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SYNODALITY AS A PATH TO COMMUNION

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It is with great joy that I have come to share a reflection on “synodality as a path to communion” on this fourth day of your international gathering of the Teams of Our Lady. I would like to extend my warmest thanks to the Clarita and Edgardo Bernal Fandiño who invited me to join you, and to all those who are helping to organise this wonderful encounter.

As you know, Pope Francis has made synodality the key axis of his pontificate, and the Synod of Bishops a major instrument of the current dynamic of missionary reform of the Church for which he was elected.¹ In October 2021, the Holy Father opened a multi-stage Synod entitled “For a synodal Church: communion, participation, and mission,” which will conclude this coming October 2024 in Rome with the second session of the Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. This is the first time in the history of the Church that a synod aims to involve the whole Church, and I hope that you have had the opportunity to take part in the synodal consultation during the first diocesan phase or perhaps during the continental phase that followed.

Understanding Synodality

The Synodal Process that we are currently undergoing is clearly aimed at the synodal conversion of the Church – that is, the “synodalisation” of the Church at all levels. It’s not just a question of having a synod, but as Pope Francis says, of “becoming a synod,” in other words, a synodal diocese, a synodal priest or bishop, a synodal couple, a synodal family. The Church is re-learning synodality. The word “synod” comes from the Greek “*syn*,” which means “together,” and “*hodos*,” which means “way.” Synodality is this style of Church that you see expressed by this logo, a Church where everyone walks together guided by the Spirit. A Church where all of us, men and women, in the diversity of our ages, vocations, and roles, seek to strengthen communion by enabling everyone to participate in order to better serve the Church’s mission in a spirit of co-responsibility. Synodality is a constitutive dimension of the Church and characterised the style of governance in the early Church. We are rediscovering it as a fruit of Vatican II. As the Australian theologian Ormond Rush puts it, “synodality is the Second Vatican Council in a nutshell.” Synodality therefore aims to implement the vision of the Church outlined by Vatican II, which focuses primarily on our common baptismal vocation, highlighting the image of the Church as the People of God.

Synodality is Learned through Experience

I am always happy to talk about synodality when I’m asked to, on occasions like our gathering here today, but in fact synodality isn’t something you learn from a book or a course, it’s something you learn

¹ Pope Francis, *Walking Together: The Way of Synodality* (Orbis Books, 2023).



first and foremost through experience. It's a question of "learning by doing." You really understand synodality by practising it, by putting into practice this style of listening, dialogue, and fraternity in Christ. For it is a journey of discernment together that is an experience of the Spirit.

Through this Synod, we are continuing to learn this synodal style, that is, how to walk together, discerning the calls of the Holy Spirit. Discernment is an art. Discerning how to be a synodal Church on mission in today's world, a world in the throes of change and transformation, is not automatic or pre-set. The path is revealed to us as we go along the way. At this stage of the Synodal Process, according to the Synthesis Report from the first session of the Assembly in Rome in October 2023, we can define synodality as follows:

"Synodality can be understood as Christians walking in communion with Christ toward the Kingdom along with the whole of humanity. Its orientation is towards mission, and its practice involves gathering in assembly at each level of ecclesial life. It involves reciprocal listening, dialogue, community discernment, and creation of consensus as an expression that renders Christ present in the Holy Spirit, each taking decisions in accordance with their responsibilities."²

The Family, the First School of Synodality

Listening to this first attempt at defining synodality, you can no doubt understand why I like to say, over and over again, that "the family is the first school of synodality." Because the family, which we define in a Christian vision as "a community of life and love" (cf. *GS* 48), is in fact the first vital cell of the Church, the domestic church, in which we learn to listen to each other, to dialogue, cultivating the communion of love while respecting differences. As couples committed to Christian marriage, you bear prophetic witness to a path of synodality that weaves together communion in difference, which opens up to the fruitfulness of love. The experience of forming a couple with this desire to live fully the grace of Christian marriage is an experience of walking together with Christ in our respective differences, a concrete experience of putting into practice these three key words of the Synod: communion, participation, and mission. As couples, as members of the Teams of Our Lady, your presence here at this international gathering is a testimony to your desire for synodality to extend beyond all cultural and linguistic boundaries. You have learned and wish to continue learning how to walk together - as husband and wife, but also for many of you as father and mother with your children - by listening to the Spirit, with a view to discerning personally and as a couple how to concretely live out this vocation toward communion in order to bear fruit. And you know how important it is to sit down together regularly to take stock, to discuss the important issues in your lives, to share important decisions to be made, and to find ways of overcoming the conflicts that arise in everyday life. Your "sit down" in conversation with one another is a bit like a "mini-synod" for the couple that you hold regularly to re-read your journey together and discern how to move forward. The grace of marriage that was given to you on the day you received this sacrament is a grace that you must continually receive so that it

² XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *Synthesis Report – First Session* (28 October 2023), 1h.



can bear fruit, putting it into practice day after day according to the concrete circumstances of your life.

