



## For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission

### A Short Summary of The Vatican's Preparatory Document

*Editors' note: The **Preparatory Document** is the Vatican's the official starting point of the Synod. It provides an overview of and sets out the reasons, the aims and objectives of the Synod, as well as providing in-depth background notes on characteristics of a "synodal church". This Short Summary has no official standing, and is not intended to be a substitute for reading the full original. It has been produced to help and stimulate our readers to engage with the synodal process and to delve more into the detail of the original. As with any summary, there may well be some oversimplification resulting in unintended misrepresentation. Readers are recommended to read 'the real thing'.*

#### Introduction:

Synodality may be described as "journeying together" — travelling companions aiming for a common destination, working co-operatively in participation and communion with each other. Pope Francis has declared that "it is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium". He "convoked" the entire Catholic Church in Synod on 17 October 2021, inviting all the People of God to reflect on how the Church can reform and renew itself to become such a "synodal church". We are called "to imagine a different future for the Church and her institutions, in keeping with the mission she has received" and to share our thoughts.

The basic question is: how does this journeying together take place today to enable us to fulfil our mission; and what does the Holy Spirit invite us to do to become more synodal?

The Synod's main aim is to make synodality manifest in the Church's form, style and processes. This can be broken down into eight objectives which range from being ever mindful that the Holy Spirit always calls us to be (as Church) witnesses to God's love, through to regenerating relationships with other faith communities and social groups in the wider world. (Full list at Appendix A)

#### I. The Call: why reform is needed

a. We live at a time of epochal changes in society. The global COVID-19 pandemic brings into sharper focus that we are one world, interdependent and yet divided by social, economic and ideological barriers; it also makes worse "the depth of the fault lines that run through humanity", fault lines that can be seen in the plight of migrants and the ecological crisis.

The task of the Church in this time is to start listening properly to the cry the poor and of the earth; to accompany individuals and communities in mourning and suffering; and to cultivate hope and faith in the goodness of creation and the Creator.

b. However, the Church itself suffers from an institutional lack of faith and from corruption. A culture and forms of authority have lead to various forms of abuse (power, economic, conscience, sexual etc.) within the Church itself. Such abuse by significant numbers have caused deep wounds in spirit and body and are an imposing barrier to "journeying together". It is impossible to think of a true reform of the Church without "the active participation of all the members of God's People".

c. In all this suffering, the Spirit continues to act. It is a reason for great hope that some synodal changes are already giving new impetus here and there; and that so many, including young people and women, are asking for more active participation in the life and mission of the Church.

- d. Nor can we ignore the diversity of local conditions in which Church communities live; from aggressive secularism to religious fundamentalism (Christian as well as others). From ones that seek to exclude religion, to those where religious extremism denies respect for individual liberties, promote intolerance and violence, and foster division and opposition.
- e. Within the above context, synodality represents the main road for the Church. Such a renewal “under the action of the Spirit” — imagining a different future for our Church and its institutions — in itself requires a synodal process of listening, dialogue and community discernment. At the same time, it is a prophetic sign to the rest of the human family, who need a shared project for the common good; who need the example of a Church that practises what we preach, that can stand beside the poor and the least.

## II. “The Church and synodality are synonymous”

- a. Synodality is more than a matter of church administration, synodality is its “constitutive dimension” — the specific **way of life and operation** of the Church, the People of God. Synodality is the way that the Church gives substance to its being as communion, “when all her members journey together, gather in assembly and take an active part in her evangelising mission.”
- b. This “journeying together” is rooted in the earliest days of the Church, and was practised at all levels of Church life. Even as the Church became increasingly hierarchical in the second millennium, the synodal tradition and principle were maintained in various forms; the Vatican Council II, firmly anchored in this tradition, re-affirmed that the whole People of God have an unerring instinct for God’s truth (*sensus fidei*), and that all the baptised exercise a variety of charisms, vocations and ministries as participants in Christ’s prophetic, priestly and kingly functions and as active subjects of evangelisation.
- c. The Church’s Pastors, as guardians of the faith, must not be afraid to listen to the Faithful because the dynamics of synodality are not those of democracy with its adversarial representation of conflicting interests. Instead, participation in a synodal process arises from a shared passion for the common mission inspired by the Spirit. Synodality does not replace hierarchy, it conditions how that hierarchy works amongst companions journeying together on a shared mission — a true, participative communion. The task of the present synod is to discover the face and form of such a synodal church, led by the Spirit; discover how we can bring together in unity the variety of gifts, charisms and ministries, for our mission.
- d. At the same time, a truly missionary Church, whose doors are open, must also journey together with other Churches and Christian communities, and all humankind. In this regard, our synodal path sets an example; a synodal Church is a prophetic sign - practising synodality is the most evident way for the Church to be “an instrument of intimate union with God and of the whole human race” .

## III Listening to the Scriptures:

As we embark on this synodal journey, we are asked to be inspired by two images from scripture:

### a. Jesus, the crowd, the apostles

The Gospels offer us an enduring image of three main actors whose interplay is a constant in how Jesus reveals himself and announces the coming of the Kingdom:

Jesus: whose words and deeds offer hope, and who consistently valued each person, listening, helping, appreciating, respecting their dignity. and who paid special attention to those separated from God and abandoned by the community.

