

Synod

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From October 4th to 25th the XIV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops was held in the Vatican to discuss the issue of the vocation and mission of the family in the Church and in the contemporary world. Our Superior General participated with voice and vote, as a "synod father."

"How is the work going?" Francis asked me when I met him along the way to the Synod hall. Fine, I replied. I am in a group in which we can speak freely. There are various sensitivities, of course, but the synod fathers speak as pastors who discuss the joys and sorrows of concrete persons, bringing stories of search and of struggles. From time to time, the laity in the group call us to realism so that we do not lose ourselves in our complicated clerical language.

The walk from Casa Santa Marta, where Francis lives, to the Paul VI Hall is a little more than three hundred meters, but the Pope walks slowly, with a slight sway, and he tends to stop when he speaks to me. It seems like there is time to chat a little more.

Francis, since we are here... "May I bring something up with you?" "Go on, tell me", he invites. Then I speak to him about my concerns. The Synod is on the family, but there is no doubt that the strongest tensions are focused on some sensitive issues related to marriage, like the role of the conscience of the spouses in decisions about birth control, or access to the sacraments for those who are in the so called "irregular" situations. The rigorists argue vehemently saying that

the doctrine of the Church prevents changing the current discipline on these issues, and they add that any gesture of openness would be a scandal for good people.

How can this be the “doctrine”? Deep down, it is a question of how we understand Grace, that is to say, the action of God in persons. In addition, it seems that the criterion that definitively opens and closes doors is sex: whether or not there are sexual relations between the couple. How odd. My biggest difficulty is, beyond the theology, that the image of Jesus that emerges from the rigorists’ positions, does not correspond to the Jesus that I know, the Jesus that I adore in the Eucharist, the One I listen to when praying with the gospels. How are we going to get out of this entanglement of irreconcilable positions?

“Look”, this man in white who walked so casually by my side slowly remarked, “many have their heads in a theology in which Grace has been objectified, and a moral theology like that of the Jesuit professor who said that a boyfriend and girlfriend can certainly kiss each other, but on the condition that they put a handkerchief between their two faces!”. I cannot keep myself from heartily laughing, while inside I remind myself that I am chatting with the successor of Peter, the one who has on his shoulders the weight of confirming his brothers in faith and strengthening communion among all. A man under immense stress, but who radiates peace, kindness and compassion.

“Try not to close doors but to open them”, he concluded, as we reached the entrance to the hall, where a swarm of photographers and journalists awaited.

Synodality

The word Synod means, *“make way together”* (συν-οδος). In his address on October 17th, during the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the creation of the Synod by Paul VI, Francis spoke to us of “the necessity and beauty of journeying together”. Although, he also recognized that “journeying together –laity, pastors, the Bishop of Rome– is an easy concept to put into words, but not so easy to put into practice”. “A synodal Church is a Church that listens”, he added, “which realizes that listening ‘is more than simply hearing’. It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn”.

The Pope has offered an admirable example of this synodality that he preaches. Francis has been at all of the plenary sessions, listening to us without saying a word. Patient listening and, at times, painful, when some have used “not entirely well-meaning ways” (as he himself pointed out in the closing address). In his rare interventions, Francis has spoken to us about what more than two-thirds of the synod fathers ardently hoped for: a church that better reveals the merciful love of God, and he has invited us to “open up broader horizons, rising above conspiracy theories and blinkered viewpoints, so as to defend and spread the freedom of the children of God, and to transmit the beauty of Christian Newness, at times encrusted in a language which is archaic or simply incomprehensible.” And, to show “the vitality of the Catholic Church, which is not afraid to stir dulled consciences or to soil her hands with lively and frank discussions about the family” (closing address).

It is well known that a group of bishops and cardinals are steadfastly opposed to the merciful style of Francis and to his proposals for a closer relationship with persons who suffer or who find themselves cut off from the Church. Many of these critics are in the Vatican curia, and have made their voices strongly heard since the first day of the Synod. I admit that, for me, Francis’ attitude is admirable: the Pope could very well dismiss them, get rid of those who upset life in his own house and put others in their place. But he does

not do it. He wants us to walk together, all of us, without excluding anyone; not even his opponents. His innermost faith, it seems, is that of touching their hearts with the "enduring appeal of kindness and love".

Francis could also carry out more rapidly the reforms that he considers necessary for the Church. It has to advance "along the path of a pastoral and missionary conversion which cannot leave things as they presently are" (EG 25). However, he prefers to adjust his rhythm to that of the larger group. In this sense, he has risked much in convoking these two synods on the family. The results, as his opposition were hoping, could have confirmed the line of leaving everything as it was and to consider certain issues as closed in the name of a supposedly immutable doctrine that makes all practical change impossible. Fortunately, it was not this way; I do not doubt in the least that the Holy Spirit has acted. In any case, this openness of Francis to allow himself to be influenced - and even stopped - by his travel companions is amazing to me.

The work of the synod fathers, in groups and in assembly, has been arduous. They have spoken freely. An enormous diversity of perspectives have emerged. "We have also seen that what seems normal for a bishop on one continent, is considered strange and almost scandalous for a bishop from another; what is considered a violation of a right in one society is an evident and inviolable rule in another; what for some is freedom of conscience is for others simply confusion" (closing address). What a miracle of catholicity that communion is maintained in such diversity!

