



Synod  
2021  
2024

For a synodal Church  
communion | participation | mission

“Enlarge the space of your tent”

(Is 54:2)

**WORKING DOCUMENT  
FOR THE CONTINENTAL STAGE**



GENERAL SECRETARIAT OF THE SYNOD

“Have among yourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus, Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness”

(Phil. 2:5-7)



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## Introduction

1. The Synod is on: one year after the opening of the synodal journey, we can enthusiastically affirm this! During this first part of the consultative phase, millions of people all over the world have been involved in the Synod's activities: some by participating in the meetings at the local level, some by collaborating in the animation and coordination of the activities at the different levels, and some by offering the support of their prayers: *"We also express our gratitude to the contemplative nuns who accompanied their people in prayer and continue to pray for the fruits of the Synod of Synodality"* (EC Peru). All of these people who got involved are the real protagonists of the Synod!

2. They set in motion urged on by a desire to respond to the basic question guiding the entire process: *"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?"* (Preparatory Document, no. 2).


3. Along the way they experienced the joy of meeting as brothers and sisters in Christ, sharing what resonated within them from listening to the Word, and reflecting together on the future of the Church based on the impetus of the Preparatory Document (PD). This has nourished the desire for an increasingly synodal Church: synodality has ceased to be an abstract concept for them and has become a concrete experience; they have tasted its flavor and want to continue to do so. *"Through this process we have discovered that synodality is a way of being Church – in fact, it is the way of being Church'. 'The Holy Spirit is asking us to be more synodal'"* (EC England and Wales).

4. Their experience has been translated into words, in the contributions that the different communities and groups have sent to the Dioceses. These submissions were synthesized and transmitted to the Episcopal Conferences, and in turn, from the outline contained in the PD, the Episcopal Conferences drafted a report that was sent to the General Secretariat of the Synod.



5. Globally, participation exceeded all expectations. In all, the Synod Secretariat received contributions from 112 out of 114 Episcopal Conferences and from all the 15 Oriental Catholic Churches, plus reflections from 17 out of 23 dicasteries of the Roman Curia besides those from religious superiors (USG/UISG), from institutes of consecrated life and societies of apostolic life, and from associations and lay movements of the faithful. In addition, over a thousand contributions arrived from individuals and groups as well as insights gathered through social media thanks to the initiative of the “Digital Synod.” These materials were distributed to a group of experts: bishops, priests, consecrated men and women, lay men and lay women, from all continents and with very diverse disciplinary expertise. After reading the reports, these experts met for almost two weeks together with the writing group, composed of the General Relator, the Secretary General of the Synod, the Undersecretaries and various officials of the Synod Secretariat, plus members of the Coordinating Committee. This group was finally joined by the members of the General Council. Together they worked in an atmosphere of prayer and discernment to share the fruits of their reading in preparation for the drafting of this Document for the Continental Stage (DCS).


6. The quotations that punctuate the DCS try to give an idea of the richness of the materials received, letting the voices of the People of God from all parts of the world speak as much as possible on their own terms and find resonance. They are not to be interpreted as endorsing the positions of any particular area of the globe, nor as simply representing geographical variety, although care has been taken to ensure a certain balance in terms of source provenance. Rather, these quotes were chosen because they express in a particularly powerful, beautiful or precise way sentiments expressed more generally in many reports. However, it is clear that no single document could condense the depth of faith, vitality of hope and energy of charity that overflow from the contributions received. Behind them one glimpses the power and richness of the experience that the different Churches have had by setting out and opening themselves to the diversity of voices that have taken the floor. Enabling this encounter and dialogue is the meaning of the synodal journey, whose ultimate purpose is not to produce documents but to open horizons of hope for the fulfilment of the Church’s mission.



7. It is within this journey, which is far from reaching its conclusion, that this DCS is situated and finds its meaning. In view of the Continental Stage of the synodal journey, the Document organizes around a small number of nuclei the hopes and concerns of the People of God from across the globe. In this way, it provides an opportunity for the local Churches to listen to each other's voices in view of the Continental Assemblies in 2023. Their task will be to draw up a list of priorities, upon which the First Session of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, which will be held from 4 to 29 October 2023, will carry out their discernment.

8. Clarifying the DCS's function also allows us to focus on what it is not: it is not a conclusive document, because the process is far from being finished; it is not a document of the Church's Magisterium, nor is it the report of a sociological survey; it does not offer the formulation of operational indications, goals and objectives, nor a full elaboration of a theological vision. Nonetheless it is theological in the sense that it is loaded with the exquisitely theological treasure contained in the experience of listening to the voice of the Spirit enacted by the People of God, allowing its *sensus fidei* to emerge. But it is also a theological document in the sense that it is orientated to the service of the Church's mission: to proclaim Christ who died and rose again for the salvation of the world.