Through this presentation on synodality as a path to communion, I hope to invite you to re-examine what you already experience in terms of synodality in your couple, your family, your Teams of Our Lady community, your parish, and perhaps in other ecclesial communities and movements in which you participate. At the same time, I hope to give you some helpful points to move forward on this path of synodality, which is a path of communion for mission, by responding personally and on behalf of your various groups and communities to this fundamental question that has guided the Synodal Process from the outset:

“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?”³

The Synodal Method (Conversation in the Spirit): A Path to Communion

Moreover, the synodal method that we have promoted and used in this Synod, particularly in the continental assemblies and the Roman assembly last October, which we call “conversation in the Spirit” (or “spiritual conversation”), may in some ways be reminiscent of what you experience when you take the time to engage in in-depth dialogue as a couple by regularly putting into practice “the sit down.” As you know, the secret of a couple who love each other faithfully over the years is the ability to allow themselves to be transformed by each other, to allow themselves to be enriched by each other. This requires each of us to embark on a journey of personal conversion, becoming more and more ourselves in Christ, which implies renouncing those things in ourselves that stand in the way of love in the Gospel sense. The adventure of marriage is the adventure of a communion that deepens when each person allows themselves to be transformed and converted by what the Spirit shapes in them through the other. This same dynamic of conversation and conversion is at work in the synodal method:

“Conversation in the Spirit is a tool that, even with its limitations, enables authentic listening in order to discern what the Spirit is saying to the Churches. Its practice has elicited joy, awe and gratitude and has been experienced as a path of renewal that transforms individuals, groups, and the Church. The word “conversation” expresses more than mere dialogue: it interweaves thought and feeling, creating a shared vital space. That is why we can say that conversion is at play in conversation. This is an anthropological reality found in different peoples and cultures, who gather together in solidarity to deal with and decide matters vital to the community. Grace brings this human experience to fruition. Conversing “in the Spirit” means living the experience of sharing in the light

³ General Secretariat of the Synod, Preparatory Document “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission” (7 September 2021), 2, <https://www.synod.va/en/news/the-preparatory-document.html>



of faith and seeking God's will in an authentically evangelical atmosphere within which the Holy Spirit's unmistakable voice can be heard."⁴

Through the synodal experience we are discerning together, and conversation in the Spirit allows us to share in the truth. Both "ecclesialise" us by inserting us more deeply into the mystery of the Church, and at the same time they allow each of us to deepen our own personal vocation. We have witnessed this during the current Synodal Process.

Synodality, a Dynamic Vision of the Identity of the Church's Communion

Many of you have undoubtedly moved on from a rather theoretical and ideal vision of marriage to a more dynamic vision of the sacrament that is embodied in day-to-day realities. In order to be faithful to the married love you have received, you have allowed yourselves to be transformed by the road you travelled together. There is no magic formula for living synodality as a path to communion, just as there is no magic formula for living a successful marriage and loving each other as a couple once and for all in the concrete reality of a daily life that inevitably changes. It is something that you learn and discern day by day as situations change, as life goes on. As you know, we don't love each other in exactly the same way at the beginning of our marriage as we do after years of marriage, inevitably marked by joys and sorrows, happy events as well as trials. It is a question of embodying the vision of Christian marriage day after day in real life, rather than being stuck following an unattainable ideal. This is what synodality is all about, a dynamic vision of the Church as the People of God moving forward through history.

Each one of you gathered here is both the same person you were on the day of your wedding and at the same time different, enriched and shaped by the joys and sorrows you have experienced. As Pope Francis says, every time he talks about synodality, it is "*il cammino si fa camminando*", meaning the path is made by walking. It is like the child who learns to walk by taking the risk of taking a first step and then another, accepting they will fall and get up again. If we don't take the risk of walking together in the Church amidst the diversity of our vocations and the challenges we face, we will never learn this art of synodality, the art of walking together in our differences by letting ourselves be guided by the Spirit on the path of truth and unity.

Synodality is therefore a dynamic vision of the identity of the Church as it journeys through history as the People of God. "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."⁵

A Path of Communion in the Image of the Trinity

⁴ XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *Synthesis Report – First Session* (28 October 2023), 2d.