The Crowd: Jesus was constantly open to the widest possible audience, which the Gospels refer to as the *crowd*. The work of evangelisation and the message of salvation can only be understood through Jesus’ constant openness to ‘the crowd’, his willingness to listen to and debate with ordinary people of all descriptions who emerge from the crowd.

The Apostles: The election of the apostles is not the privilege of an exclusive position of power and separation but the grace of an inclusive ministry .... “to guard the place of Jesus, not replace him: to make it easy to encounter him, not to put filters on his presence.”

b. Peter & Cornelius

Peter experiences bewilderment, incomprehension, and resistance to the Holy Spirit when what is asked of him conflicts with his cultural and social norms. He is eventually converted by the Holy Spirit speaking through Cornelius, an outsider and pagan, to a better understanding that God’s laws override conventional rules, customs and wisdom.

#### IV. Synodality in action: Consulting the People of God

- a. Synodality is both the aim and the method. Only in beginning to try it will the Church progress and develop as a synodal community. In doing so, the Church can only draw and build on lived experiences of “journeying together”, in our various ordinary lives, in whatever guise; such experiences are invaluable to help us to discern the right direction for the Church.
- b. The fundamental question on which the People of God are being consulted is therefore: 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”?
- c. We are all therefore invited to
  - ask: what experiences does the question call to mind?
  - reflect: what joys? what obstacles? what wounds? what insights?
  - Share: Where in all this, is the voice of the Spirit? What is he asking of us? What steps can be taken to move these issues forward, to open new paths for our local Church?
- d. In order for Synodality to be a “constitutive dimension of the Church” it must find consistent expression in all aspects of the Church’s life and operations: i) the way that communion and participation is realised in our celebration, ministries and roles; ii) the Church’s formal structures and processes; and iii) the extent that synodal events and processes are invoked by Church authorities. Without consistency and coherence across all three aspects, the Church’s credibility will be undermined, its style and processes degrade into empty rhetoric and formalities.
- e. Furthermore, it is important for us to maintain both internal and external perspectives. That is, not just forms of relationships between the Faithful, pastors, bishops and Pope; but also how the People of God journeys together with other denominations, religions, communities - the entire human family.
- f. Ten themes offered for exploration in our responses include: The journeying companions, listening, speaking out, celebrating, co-responsibility in Mission, dialogue in church and society, other denominations, authority, decision-making, and formation. (see Appendix B)
- g. The purpose of the Diocesan phase of this Synod is to gather the wealth of the experiences of lived synodality in its various forms. It is fundamentally important that in this broad consultation of all the Faithful, the voice of the poor and excluded must also find a place.

The summary of the Diocesan exercise will feed into a second (Regional) phase and from there into a Synod of Bishops.

#### In Conclusion:

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.” (Francis)*

## Appendix A:

The Synod's main aim is to make synodality manifest in the Church's form, style and processes.

This can be broken down into eight objectives

- 1 recalling how the Spirit has guided the Church's journey through history and, today, calls us to be, together, witnesses of God's love;
- 2 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;
- 3 recognising 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;
- 4 exploring participatory ways of exercising responsibility in the proclamation of the Gospel and in the effort to build a more beautiful and habitable world;
- 5 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;
- 6 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;
- 7 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 organisations, popular movements, etc.;
- 8 fostering the appreciation and appropriation of the fruits of recent synodal experiences on the universal, regional, national, and local levels.

## Appendix B:

### Facets of Synodality: Ten Themes to explore further

(Note: ★ denotes item selected by Plymouth Diocese for parish consultation/questionnaires. The Diocesan team have indicated that feedback on ANY item is welcome)

- I. THE JOURNEYING COMPANIONS: When we say: “our Church,” who is part of it? Who is left on the margins, expressly or in fact?
- ★ II. LISTENING: Who needs to be listened to, and how? The Laity, Consecrated Men and Women, Minorities, the discarded, and the excluded?
- III. SPEAKING OUT: How do we promote a free and authentic style of communication within our community and its organisations? And in relation to our society? When and how do we do this? Who speaks for us?
- ★ IV. CELEBRATING: How do prayer and liturgical celebration inspire and direct our “journeying together” and the most important decisions? How do we promote active participation in prayer, the liturgies and lay ministries?
- ★ V. CO-RESPONSIBLE IN THE MISSION: How do we call and help each person to mission, within the church and in wider society? Who participates in discernment about mission-related choices made, and how?
- VI. DIALOGUE IN CHURCH AND SOCIETY: What are the places and modes of dialogue within our diocese/parish? How do we deal with differences and promote collaboration with other religious communities, lay associations and movements, other sectors of society etc.?
- VII. JOURNEYING WITH THE OTHER CHRISTIAN DENOMINATIONS: What relations do we have with the brothers and sisters of other Christian denominations? In what areas? What are the difficulties and the fruits?
- VIII. AUTHORITY AND PARTICIPATION: How do we identify our goals and plans? How is authority exercised within our parish/diocese? 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 in our diocese/parish?
- IX. DISCERNING AND DECIDING: Do we make decisions through discernment, based on a consensus that flows from the common obedience to the Spirit, and how? How can it be improved? How do we promote participation in decision-making, transparency and accountability? How can we articulate consultation, deliberation and decision-making?
- X. FORMING OURSELVES IN SYNODALITY: How do we form people, the family and the community, to make them more capable of “journeying together,” listening to one another and engaging in dialogue? Formation for discernment and the exercise of authority?