

The Synod on Synodality: A Spiritual Experience

In the fall of 2021, Pope Francis convened the Catholic Church in a synod, the “Synod on Synodality.” Currently, the official Synod meeting is taking place in the Vatican. Cardinals, bishops, priests, nuns, lay women and men are participating in this meeting. “Synod” is not just a church meeting, though. It is a synonym for Church, for “synod” means the people of God walking the Way of Jesus, opening to the Spirit, and discerning what God wants us to do in this time and place. In a Synod, the Church gets together to address and discern, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, various important pastoral questions that arise. Nevertheless, behind this rather churchy term, synodality, lies a Gospel-based approach to renewing the Catholic Church. The synod is more than a meeting, more than trying to solve an issue. It is intended to reinvigorate our Church and empower us to live the Gospel in our daily lives.

Essentially, the Synod is a spiritual experience. Pope Francis continually reminds us that the Synod is anchored in and directed by the Spirit of God. As a church, we gather in the presence of this Spirit. We pray, worship, love each other, learn, and work in and through the Spirit. In his address for the opening of the synod, Pope Francis says, “the Synod is not a parliament...The Synod is not a gathering among friends to resolve some current problems or to give opinions...we are not the protagonist of the Synod: it is the Holy Spirit. If the Spirit is in our midst to guide us, it will be a good Synod. If there are other ways of going about things, based on human, personal or ideological interests, it will not be a Synod, but more of a parliamentary meeting, which is another thing. A Synod is a journey that the Holy Spirit makes” (Pope’s Address for Opening of the 16th General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops). As such, the Synod is not something happening only in the Vatican. It happens here and now when we listen to what the Spirit wants our local Church to do.

Pope Francis continues, “A synodal Church is a Church animated by the Spirit; it is a Church that listens to the Spirit. The synod is not an exercise in worldly efficiency and updating. The synod is the way the Church listens to and responds to what the Spirit wants the Church to do in this time and place” (Pope’s Address for Opening of the 16th General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops). Pope Francis highlights the Synod as an experience of spiritual discernment, which means listening to and being led by the direction of the Spirit of God. Thus, prayer is the atmosphere of the Synod, and prayer that abandons all egocentric opinions and ideological agendas to let the Spirit lead and not allow ego-interests to take over.

Still, if the Synod appears slippery and ill-defined it is because we are uncomfortable with Mystery. The Synod is the Church journeying together from, within, and to the Infinite Mystery of God revealed in Jesus Crucified and Risen and tenderly close in our lives as the Holy Spirit. Mystery means God is beyond our minds, beyond our control. The *Instrumentum Laboris*, or working document for the Synod, is clear: “We are faced with the inexhaustible and holy mystery of God and must remain open to its surprises as we walk through history towards the Kingdom. This also applies to the questions that the synodal process has brought to light. As a first step they require listening and attention, without rushing to offer immediate solutions” (*Instrumentum Laboris*, p 14).

Pope Francis brings to light this central truth: “God infinitely transcends us; he is full of surprises. We are not the ones to determine when and how we will encounter him; the exact times and places of that encounter are not up to us. Someone who wants everything to be clear and sure presumes to control God’s transcendence. Nor can we claim to say where God is not, because God is mysteriously present in the life of every person, in a way that he himself

chooses, and we cannot exclude this by our presumed certainties. Even when someone's life appears completely wrecked, even when we see it devastated by vices or addictions, God is present there. If we let ourselves be guided by the Spirit rather than our own preconceptions, we can and must try to find the Lord in every human life" (Gaudete et Exsultate 41, 42).

God is transcendent, which means God is free to be everywhere and in everyone's lives. We are not in charge of God's presence and Church rules cannot restrict God's love, mercy, or grace. Mystery means no one is beyond God's reach in Jesus and through the Spirit. Accepting God's mystery means letting go of our ideas, our thoughts, our feelings, our experiences to be open to God's love within us and where we least expect it.

The Synod can lead to change in the Church not by instituting top-down policies but through renewed and transformative encounter: encounter between each one of us and the Mystery of God, encounter between members of the church, encounter with the Word of God and living tradition of the church. This is the work of the Spirit who guides the church in the Synod. Pope Francis keeps affirming and reaffirming this important spiritual truth: "This is a synodos: journeying together is the programme. We have done so much...consultation, all this, with the people of God. But the one who takes this in hand, who guides us is the Holy Spirit. If he is not here, this will not lead to a good outcome." He stresses the importance of this theological truth and to keep the synodal mothers and fathers open to the Spirit's surprises. "The Holy Spirit often shatters our expectations to create something new that surpasses our predictions and negativity. Perhaps I can say that the more fruitful moments of the Synod are those connected to prayer, an atmosphere of prayer, through which the Lord works in us. Let us open ourselves to him and call upon him, the protagonist, the Holy Spirit. Let us allow him to be the protagonist of the Synod! And let us walk with him, in trust and with joy" (Homily opening Synod Oct 4, 2023).