9. To avoid misunderstandings in its reading, it is essential to keep in mind the particular nature of the DCS, as well as its structure. The Document opens with a chapter that offers more than a simple account of 'what happened', presenting a narrative of the synodality experienced so far, with the consultation of the People of God in the local Churches and the discernment of the Pastors in the Episcopal Conferences: it profiles the synodal experience, presents the difficulties encountered and the most significant fruits gathered, identifying the cornerstones of what constitutes an authentic collective experience of the Christian faith. In this way it does not provide a definition of synodality in the strict sense – for this you can refer to the PD or the materials listed on the Synod website ([www.synod.va](http://www.synod.va)) – but expresses the shared sense of the experience of synodality lived by those who took part. What emerges is a profound re-appropriation of the common dignity of all the baptized. This is the authentic pillar of a synodal Church and the theological foundation of a unity which is capable of resisting the push toward homogenization. This enables us to continue to promote and make good use of the variety of charisms that the Spirit with unpredictable abundance pours out on the faithful.



10. The second chapter presents a biblical icon, the image of the tent with which chapter 54 of the book of Isaiah opens. This image and narrative represents a key to an interpretation of the contents within the DCS in the light of the Word, placing them in the arc of God's promise that becomes a vocation for his People and his Church: "*Enlarge the space of your tent!*"

11. This tent is a space of *communion*, a place of *participation*, and a foundation for *mission*. In turn, the third chapter articulates the key words of the synodal journey connecting them with the fruits of listening to the People of God. It does so by gathering them around five generative tensions that are intertwined with one another:

1. listening as openness to welcome: this starts from a desire for radical inclusion – no one is excluded – to be understood in a perspective of communion with sisters and brothers and with our common Father; listening appears here not as an instrumental action, but as the assumption of the basic attitude of a God who listens to his People, as the following of a Lord whom the Gospels constantly present to us in the act of listening to the people who come to him along the roads of the Holy Land; in this sense listening is already mission and proclamation;
2. our outgoing drive toward mission. This is a mission that Catholics recognize as needing to be carried out with brothers and sisters of other confessions and in dialogue with believers of other religions, transforming human actions of care into authentically spiritual experiences that proclaim the face of a God who cares to the point of giving his own life so that we may have it in abundance;
3. carrying out the mission requires assuming a style based on participation, this corresponds to the full assumption of co-responsibility of all the baptized for the one mission of the Church arising from the common baptismal dignity;
4. the construction of concrete possibilities for living communion, participation and mission through structures and institutions inhabited by people properly formed and sustained by a living spirituality;



5. the liturgy, especially the Eucharistic liturgy, the source and summit of Christian life, which brings the community together, making communion tangible, enables the exercise of participation, and nourishes the momentum toward mission with the Word and the Sacraments.

12. Finally, the fourth chapter offers a glimpse toward the future by appealing to two levels both of which are indispensable for proceeding along the path: the spiritual level that seeks to orientate us towards a horizon of missionary synodal conversion, and the methodological one that traces our next steps for the Continental Stage.

13. The DCS will be understandable and useful only if it is read with the eyes of the disciple, who recognizes it as a testimony to the path of conversion toward a synodal Church. This means a Church that learns from listening how to renew its evangelizing mission in the light of the signs of the times, to continue offering humanity a way of being and living in which all can feel included as protagonists. Along this path, the lamp to our steps is the Word of God, which offers the light with which to reread, interpret and express the experience that has been lived.

14. Together we pray:

*Lord, you have gathered all your People in Synod.*

*We give you thanks for the joy  
experienced by those who decided to set out  
to listen to God and to their brothers and sisters during this year,  
with an attitude of welcome, humility, hospitality and siblinghood.*

*Help us to enter these pages as on "holy ground."*

*Come Holy Spirit: may you be the guide of our journey together!*






# 1. The experience of the synodal journey

15. The reports sent by Churches across the world give voice to the joys, hopes, sufferings and wounds of Christ's disciples. In their words we hear resonate what lies at the heart of all humanity. They express the desire for a Church that walks with Christ under the guidance of the Spirit to fulfil its mission of evangelization. *"Our current 'synod' experience has awakened in the lay faithful the idea of, and a desire to, get involved in the life of the Church, in its engagement with the world today, and in its pastoral work on the ground"* (EC Canada).

## 1.1 "The fruits, the seeds, the weeds of synodality"


16. The first part of the synodal journey has produced abundant fruit, new seeds that promise new growth, and above all, an experience of joy in challenging times: *"Largely, what emerges from the fruits, seeds and weeds of synodality are voices that have great love for the Church, voices that dream of a Church of credible witnesses, a Church that is inclusive, open and welcoming Family of God"* (EC Zimbabwe). Haiti speaks for many: *"Despite the continuous cases of kidnapping and violence recorded, the reports of the Dioceses express the joy of those who were able to actively participate in this first phase of the Synod"* (EC Haiti). This is a joy that many have asked be extended and shared with others. The Diocese of Ebibeyín (Equatorial Guinea) echoes this: *"this synodal experience has been one of the most rewarding that many have been able to experience in their Christian lives. From the first moment the work of the Synod began to the point where we are now, there is great enthusiasm among the People of God."* Among the fruits of the synod experience, several summaries highlight the strengthened feeling of belonging to the Church and the realisation on a practical level that the Church is not just priests and bishops: *"While sharing the fundamental question: 'How is this journeying together happening today in your particular Church?' it was noted that people could realize the true nature of the Church and in that light, they were able to see the situation of their Particular Church"* (EC Bangladesh).