⁵ General Secretariat of the Synod, Preparatory Document "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission" (7 September 2021), 1, <https://www.synod.va/en/news/the-preparatory-document.html>



The Church is called to live synodality as a method that is also embodied in structures. The Church is given the opportunity to deepen its own identity and vocation along the synodal path, which can be defined, in the words of the Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, as being “in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race.”⁶

As you can see, entering into this synodal vision means seeing the Church as a mystery that is both the human and the divine. The Church rooted in the mystery of the Trinity, yet its mystery unfolds across history, through the diverse contexts and situations that people experience across the ages. Moving along this path of synodality as baptised people, means living family and Church life as missionary pilgrims, forming together as the People of God who walk through history with all the peoples of the world. We are led to look at the Church not in a theoretical and abstract way, but through the concrete reality of the people who make up the Church. The starting points for synodality are concrete and real situations, not imaginary or ideal situations. It is therefore a question of starting from real life, allowing it to be illuminated by the divine Light that works in our hearts. Living out synodality as a path of communion means being both fully human and fully spiritual, but open to the divine dimension. This path of communion is realised when we recognise the primacy of grace, as the Synod's Synthesis Report reminds us. God's love precedes us but calls for our loving response to his love, which must be translated into action. As eloquently expressed by the words of the Contemplation to Gain Love at the end of the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola: “Love must be put into action more than into words.” Secondly, love exists in reciprocal communication; that is to say, people who love, give and communicate to those they love some part of what they have and what they are capable of. At the same time, those who are loved, give some part of what they have to the one who loves them. In the same way, if we have knowledge, we give it to those who do not have it. It is the same for honours and riches. They each give something back to us. Love calls for reciprocity, relationship, and mutual communication.

The Church, the Family of God

There is a very deep link between what the Church is, and what a family is, as communities of life and love, and is a model of the Trinity. This is why this Synod has increasingly highlighted the vision of the synodal Church as a family Church. This is reflected in a passage from the Synthesis Report from the Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in October 2023, which speaks about the Synodal Process that has been undertaken throughout the Church:

“This process has renewed our experience of and desire for the Church as God's home and family, a Church that is closer to the lives of Her people, less bureaucratic and more relational. The terms ‘synodal’ and ‘synodality’ have been associated with this experience and desire, offering an understanding that now requires further clarification. This is the Church that young people first declared they desired in 2018 on the occasion of the Synod of Youth.”⁷

⁶ Second Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church Lumen Gentium*, 1.

⁷ XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *Synthesis Report – First Session* (28 October 2023), 1b.



Here we see that synodality puts relationships at the centre. People, young people in particular, but not only, do not want an institutional Church that presents itself primarily through structures and functions, but rather a relational Church that puts relationship at the heart of everything, relationship with Christ and relationship with our brothers and sisters in Christ. And as a couple and a family, the first cell of the Church, you represent precisely this: a relational nucleus that weaves relationships of love not in a theoretical and abstract way but by incarnating day by day this love that is received and given in the gestures and acts of daily life. A love receives its life from Trinitarian love. This is because the vocation of the family, like that of the Church and of every Christian community, like the one that you form in these days as the Teams of Our Lady, is to be the very image of the Trinity. It is the mystery of a relationship of love so strong between the Father and Christ that it is expressed through the person of the Holy Spirit as an active presence in the world to guide, inspire, and sanctify believers.

Communion, a Gift to be Received and a Journey to be Lived

We understand from the experience of the Synod that, in the couple and in the family, as in the Church, living out communion is both a gift from God the Trinity, and a path to journey on. This path is that of synodality, which takes us from "I" to "we," making us ever more aware that, as baptised people, we are members of the same Body, as brothers and sisters in Christ. The path of synodality is a journey of missionary communion in which all participate and are heard. It has been discerned by the Church as God's call for the Church of the third millennium.⁸ For, as Pope Francis has said, "synodality is the way of being Church today according to God's will, in a dynamic of listening to and discerning the Holy Spirit."

This path of synodality calls us all to be active protagonists in the life of the Church, by understanding and living out this vision of a Church that is the People of God. All the baptised are called to carry out the mission of the Church as a community of missionary disciples. "Synodal life reveals a Church consisting of free and different subjects, united in communion, which is dynamically shown to be a single communitarian subject built on Christ, the corner-stone, and on the Apostles, who are like pillars, built like so many living stones into 'a spiritual house' (cf. *1 Peter* 2:5), 'a dwelling-place of God in the Spirit' (*Ephesians* 2:22)."⁹

So you can see how the very dynamic of the sacrament of Christian marriage is one of unity between a man and a woman, a covenant between two free and equal partners, open to the life and fruitfulness of love. It is in some ways of the same order as the synodal dynamic by which we recognise each other as baptised persons clothed with equal dignity, incorporated by baptism into the same body. This makes us brothers and sisters in Christ, called to serve together in the mission of the Church, which is at the service of the communion of the whole human family.

