with which the Church ordinarily lives and works, which expresses its nature as the People of God that journeys together and gathers in assembly summoned by the Lord Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit to proclaim the Gospel. This style is realized through “the community listening to the Word and celebrating the Eucharist, the brotherhood of communion and the co-responsibility and participation of the whole People of God in its life and mission, on all levels and distinguishing between various ministries and roles;”[21]

·the level of ecclesial structures and processes, determined also from the theological and canonical point of view, in which the synodal nature of the Church is expressed in an institutional way at the local, regional, and universal levels;

·the level of synodal processes and events in which the Church is convoked by the competent authority, according to specific procedures determined by the ecclesiastical discipline.

Although distinct from a logical point of view, these three levels refer one to the other and must be held together in a coherent way, otherwise a counter-testimony is transmitted, and the Church's credibility is undermined. In fact, if it is not embodied in structures and processes, the style of synodality easily degrades from the level of intentions and desires to that of rhetoric, while processes and events, if they are not animated by an adequate style, turn out to be empty formalities.

28. Furthermore, in re-reading experiences, it is necessary to keep in mind that “journeying together” can be understood from two different perspectives, which are strongly interconnected. The first perspective looks at the internal life of the particular Churches, at the relationships between their constituent parts (first and foremost between the Faithful and their Pastors, also through the participatory bodies envisaged by the canonical discipline, including the diocesan synod) and the communities into which they are divided (especially parishes). It then considers the relationships between the Bishops and with the Bishop of Rome, also through the intermediate bodies of synodality (Synods of Bishops of the Patriarchal and Major Archdiocesan Churches, Councils of Hierarchs and Assemblies of Hierarchs of the Churches *sui iuris*, and Episcopal Conferences, with their national, international, and continental expressions). It then extends to the ways in which each particular Church integrates within itself the contribution of the various forms of monastic, religious, and consecrated life, of lay associations and movements, of ecclesial and ecclesiastical institutions of various kinds (schools, hospitals, universities, foundations, charitable and assistance organizations, etc.). Finally, this perspective also embraces relationships and common initiatives with the brothers and sisters of other Christian denominations, with whom we share the gift of the same Baptism.

29. The second perspective considers how the People of God journeys together with the entire human family. Thus, our gaze will focus on the state of relations, dialogue, and possible common initiatives with believers of other religions, with people who are distant from the faith, as well as with specific social environments and groups, with their institutions (the world of politics, culture, economics, finance, labor, trade unions, and business associations, non-governmental and civil society organizations, popular movements, minorities of various kinds, the poor and the excluded, etc.).

Ten Thematic Nuclei to be Explored

30. In order to help highlight the experiences and contribute in a richer way to the consultation, we indicate below ten thematic nuclei that articulate different facets of “lived synodality.” They should be adapted to the different local contexts and, from time to time, integrated, explained, simplified, and deepened, with particular attention paid to those who have more difficulty in participating and responding: the *Handbook* that accompanies this Preparatory Document offers tools, itineraries, and suggestions so that the different groups of questions can concretely inspire moments of prayer, formation, reflection, and exchange.

I. THE JOURNEYING COMPANIONS

In the Church and in society, we are side by side on the same road. In your local Church, who are the ones “journeying together”? When we say: “our Church,” who is part of it? Who is asking us to journey together? Who are the road companions, including those outside the ecclesial perimeter? What persons or groups are left on the margins, expressly or in fact?

II. LISTENING

Listening is the first step, but it requires having an open mind and heart, without prejudices. To whom does our particular Church “need to listen to”? How are the Laity, especially young people and women, listened to? How do we integrate the contribution of Consecrated Men and Women? What space is there for the voice of minorities, the discarded, and the excluded? Do we identify prejudices and stereotypes that hinder our listening? How do we listen to the social and cultural context in which we live?

III. SPEAKING OUT

All are invited to speak with courage and parrhesia, that is, integrating freedom, truth, and charity. How do we promote a free and authentic style of communication within the community and its organizations, without duplicity and opportunism? And in relation to the society of which we are a part? When and how do we manage to say what is important to us? How does the relationship with the media system (not only Catholic media) work? Who speaks on behalf of the Christian community, and how are they chosen?

IV. CELEBRATING

“Journeying together” is only possible if it is based on communal listening to the Word and the celebration of the Eucharist. How do prayer and liturgical celebration inspire and direct our “journeying together”? How do they inspire the most important decisions? How do we promote the active participation of all the Faithful in the liturgy and the exercise of the sanctifying function? What space is given to the exercise of the ministries of the reader and acolyte?

V. CO-RESPONSIBLE IN THE MISSION

Synodality is at the service of the Church’s mission, in which all her members are called to participate. Since we are all missionary disciples, how is each Baptized person called to be a protagonist in the mission? How does the community support its members committed to service in society (social and political commitment, in scientific research and teaching, in the promotion of social justice, in the protection of human rights, and in caring for the Common home, etc.)? How do you help them to live out these commitments in a logic of mission? How is discernment about mission-related choices made, and who participates in it? How are the different traditions that constitute the patrimony of many Churches, especially the Oriental ones, integrated and adapted, with respect to the synodal style, in view of an effective Christian witness? How does collaboration work in territories where different *sui iuris* Churches are present?