17. Widespread appreciation was given to the method of spiritual conversation which allowed many to look honestly at the reality of Church life and name the lights and shadows. This honest appraisal bore immediate missionary fruits. *“There is a strong mobilization of the People of God, the joy of coming together, of walking together and of speaking freely. Some Christians who felt hurt and who had distanced themselves from the Church came back during this consultation phase”* (EC Central African Republic). Many emphasised that this was the first time the Church had asked for their opinion and they wish to continue this journey: *“Meetings in the spirit of the synodal method, in which all members of the congregation or community can openly and honestly express their opinion, as well as meetings with various groups outside the Church, should continue. This kind of cooperation should become one of the ‘unwritten laws’ of the Church culture, so as to foster rapprochement between Church members and groups in society, thus creating a readiness of people for deeper dialogue”* (EC Latvia).


18. However, there has been no shortage of challenges, which the reports do not hide. Some are related to the coincidence of the consultative phase with the pandemic; others stem from the difficulty of understanding what synodality means, the need for a greater effort to translate and enculturate the materials, the failure to organize synodal gatherings in some local contexts, or resistance to the basic proposal. There is no shortage of very clear expressions of rejection: *“I distrust the Synod. I think it has been called to bring about further change to Christ’s teachings and wound his Church further”* (individual submission from the UK). Quite frequently, the fear has been expressed that the emphasis on synodality could push the Church toward adopting mechanisms and procedures that depend on a democratic-type majority principle. Among the difficulties a scepticism about the real efficacy or intent of the synodal process should be noted: *“Some expressed doubts about the outcome of the synodal process due to their perception of the Church as a rigid institution unwilling to change and modernize itself, or due to a suspicion that the synodal outcome had been predetermined”* (EC Canada).

19. Numerous reports mention the fears and resistance on the part of the clergy, but also the passivity of the laity, their fear of expressing



themselves freely, and the struggle to understand and articulate the priests' and bishops' role within the synodal dynamic: *"In this process there was also resistance, lack of participation, communities that did not join. This may have been partly due to the novelty of the challenge, since many communities are not accustomed to this way of living the Church. It was also due to the fact that some leaders and pastors did not assume the animating and guiding role that corresponded to them. Several diocesan reports complain about the lack or weak involvement of priests"* (EC Chile). In many cases, the synodal process and materials reveal that there is a widespread perception of a separation between priests and the rest of the People of God: *"Consultations in dioceses and at national level have shown that the relationship between priests and the faithful is difficult in many places. On the one hand, there is criticism of a perceived distance between clergy and laity, in some places priests are even experienced as an obstacle to a fruitful community. At the same time, the challenges for priests are named: the shortage of priests and also the increasing loss of volunteers lead to exhaustion; also, priests do not always feel heard, some see their ministry questioned. What makes a good priest? How can parish life be an enriching experience for everyone involved? Why do fewer and fewer men feel a vocation? These questions need to be discussed"* (EC Austria).

20. An obstacle of particular relevance on the path of walking together is the scandal of abuse by members of the clergy or by people holding ecclesial office: first and foremost, abuse of minors and vulnerable persons, but also abuse of other kinds (spiritual, sexual, economic, of authority, of conscience). This is an open wound that continues to inflict pain on victims and survivors, on their families, and on their communities: *"There was ongoing reference to the impact of the clergy sexual abuse crisis and the Church's response [...]. For many, the aftermath of this is still a powerful, unresolved issue. There was a strong urgency to acknowledge the horror and damage, and to strengthen efforts to safeguard the vulnerable, repair damage to the moral authority of the Church and rebuild trust. Some Dioceses reported that participants wished for them publicly to acknowledge and atone for past abuses"* (EC Australia). Careful and painful reflection on the legacy of abuse has led many synod groups to call for a cultural change in the Church with a view to greater transparency, accountability and co-responsibility.



21. Furthermore, in too many countries the synodal way has crossed paths with the wars that stain our world with blood, *“giving free reign to fanaticism of all kinds and to persecutions, even massacres. Sectarian and ethnic incitements were noted, which degenerated into armed and political conflicts, often bloody”* (Maronite Church). Particularly painful are those situations in which Christians, including Catholics, live in countries at war with each other. Even in these fragile situations which intensify an encounter with the Cross and Resurrection, Christian communities have been able to take up the invitation addressed to them to build experiences of synodality, to reflect on what it means to walk together, and express a desire to continue to do so: *“Concerning the tragedy of the genocide against the Tutsi that has so divided the Rwandan people, one should better deepen the theme of communion with a view to an authentic healing of the collective memory. This Synod has given us a better understanding that the pastoral of unity and reconciliation must continue to be a priority”* (EC Rwanda).