⁸ Pope Francis, *Address for the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops* (17 October 2015).

⁹ International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the life and mission of the Church* (2 March 2018), 55, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html

The Eucharist, the Source and Summit of Synodality

As you have chosen the Eucharist as the theme for your gathering, I would like to continue my reflection on synodality with this extract from the Synthesis Report of the first session of the synodal Assembly in October 2023. As you can see from the photos of the synod hall, we were all seated around round tables, both for the plenary sessions and for the time spent in small language groups, following the synodal method of Conversation in the Spirit:

“The manner in which the Assembly proceeded in the Paul VI Hall, including the seating of people in small groups at round tables, was likened for some cultures to the biblical image of the wedding banquet (*Rev.* 19:9). This was understood as emblematic of a synodal way of being Church and an image of the Eucharist, which is the source and summit of synodality, with the Word of God at the centre. In a Church that is living synodally, different cultures, languages, rites, ways of thinking, and realities, can engage together and fruitfully in a sincere search for the Spirit's guidance.”¹⁰

Then, a little further on in the Report, Chapter 3, entitled “Entering the Community of Faith: Christian Initiation,” contains the following two paragraphs:

“The celebration of the Eucharist, especially on Sunday, is the first and fundamental form by which the Holy People of God gather and meet. When this is not possible, the community although desiring the Eucharist gathers to celebrate a Liturgy of the Word. In the Eucharist, we celebrate a mystery of grace which is given to us. By calling us to participate in his Body and Blood, the Lord forms us into one body, with one another and with Himself. Beginning with Paul's use of the term *koinonia* (cf. *1 Cor.* 10:16-17), the Christian tradition has treasured the word ‘communion’ to indicate at the same time full participation in the Eucharist, and the nature of relationships among the faithful and among the Churches. While it opens us to the contemplation of the divine life and to the unfathomable depths of the Trinitarian mystery, this term also refers to the ‘everydayness’ of our relationships: in the simplest gestures by which we open ourselves to one another, the breath of the Spirit genuinely breathes. This is why communion, which springs from the Eucharist and is celebrated in it, configures and directs the paths of synodality.

“From the Eucharist we learn to articulate unity and diversity: unity of the Church and multiplicity of Christian communities; unity of the sacramental mystery and variety of liturgical traditions; unity of celebration and diversity of vocations, charisms and ministries. Nothing shows more than the Eucharist that the harmony created by the Spirit is not uniformity and that every ecclesial gift is intended for common edification.”¹¹

These two paragraphs put us at the heart of the synodal journey and the question that underpins the whole current synodal process: *How can we articulate both unity and diversity? How can we live out*

¹⁰ XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *Synthesis Report – First Session* (28 October 2023), 1c.

¹¹ XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *Synthesis Report – First Session* (28 October 2023), 3e; 3f.

unity in diversity? They highlight the fundamental link between the Eucharist and the Church, the mystery of the Eucharist, which is a mystery of communion founded on the mystery of the Trinity, and the path of synodality that we are all called to follow as couples, families, parishes, movements, in all our Christian communities. "Communion, which springs from the Eucharist and is celebrated in it, configures and directs the paths of synodality." Every synod opens and closes with a Eucharistic celebration because:

"The Church's synodal path is shaped and nourished by the Eucharist. It is the centre of the whole of Christian life for the Church both universal and local, as well as for each of the faithful individually. The source and summit of synodality are in the celebration of the liturgy and - in a unique way - in our full, conscious and active participation in the Eucharistic synaxis. Because of our communion with the Body and Blood of Christ, 'we, although there are many of us, are one single body, for we all share in the one loaf' (1 Corinthians 10:17)."¹²

Living a spirituality of synodality

By exploring this link between the Eucharist and synodality, we can identify and deepen the elements that enable us to live out a spirituality of synodality that weaves communion. Its starting point is humility, the recognition of our sinfulness and of our need for reconciliation. We are fundamentally created for relationship and communion, but we struggle to live it out in practice. That's why synodality is a journey that begins in real life, through the recognition that we are sinners and that we live out in imperfect ways the synodality and communion to which we are called. We therefore need to ask God for his Spirit to guide us. The prayer of the *Adsumus*, the Church's traditional prayer for councils and synods, which has accompanied this Synod, ultimately gives us all the elements we need to live synodality as a Eucharistic path of communion. It is undoubtedly a prayer that could also help you to live synodality in your couple, your family. I invite you to identify within this prayer the spiritual attitudes required for living synodally:

We stand before You, Holy Spirit, as we gather together in Your name.