Hence, listening to the Spirit is the priority as well as listening to each other in the Spirit. The handbook for the Synod states, "the objective of the current Synod is to listen, as the entire People of God, to what the Holy Spirit is saying to the Church. We do so by listening together to the Word of God in Scripture and the living Tradition of the Church, and then by listening to one another, and especially to those at the margins, discerning the signs of the times. In fact, the whole Synodal Process aims at fostering a lived experience of discernment, participation, and co-responsibility, where a diversity of gifts is brought together for the Church's mission in the world" (Vademecum 1.3). We listen to each other in the Spirit and with an ear to the Word of God and the Tradition of the Church. We listen to what God wants to do with the Church in this present time and social context. But we must beware of certain blockages to hearing each other and to hearing the Spirit.

Pope Francis is concerned ideology will hijack this holy conversation and pervert it, twisting it into a partisan theological food fight. He is concerned about gossip and backbiting because, again, this egocentric way of talking impedes and perversely twists conversation in the Spirit. The Holy Father does not expect unanimity of opinion but does expect direct, honest, yet compassionate conversation even when there is disagreement on a topic. The media and certain sectors of the American Catholic Church may be focusing so much on hot-button issues, that it is neglecting the true mystical purpose of the Synod on Synodality. Teachings, beliefs, and orthodoxy are not the central concern as much as the encounter of the people of God with the Holy Spirit, opening hearts to the Spirit, listening to what the Spirit wants us to do – and not listening to our ideological agendas.

Much misunderstanding, ideological attachment, and fear has given rise to gossip about the Synod. “Scripture, the liturgy and the ancient tradition speak to us of the “sadness” of the Holy Spirit, and among the things that most sadden the Holy Spirit are empty words. Empty words, worldly words, and – to descend a bit to a certain human habit, but not a good one – gossiping. Gossiping is the “anti-Holy Spirit”; it goes against him...It is the most common disease in the Church: gossiping. And if we don’t let him heal us of this disease, it will be hard for this synodal journey to be a good one...Pay heed to this: let us not yield the place of the Holy Spirit to worldly things – even good things, like common sense; that is helpful, but the Spirit goes beyond that. We must learn to live in our Church with the Holy Spirit” (Pope’s Address for Opening of the 16th General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops).

Now, if we let go of our preconceived notions and our agendas, we can experience the Spirit here and now. We can renew the Church. Even as the official Synod meeting is underway, Pope Francis does not want the Synod to end with October meetings in Rome. He wants a synodal church. To this end, individual dioceses and parishes must commit to synodality, to becoming synodal churches themselves. This is not a task reserved for Rome. It is our task as the people of God.

Each parish, diocese, and national church ought to reflect on the key questions that the participants of the official Synod are reflecting on, namely, those found in the *Instrumentum Laboris*. To do so, and to implement synodality in parishes, Pope Francis calls us to have “conversations in the Spirit.” This is a concrete way to be a synodal church. Indeed, the whole method and point of the Synod is “Conversation in the Spirit.” These are small group discussions rooted in prayer and directed towards discernment. “In its concrete reality conversation in the Spirit can be described as a shared prayer with a view to communal discernment for which participants prepare themselves by personal reflection and meditation” (*Instrumentum Laboris* p 16).

The Synod’s conversations in the Spirit are a chance to make friends. Friendship is being with each other and enjoying each other’s presence. These conversations in the Spirit are an opportunity to make friends. The church should be a place of friends, deep friends. The surgeon general issued a report recently about the most prominent health concern, even beyond COVID-19: loneliness. Our conversations in the Spirit are tremendous opportunities to be with one another, share deeply with one another, listen deeply to each other, and relieve this immense loneliness we are all experiencing.

What is a synodal church? A church walking together through history. It is a church walking together through life. It is a community of faith on an adventure. It is the adventure of holiness that is fueled by, sustained by, and heading into the incomprehensible mystery of God. Along this adventure of holiness, the church experiences God in small ways, in everyday moments. One of these small ways is a simple conversation. The adventure and the surprises of God’s mystery happen in these conversations in the Spirit.

And these conversations in the Spirit will be happening at the Cathedral of St. Matthew. Be on the lookout for when these conversations will happen. I invite you to participate in a conversation in the Spirit. We hope you come to one, several, or all to help renew the Church.

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October 2023