## 1.2 Our common baptismal dignity

22. Practices of lived synodality have constituted *“a pivotal and precious moment to realize how we all share a common dignity and vocation through our Baptism to participants in the life of the Church”* (EC Ethiopia). This foundational reference to baptism – not as an abstract concept but as a felt identity – immediately brings into focus the link between the synodal form of the Church and the possibility of fulfilling its mission: *“there was a growing understanding that it is important for all who have received the blessing of baptism to walk together, sharing and discerning the guidance of the Holy Spirit who calls them. There was a deep realization that in the synodal Church walking together is the way to become a missionary Church”* (EC Japan). Many local Churches within contexts that see the presence of numerous Christian denominations place particular stress on the baptismal dignity of all Christian sisters and brothers, and the common mission in service of the Gospel. A synodal process is incomplete without meeting brothers and sisters from other confessions, sharing and dialogue with them, and engaging in common actions. The reports express a desire for deeper ecumenical encounter, and the need for formation to support this work.

23. The reports present the synod process as an experience of novelty and freshness: *"People of God remarked on the uniqueness of speaking freely and being heard in organized conversations that were open-ended and attentive with guidance of the Holy Spirit. They spoke of how, after decades of church going, they had been asked to speak for first time"* (EC Pakistan). Another image refers to an experience of liberation and new life: the eggshell shattering as new life unfurls its wings.

24. Elsewhere, expressions emerge that evoke rather the idea of distance between family members and a desired return, the end of a collective alienation from one's identity as a synodal Church. To use a biblical image, one could say that the synodal journey marked the first steps of the return from an experience of collective exile, the consequences of which affect the entire People of God: if the Church is not synodal, no one can really feel fully at home.






## 2. Listening to the Scriptures

25. It is to a people living the experience of exile that the prophet addresses words that help us today to focus on what the Lord is calling us to through the experience of lived synodality: *"Enlarge the space of your tent, spread out your tent cloths unsparingly, lengthen your ropes and make firm your pegs"* (Is 54:2).

26. To the people in exile the prophet's words evokes the experience of the exodus, when they dwelt in tents, and announces the promise of the return to the land, a sign of joy and hope. To prepare, it is necessary to enlarge the tent, acting on the three elements of its structure. The first is the tent cloth, which protect from the sun, wind and rain, delineating a space of life and conviviality. They need to be spread out, so that they can also protect those who are still outside this space, but who feel called to enter it. The ropes that hold the cloths together are the second structural element of the tent. They must balance the tension needed to keep the tent from drooping with the softness that cushions movement caused by the wind. That is why if the tent expands, the ropes must be stretched to maintain the right tension. Finally, the pegs are the third element: they anchor the structure to the ground and ensure its solidity, but remain capable of moving when the tent must be pitched elsewhere.

27. Listened to today, these words of Isaiah invite us to imagine the Church similarly as a tent, indeed as the tent of meeting, which accompanied the people on their journey through the desert: called to stretch out, therefore, but also to move. At its centre, stands the tabernacle, that is, the presence of the Lord. The tent's hold is ensured by the sturdiness of its pegs, that is, the fundamentals of faith that do not change but can be moved and planted in ever new ground, so that the tent can accompany the people as they walk through history. Finally, in order not to sag, the structure of the tent must keep in balance the different forces and tensions to which it is subjected: a metaphor that expresses the need for discernment. This is how many reports envision the Church: an expansive, but not homogeneous dwelling, capable of sheltering all, but open, letting in and out (cf. Jn. 10:9), and moving toward embracing the Father and all of humanity.



28. Enlarging the tent requires welcoming others into it, making room for their diversity. It thus entails a willingness to die to self out of love, finding oneself again in and through relationship with Christ and one's neighbor: *"Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit"* (Jn. 12:24). The fruitfulness of the Church depends on accepting this death, which is not, however, an annihilation, but an experience of emptying oneself in order to be filled by Christ through the Holy Spirit, and thus a process by which we receive richer relationships, deeper ties to God and each other. This is the place of grace, and of transfiguration. For this reason, the apostle Paul recommends, *"Have among yourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus, Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness"* (Phil. 2:5-7). It is under this condition that the members of the Church, each and all together, will be able to cooperate with the Holy Spirit in fulfilling the mission assigned by Jesus Christ to his Church: it is a liturgical, Eucharistic act.

"I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit"

(Jn. 12:24)







### 3. Towards a missionary synodal Church

29. The biblical imagery of the tent relates to other images that appear in numerous reports: that of the family and that of home, the place to which people wish to belong, and to which they wish to return. *"The Church-home does not have doors that close, but a perimeter that continually widens"* (EC Italy). The dynamic of home and exile, of belonging and exclusion, is felt as a tension in the reports. One noted *"Those who feel at home in the Church feel the absence of those who don't"* (EC Ireland). Through these voices, we hear the dream of *"a global and synodal Church that lives unity in diversity. God is preparing something new, and we must collaborate"* (USG/UISG).