VI. DIALOGUE IN CHURCH AND SOCIETY

Dialogue is a path of perseverance that also includes silences and sufferings, but which is capable of gathering the experience of persons and peoples. What are the places and modes of dialogue within our particular Church? How are divergences of vision, the conflicts, the difficulties addressed? How do we promote collaboration with neighboring Dioceses, with and among religious communities in the area, with and among lay associations and movements, etc.? What experiences of dialogue and shared commitment do we have with believers of other religions and with non-believers? How does the Church dialogue with and learn from other sectors of society: the world of politics, economics, culture, civil society, the poor...?

VII. WITH THE OTHER CHRISTIAN DENOMINATIONS

The dialogue between Christians of different confessions, united by one Baptism, has a special place in the synodal journey. What relations do we have with the brothers and sisters of other Christian denominations? What areas do they concern? What fruits have we drawn from this “journeying together”? What are the difficulties?

VIII. AUTHORITY AND PARTICIPATION

A synodal Church is a participatory and co-responsible Church. How do we identify the goals to be pursued, the way to achieve them, and the steps to be taken? How is authority exercised within our particular Church? What are the practices of teamwork and co-responsibility? How are lay ministries and the assumption of responsibility by the Faithful promoted? How do synodal bodies function at the level of the particular Church? Are they a fruitful experience?

IX. DISCERNING AND DECIDING

In a synodal style, decisions are made through discernment, based on a consensus that flows from the common obedience to the Spirit. By what procedures and methods do we discern together and make decisions? How can they be improved? How do we promote participation in decision-making within hierarchically structured communities? How do we articulate the consultative phase with the deliberative one, the process of *decision-making* with the moment of *decision-taking*? How and with what tools do we promote transparency and accountability?

X. FORMING OURSELVES IN SYNODALITY

The spirituality of journeying together is called to become an educational principle for the formation of the human person and of the Christian, of the families, and of the communities. How do we form people, especially those who hold roles of responsibility within the Christian community, to make them more capable of “journeying together,” listening to one another and engaging in dialogue? What formation do we offer for discernment and the exercise of authority? What tools help us to read the dynamics of the culture in which we are immersed and their impact on our style of Church?

To Contribute to the Consultation

31. The purpose of the first phase of the synodal journey is to foster a broad consultation process in order to gather the wealth of the experiences of lived synodality, in its different articulations and facets, involving the Pastors and the Faithful of the particular Churches at all the different levels, through the most appropriate means according to the specific local realities: the consultation, coordinated by the Bishop, is addressed “to the Priests, Deacons and lay Faithful of their Churches, both individually and in associations, without overlooking the valuable contribution that consecrated men and women can offer” (EC, no. 7). The contribution of the participatory bodies of the particular Churches is specifically requested, especially that of the Presbyteral Council and the Pastoral Council, from which “a synodal Church [can truly] begin to take shape”.^[22] Equally valuable will be the contribution of other ecclesial entities to which the Preparatory Document will be sent, as well as that of those who wish to send their own contribution directly. Finally, it will be of fundamental importance that the voice of the poor and excluded also find a place, not only that of those who have some role or responsibility within the particular Churches.

32. The synthesis that each particular Church will elaborate at the end of this work of listening and discernment will constitute its contribution to the journey of the universal Church. To make the subsequent phases of the journey easier and more sustainable, it is important to condense the fruits of prayer and reflection into a maximum of ten pages. If necessary to contextualize and explain them better, other texts can be attached to support or integrate them. 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 create a bright resourcefulness that will enlighten minds, warm hearts, give strength to our hands.”^[23]

Abbreviations

DV Vatican Council II, Dogm. Const. *Dei Verbum* (18 November 1965)
 EC Francis, Ap. Const. *Episcopalis communio* (15 September 2018)
 EG Francis, Ap. Exhort. *Evangelii gaudium* (24 November 2013)
 FT Francis, Enc. Lett. *Fratelli tutti* (3 October 2020)
 GS Vatican Council II, Past. Const. *Gaudium et spes* (7 December 1965)
 LG Vatican Council II, Dogm. Const. *Lumen gentium* (21 November 1964)
 LS Francis, Enc. Lett. *Laudato si'* (24 May 2015)
 UR Vatican Council II, Decree *Unitatis redintegratio* (21 November 1964)

[1] The stages of the synodal journey are reported below:

[2] FRANCIS, Address for the ceremony commemorating the 50th anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops (17 October 2015).

[3] Cf. www.synod.va

[4] FRANCIS, *Letter to the People of God* (20 August 2018), introduction.

[5] *Ibid.*, no. 2.

[6] *Ibid.*

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] FRANCIS, *Address at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops*.

[9] ITC, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (2 March 2018), no. 3.

[10] *Ibid.*

[11] *Ibid.*, no. 6.

[12] CYPRIAN, *The Lord's Prayer*, 23

[13] AUGUSTIN, *Letter* 194, 31.

[14] JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *Commentary on Psalm* 149.

[15] ITC, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, no. 6.

[16] FRANCIS, *Address at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops*.

[17] ITC, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, no. 69.

[18] BENEDICT, *Rule*, 3.3.

[19] FRANCIS, *Address at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops*.

[20] ITC, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, no. 70.

[21] *Ibid.*

[22] FRANCIS, *Address at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops*.

[23] FRANCIS, *Address at the Opening of the Synod of Bishops on Young People* (3 October 2018).