The Synod was a meeting of bishops. The others participated as invitees or auditors. So the question of the participation of the laity in the governance of the Church remains open. Nevertheless, I must say that during the days of the Synod I felt the wind of the Spirit that must have blown in the first councils, as an echo of Pentecost among the gathered successors of the apostles "*cum Petro et sub Petro*". What a privilege to have been there!

We ten superiors general, called as synod fathers (one of them a lay brother), were not bishops, but we could participate and vote as they did. This was determined by the rules of the Synod. In a certain sense, we worked as "outsiders", given that we do not have the responsibilities that the bishops have nor do we think as they do. I believe, however, that our humble contribution was able to help to focus on some issues in a different way; and on some occasions, our vote was decisive in tipping the balance to one side and not the other.

For my part, I have kept in mind that, through me, the charismatic experience of our Congregation and the voices of so many persons in our great SS.CC. family have reached the Synod. I have tried to offer this simple contribution for the well-being of the whole Church. I have learned a lot and I have grown in the awareness that we do not exist at the margin of the larger Church, rather, as Congregation, we participate in the journey of the people of God and in the hard work of the Gospel.

The path of discernment

So what are the results of the Synod? As almost always in these cases, the final text turns out to be boring, clerical and repetitive. Those who speak are "pastors" and they cannot avoid using the word "Church" as if it refers exclusively to them and their collaborators. It

is difficult to arrive at a consensus about something different in a group with these characteristics.

It speaks about a lot of topics. There is a bit of everything: it says very beautiful things about marriage and the family, it repeats things that are known, and one finds some expressions that are difficult to swallow... It says so many things that it does not manage to give a clear message that makes an impact on the imagination and on hearts. In order to do something like this, it will be necessary that Francis, himself, decide to write, and give a more clearly defined form to this ocean of ideas and words.

But let's not allow ourselves to be deceived by this first impression of "more of the same". The final text is radically different from the initial report with which the Synod began. Something happened among the synod fathers during these three weeks. There has been a decisive shift toward a language that looks at the concrete reality with more understanding eyes. All of those who do not fit the so-called "model of a Christian family based in the sacrament of marriage" are no longer stigmatized as egoists, irresponsible, children of the culture of death; now it is a question of understanding their searches, yearnings and difficulties. Timidly, but at last, it trusts in the action of God in the hearts of people and respects the decisions made in the sanctuary of their conscience. They no longer say, "this is allowed, this is prohibited", rather they leave the doors open to the paths of discernment where the eyes of faith merge with the thirst of the human heart and with its struggles.

A difficult and demanding orientation that compels one to confront the Gospel and seek light through prayer, dialogue and sincerity of conscience. It is not that anything goes, but for each situation, there is a possible way out that one has to search for and for which one has to work. It opens a path that, perhaps, will be disconcerting for many pastors and pastoral workers. They will no longer be able to limit themselves to being administrators of prefabricated services; rather they will have to devote time, energy and heart to becoming involved in the concrete lives of people. A path that invites one to overcome the recurring temptations of the elder brother (cf. Lk 15:25-32) and of the jealous workers (cf. Mt 20:1-16), one that expresses the complaints of the good and the just (cf. closing address).

Lastly, although it does it in a discreet way, the final text recognizes that the Reign of God is much larger than all of our concrete realizations, and that we can only be faithful to the Gospel if we recognize that we are always on the journey toward a love that precedes us and surpasses us. As it says in number 41, "Jesus with his way of living and his words, clearly showed that *family ties are important but not absolute* (Catechism of the Catholic Church). In a way that would end up shocking his listeners, Jesus down played family relations based on the reality of the Reign of God (cf. Mk 3:33-35; Lk 14:26; Mt 10:34-37; 19:29; 23:9). This revolution of affections, which Jesus introduces in the human family, constitutes a radical call to universal fraternity. No one remains excluded from the new community brought together in the name of Jesus; everyone has a place in the family of God".

Its only one-step on the journey. A journey together (syn-odos) towards a Church a little closer to the Heart of Jesus.

Embrace

On Saturday October 24th, in the afternoon, we proceeded to vote, point by point, on the final document. It was a long session charged with excitement. All of the points were approved by more than two-thirds. Even the most disputed point, number 85 on the divorced and remarried, received 178 votes (177 being the qualified majority of 2/3).

Immediately after the voting, Francis gave us a closing address. I earnestly invite you all to read it and meditate on it. They are formidable words of a believer who is impassioned for his Lord, of a pastor embracing his people, of a man who is a tremendous gift of God to his Church today.

At the end, many of us were exhausted, serenely happy and profoundly moved. I approached Francis with the intention of expressing my deepest gratitude. But it was he who stepped forward, looked at me with his tired face and bright eyes, and said to me, "thank you very much for your support." Then we melted into an embrace that I will remember for the rest of my life. An embrace in which the whole Congregation, which I unworthily represented, abandoned itself into the arms of the Church and its Lord.