30. The submissions are encouraging because they avoid two of the main spiritual temptations facing the Church in responding to diversity and the tensions it generates. The first is to remain trapped in conflict, such that our horizons shrink and we lose our sense of the whole, and fracture into sub-identities. It is an experience of Babel and not Pentecost, well recognizable in many features of our world. The second is to become spiritually detached and disinterested in the tensions involved, continuing to go our own way without involving ourselves with those close to us on the journey. Instead, *"the call is to live better the tension of truth and mercy, as Jesus did [...]. The dream is of a Church that more fully lives a Christological paradox: boldly proclaiming its authentic teaching while at the same time offering a witness of radical inclusion and acceptance through its pastoral and discerning accompaniment"* (EC England and Wales).


31. The vision of a Church capable of radical inclusion, shared belonging, and deep hospitality according to the teachings of Jesus is at the heart of the synodal process: *"Instead of behaving like gatekeepers trying to exclude others from the table, we need to do more to make sure that people know that everyone can find a place and a home here"* (remark by a parish group from the USA). We are called to go to every place, especially outside the more familiar territories, *"leaving the comfortable position of those who give hospitality to allow ourselves to be welcomed into the existence of those who are our companions on the journey of humanity"* (EC Germany).



### 3.1 Listening that becomes welcoming

32. In this journey, the Churches have realised that the path to greater inclusion – the enlarged tent – is a gradual one. It begins with listening and requires a broader and deeper conversion of attitudes and structures, as well as new approaches to pastoral accompaniment; it begins in a readiness to recognise that the peripheries can be the place where a call to conversion resounds along with the call to put the Gospel more decisively into practice. Listening requires that we recognize others as subjects of their own journey. When we do this, others feel welcomed, not judged, free to share their own spiritual journey. This has been experienced in many contexts, and for some this has been the most transformative aspect of the whole process. The synodal experience can be read as a path of recognition for those who do not feel sufficiently recognised in the Church. This is especially true for those lay men and women, deacons, consecrated men and women who previously had the feeling that the institutional Church was not interested in their faith experience or their opinions.

33. The reports also reflect on the difficulty of listening deeply and accepting being transformed by it. They highlight the lack of communal processes of listening and discernment, and call for more training in this area. Furthermore, they point to the persistence of structural obstacles, including: hierarchical structures that foster autocratic tendencies; a clerical and individualistic culture that isolates individuals and fragments relationships between priests and laity; sociocultural and economic disparities that benefit the wealthy and educated; and the absence of “in-between” spaces that foster encounters between members of mutually separated groups. Poland’s report states *“Not listening leads to misunderstanding, exclusion, and marginalization. As a further consequence, it creates closure, simplification, lack of trust and fears that destroys the community. When priests do not want to listen, making excuses, such as in the large number of activities, or when questions go unanswered, a sense of sadness and estrangement arises in the hearts of the lay faithful. Without listening, answers to the faithfuls’ difficulties are taken out of context and do not address the essence of the problems they are experiencing, becoming empty moralism. The laity feel that the flight from sincere listening stems from the fear of having to engage pastorally. A similar feeling grows when bishops do not have time to speak and listen to the faithful.”*




34. At the same time, the reports are sensitive to the loneliness and isolation of many members of the clergy, who do not feel listened to, supported and appreciated: perhaps one of the least evident voices in the reports is that of priests and bishops, speaking for themselves and of their experience of walking together. A particularly attentive listening must be offered to enable ordained ministers to negotiate the many dimensions of their emotional and sexual life. The need to ensure appropriate forms of welcome and protection for the women and eventual children of priests who have broken the vow of celibacy, who are otherwise at risk of suffering serious injustice and discrimination, is also noted.

#### **An option for young people, people with disabilities and the defence of life**

35. There is universal concern regarding the meagre presence of the voice of young people in the synod process, as well as increasingly in the life of the Church. A renewed focus on young people, their formation and accompaniment is an urgent need, also as a way to implement the conclusions of the previous Synod on “Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment” (2018). On that occasion, it was precisely young people who brought out the need for a more synodal Church in view of the transmission of the faith today. The “Digital Synod” initiative is a significant attempt to listen to young people and offers new insights for the proclamation of the Gospel. Antilles’ report states, *“Since our young people experience a high degree of alienation, we need to make a preferential option for the young.”*

36. Numerous reports point to the lack of appropriate structures and ways of accompanying persons with disabilities, and call for new ways of welcoming their contribution and promoting their participation: in spite of its own teachings, the Church is in danger of imitating the way society casts them aside. *“The forms of discrimination listed – the lack of listening, the violation of the right to choose where and with whom to live, the denial of the sacraments, the accusation of witchcraft, abuse – and others, describe the culture of rejection towards persons with disabilities. They do not arise by chance, but have in common the same root: the idea that the lives of persons with disabilities are worth less than others”* (Report of the special synodal consultation of persons with disabilities by the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life).