With You alone to guide us, make Yourself at home in our hearts;

Teach us the way we must go and how we are to pursue it.

We are weak and sinful; do not let us promote disorder.

Do not let ignorance lead us down the wrong path nor partiality influence our actions.

Let us find in You our unity so that we may journey together to eternal life and not stray from the way of truth and what is right.

All this we ask of You, who are at work in every place and time, in the communion of the Father and the Son, forever and ever.

Amen.

¹² International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the life and mission of the Church* (2 March 2018), 47, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html



The synodal experience teaches us how much we need others. It invites us to humbly recognise that we do not reach the truth alone. We need the eyes of others to discern the truth because, as the prayer from the *Adsumus* says, “we are weak and sinful,” we are vulnerable and each one of us has his or her limits. To live synodality as a path to communion, as you live it out as a couple, we need to fully recognise the equal dignity of others, by listening to and valuing their differences, their particular charism and their unique vocation. Above all, we need to move away from a logic of competition or domination of one over the other, and enter into a logic of cooperation and reciprocity, with a desire to learn from each other. This requires great humility and openness to the newness that the other brings. In a synodal Church, everyone needs to learn from each other, as Pope Francis says:

“A synodal Church is a Church which listens, which realizes that listening ‘is more than simply hearing.’ It is a mutual listening 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).”¹³

To become a synodal Church, we need to become a learning Church, remaining open to the newness of the Spirit. Synodality is a creative path, not mapped out in advance, in which everyone has something to give, and everyone has something to receive.

Becoming learning couples in a learning Church

This synodal dynamic invites us to be constantly on a learning curve. A synodal Church is a learning Church in which we help each other and learn from each other how to follow Christ concretely today in the diversity of our vocations; how to live the mission of the Church in the concrete reality of our diverse situations; how to let ourselves be led by the Spirit. If we think that we alone hold the truth, or that we already know everything about the concrete path to be followed by a couple or a Christian community, then we must be careful. God’s call is discerned as we go along, by listening deeply to the Spirit and by listening to others. You are surely experiencing this here, coming together from so many different countries and opening yourselves up to meeting others and sharing experiences that are so enriching. Your gathering is itself an experience of synodality, of walking together in this spirit of listening, dialogue, and discernment. I invite you to re-read this experience of the Church that you are sharing together from the perspective of synodality. What did you learn from this experience of pilgrimage together here in Turin? What are the seeds of synodality that you are gathering so that you can make them bear fruit at home, so that you can continue to weave communion in your life as a couple, in your family, in the Teams of Our Lady, in your parish and diocesan communities, but also more broadly in society, in your places of work and social engagement. For synodality is not only and primarily a way of living synodality *ad intra*, amongst ourselves, but it also goes hand in hand with a way of living the Church *ad extra* in this style of dialogue that reaches outwards. Synodality is always

¹³ Pope Francis, *Address for the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops* (17 October 2015).



missionary and involves ecumenical dialogue, inter-religious dialogue, dialogue with society, with the political and economic spheres, and so on.

In conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to emphasise that this is a call to become a synodal Church, that is, a Church that listens and accompanies, that requires the commitment of all the baptised since we all share in the same mission. May this gathering help each of you, and each couple, to discern how to become more of a synodal couple, a synodal family, a synodal Team of Our Lady, that listens to and accompanies each person, each couple, and each family like Christ on the road to Emmaus. The road to Emmaus offers us a paradigmatic image of what synodality is all about: walking together like Christ with the two disciples (cf. *Luke 24*). He begins by listening to them, asking them a question that allows them to express what they are going through - disillusionment and suffering. Then he interprets the Scriptures for them after listening to their experiences. Through this listening and dialogue, he reaches something deep within them. He does not impose himself, but the disciples nevertheless invite him to stay with them. From this encounter, which is expressed in the sharing of bread, the disciples receive consolation. This encounter transformed them and sent them out on mission, united with the Christian community that they were to meet anew in Jerusalem. This journey of conversion of the disciples of Emmaus is a good description of what the path of synodality can be as a path of communion. May we receive this grace and continue to walk with Christ on the road to Emmaus to make this world a place of communion.