37. Equally prominent is the commitment of the People of God to the defence of fragile and threatened life at all its stages. For example, for the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, it is part of synodality to *“study the phenomenon of female migration and offer support to women of different age groups; to pay special attention to women who decide to have an abortion due to fear of material poverty and rejection by their families in Ukraine; to carry out educational work among women who are called upon to make a responsible choice when going through a difficult time in their lives, with the aim of preserving and protecting the lives of unborn children and preventing abortion; to care for women with post-abortion syndrome.”*

### Listening to Those who Feel Neglected and Excluded

38. The reports clearly show that many communities have already understood synodality as an invitation to listen to those who feel exiled from the Church. The groups who feel a sense of exile are diverse, beginning with many women and young people who do not feel their gifts and abilities are recognised. Within these groups, that among themselves are highly heterogeneous, many feel denigrated, neglected, misunderstood. Longing for a home also characterises those who, following the liturgical developments of the Second Vatican Council, do not feel at ease. For many, the experience of being seriously listened to is transformative and a first step towards feeling included. On the other hand, it was a source of sadness that some felt that their participation in the synod process was unwelcome: this is a feeling that requires understanding and dialogue.

39. Among those who ask for a more meaningful dialogue and a more welcoming space we also find those who, for various reasons, feel a tension between belonging to the Church and their own loving relationships, such as: remarried divorcees, single parents, people living in a polygamous marriage, LGBTQ people, etc. Reports show how this demand for welcome challenges many local Churches: *“People ask that the Church be a refuge for the wounded and broken, not an institution for the perfect. They want the Church to meet people wherever they are, to walk with them rather than judge them, and to build real relationships through caring and authenticity, not a purpose of superiority”* (EC USA). They also reveal uncertainties about how to respond and express the need for discernment on the part of the universal Church: *“There is a new phenomenon in the Church that is absolutely new in Lesotho: same-sex relationships. [...] This novelty is*




*disturbing for Catholics and for those who consider it a sin. Surprisingly, there are Catholics in Lesotho who have started practising this behaviour and expect the Church to accept them and their way of behaving. [...] This is a problematic challenge for the Church because these people feel excluded"* (EC Lesotho). Those who left ordained ministry and married, too, ask for a more welcoming Church, with greater willingness to dialogue.

40. Despite the cultural differences, there are remarkable similarities between the various continents regarding those who are perceived as excluded, in society and also in the Christian community. In many cases their voice has been absent from the synod process, and they appear in reports only because others speak about them, lamenting their exclusion: *"As the Bolivian Church, we are saddened that we have not been able to effectively reach out to the poor on the peripheries and in the most remote places"* (EC Bolivia). Among the most frequently mentioned excluded groups are: the poorest, the lonely elderly, indigenous peoples, migrants without any affiliation and who lead a precarious existence, street children, alcoholics and drug addicts, those who have fallen into the plots of criminality and those for whom prostitution seems their only chance of survival, victims of trafficking, survivors of abuse (in the Church and beyond), prisoners, groups who suffer discrimination and violence because of race, ethnicity, gender, culture and sexuality. In the reports, all of them appear as people with faces and names, calling for solidarity, dialogue, accompaniment and welcome.

### **3.2 Sisters and brothers for mission**

41. The Church is the bearer of a proclamation of fullness of life: *"I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly"* (Jn10:10). The Gospels present the fullness of life and the fullness of the Kingdom of God not as separate realities or spheres of action, but always as dynamically intertwined movements. The Church's mission is to make Christ present in the midst of His People through reading the Word, the celebration of the Sacraments and through all actions that care for the wounded and suffering. *"It is necessary for all of us in the Church to enter into a process of conversion in order to respond to this need, which would imply proposing the kerygma as the fundamental proclamation and listening to Christ crucified and risen for us. [...] Hence the importance of returning to the essence of Christian life and of our first love, and returning to our roots as the first communities; that is to say, where all things were held in common"* (EC Costa Rica).




42. Fulfilling our mission we grow to the measure of our Christian vocation. 'Enlarging our tent' is at the heart of this missionary activity. Therefore, a Church that practises synodality offers a potent Gospel witness to the world: *"The Holy Spirit is pushing for the renewal of our strategies, commitments, dedication and motivation so that we can walk together and reach those who are farthest away: by spreading the Word of God with enthusiasm and joy, by putting our talents, gifts and skill to use, by accepting the new challenges and by producing cultural changes in the light of the Gospel and the life of the Church"* (EC Venezuela). Contained in the reports is the dream of such a Church: one deeply involved with the world's challenges, and capable of responding to these through concrete transformations. *"The world needs a 'Church that goes forth', that rejects the division between believers and non-believers, that looks at humanity and offers it more than a doctrine or a strategy, an experience of salvation, a 'coup of gift' that responds to the cry of humanity and nature"* (EC Portugal).

#### The Church's mission in today's world.

43. Synodality is a call from God to walk together with the whole human family. In many places, Christians live in the midst of people of other faiths or non-believers and are engaged in a dialogue formed in the exchanges of everyday life and common living: *"A social climate of dialogue is cultivated with those who practice traditional African religion, too, and with every other person or community, whatever religious denomination they belong to"* (EC Senegal, Mauritania, Cape Verde and Guinea Bissau). However, the reports indicate that there is still a long way to go in terms of social, cultural, spiritual and intellectual exchange and collaboration.

44. The wounds of the Church are intimately connected to those of the world. The reports speak of the challenges of tribalism, sectarianism, racism, poverty, and gender inequality within the life of the Church, as well as the world. Uganda echoes many other countries in noting that in the structures of the Church *"the rich and the educated are listened to more than others"*. The Philippines report notes that *"many of the underprivileged and those who were marginalised in society felt that they are also left out in the Church"*. Other reports note the influence that ethnic discrimination and a culture based on tribalism has on the life of ecclesial communities. These realities form not just the background context of our mission but also define its focus and purpose: the message of the Gospel that the Church



is charged to proclaim must also convert the structures of sin that hold humanity and creation captive.


45. The People of God express a deep desire to hear the cry of the poor and that of the earth. In particular, the reports invite us to recognize the interconnectedness of social and environmental challenges and to respond to them by collaborating and forming alliances with other Christian confessions, believers of other religions and all people of good will. This call for renewed ecumenism and interfaith engagement is particularly strong in regions marked by greater vulnerability to socio-environmental damage and more pronounced inequalities. For example, many African and Pacific Rim reports call on Churches around the world to recognize that addressing socio-environmental challenges is no longer optional: *“It is our desire to protect this part of God’s creation, as the wellbeing of our people depends on the ocean in so many ways. In some of our countries the major threat is the ocean as changes in climate have drastic outcomes for the actual survival of these countries”* (EC Pacific).

46. Some reports also noted the importance of the role of the Church in the public sphere, particularly in relation to processes of peace-building and reconciliation. In heavily divided societies this is often seen as a crucial part of mission. Other reports called for the Church to be more confident in contributing to debate and action for justice in the public sphere. The desire was for greater formation in the Church’s social teaching. *“[O]ur Church is not called to confrontation, but to dialogue and cooperation on all levels [...]. Our dialogue cannot be an apologetic dialogue with useless arguments, but a dialogue of life and solidarity”* (Catholic Armenian Church).

47. A further theme common to many reports is the weakness of deep ecumenical engagement and the desire to learn how to breathe new life into the ecumenical journey, starting with concrete, daily collaboration on common concerns for social and environmental justice. A more united witness among Christians and between faith communities is expressed as an ardent desire.

### Walking together with all Christians.

48. The call to ecumenism is not, however, merely aimed at common social engagement. Many reports emphasize that there is no complete




synodality without unity among Christians. This begins with the call for closer communion between Churches of different rites. Since the Second Vatican Council, ecumenical dialogue has made progress: *"In the real life of the Central African Republic, 'living together' between Christians of different confessions is self-evident. Our neighbourhoods, our families, our mortuary places, our workplaces are real places of ecumenism"* (EC Republic of Central Africa). However, many ecumenical issues related to synodal structures and ministries in the Church are still not well-articulated. The reports also note that there is an 'ecumenism of martyrdom' where persecution continues to unite Christians. The reports request greater attention to divisive realities, for example the question of sharing the Eucharist.

49. The reports also point to the sensitive phenomenon of the growth in the number of inter-church and interfaith families, with their specific needs in terms of accompaniment. Revitalizing the commitment to dialogue and accompaniment as a witness in a fragmented world requires targeted formation that increases confidence, capacity and motivation for ecumenical and interreligious dialogue among bishops, priests, consecrated women and men, lay men and women. *"Although the Catholic Church in India has attempted to foster ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue, there is a feeling that the mission in this realm is minimal. The dialogue efforts drew only a handful of elites and remained mostly as cerebral exercises limited to the realm of ideas and concepts rather than becoming a movement of the masses and becoming also a dialogue of life, love and action at the base, by getting people of various faiths and ideologies to discern, plan and work together for common causes"* (EC India).

### Cultural contexts

50. Numerous reports highlight the importance of recognizing that the Church fulfills its mission of proclaiming the Gospel within specific cultural contexts, and is influenced by profound and rapid social changes. The factors vary, but create significant challenges for participation and shape the reality of the Church's mission. Legacies of sectarianism, tribalism, ethno-nationalisms – differently expressed and experienced in diverse places - share the same characteristic threat: to narrow the Church's expression of its catholicity.




51. Many local Churches express concern about the impact of a lack of trust and credibility resulting from the abuse crises. Others point to individualism and consumerism as critical cultural factors: *“Every day we can feel that even in our country the proclamation of the Gospel is challenged by growing secularization, individualism and indifference to the institutional forms of religion”* (EC Hungary). Malta’s report, like many others, underscores how historical entanglements between Church and political power continue to have an effect on the mission context. Many Churches feel they face all these cultural challenges simultaneously, but wish to grow more and more confident in proclaiming the Gospel in *“a consumerist society that has failed to ensure sustainability, equity or life satisfaction”* (EC Ireland). Others experience a pluralism of positions within themselves: *“Southern Africa is also impacted by the international trends of secularisation, individualisation, and relativism. Issues such as the Church’s teaching on abortion, contraception, ordination of women, married clergy, celibacy, divorce and remarriage, Holy Communion, homosexuality, LGBTQIA+ were raised up across the Dioceses both rural and urban. There were of course differing views on these and it is not possible to give a definitive community stance on any of these issues”* (EC South Africa). Many reports express particular regret and concern for the pressures experienced by families and the resulting impact on intergenerational relationships and faith transmission. Many Asian reports ask for better accompaniment and formation for families, as they negotiate changing cultural conditions.

52. In some contexts, the witness of the faith is lived to the point of martyrdom. There are countries where Christians, especially young people, face the challenge of systematic forced conversion to other religions. There are many reports that emphasize the insecurity and violence with which persecuted Christian minorities must contend. In such cases, walking together with people of other faiths, instead of retreating behind the wall of separation, requires the courage of prophecy.

### Cultures, religions and dialogue


53. An essential element of a synodal Church, one which still needs significant deepening and better understanding, is the call to a more meaningful inter-cultural approach. This approach begins by walking together with others, appreciating cultural differences, understanding those particularities as elements which help us to grow: *“The encounter*



*between the Catholic Church in Cambodia and the Buddhist Monks and lay Cambodian Buddhists 'creates a new culture.' All our activities affect each other and affect the whole world. We may differ in religion, but we all seek the common good" (EC Laos and Cambodia). It is the Churches that represent a small minority in the context in which they live that experience this most intensely: "For example [there is] what we might call the 'porosity' of our Churches, whose line of demarcation with civil society is paradoxically less marked than elsewhere [...]. There is no problem of doing things 'inside' or 'outside' the Church. We are an outgoing Church by definition, because we are always 'in the home of others' and this has taught us listening, flexibility, and creativity in forms, language, and practices" (EC North African Region - CERNA).*

54. However, even when we come to acceptance or even appreciation of the other, the journey is still incomplete. The Church's intercultural approach aims at the horizon to which Christ calls us: the Kingdom of God. In the embrace of an enriching diversity, we can find our deeper unity and the opportunity to cooperate with God's grace: *"We should also take heed of the thoughts and ideas of the extended family and companions in the journey; non-Catholics, Politicians and non-believers. These are voices in our neighbourhood we cannot afford to avoid lest we miss out God's whispers through them!" (EC Zimbabwe). This constitutes a witness within a world that struggles to see diversity in unity as a true vocation: "The community [...] must take greater account of diversity, aspirations, needs and ways of living the faith. The universal Church must remain the guarantor of unity, but Dioceses can inculturate the faith locally: decentralization is necessary" (Archdiocese of Luxembourg).*

55. In a good number of reports, there is a call to better recognize, engage, integrate, and respond to the richness of local cultures, many of which have worldviews and styles of action that are synodal. People express a desire to promote (and in some cases recover and deepen) local culture, to integrate it with faith, and to incorporate it into the liturgy. *"In this context, Christians are called to offer their own contribution starting from their own vision of faith in order to enculturate it in the new cultural contexts [...]. This diversity of approaches should be seen as the implementation of a model of interculturality, where the different proposals complement and enrich each other, going beyond that of multiculturalism, which consists in the simple*



*juxtaposition of cultures, closed within their perimeters” (Contribution of the Pontifical Council for Culture).*


56. In many cases, the reports call especially for attention to the situation of indigenous peoples. Their spirituality, wisdom, and culture have much to teach. We need to reread history together with these peoples, to draw inspiration from those situations in which the Church’s action has been at the service of their integral human development, and to ask forgiveness for the times when it has instead been complicit in their oppression. At the same time, some reports highlight the need to reconcile the apparent contradictions that exist between cultural practices or traditional beliefs and the teachings of the Church. On a more general level, the practice of synodality – communion, participation and mission – needs to be articulated within local cultures and contexts, in a tension that promotes discernment and generativity.

### **3.3 Communion, participation, and co-responsibility**

57. The mission of the Church is realized through the lives of all the baptised. The reports express a deep desire to recognise and reaffirm this common dignity as the basis for the renewal of life and ministries in the Church. They affirm the value of all vocations in the Church, and above all, invite us to follow Jesus, returning to his style and way of exercising power and authority as a means of offering healing, reconciliation and liberation. *“It is important to build a synodal institutional model as an ecclesial paradigm of deconstructing pyramidal power that privileges unipersonal managements. The only legitimate authority in the Church must be that of love and service, following the example of the Lord” (CE Argentina).*

#### **Beyond clericalism**

58. The tone of the reports is not anti-clerical (against priests or the ministerial priesthood). Many express deep appreciation and affection for faithful and dedicated priests, and concerns about the many demands that they face. They also voice the desire for better formed, better accompanied and less isolated priests. They signal the importance of ridding the Church of clericalism so that all its members, including priests and laity, can fulfil a common mission. Clericalism is seen as a form of spiritual impoverishment, a deprivation of the true goods of ordained ministry, and a culture that isolates clergy and harms the laity. This culture separates us from the living




experience of God and damages the kinship relations of the baptised, producing rigidity, attachment to legalistic power and an exercise of authority that is power rather than service. Clericalism can be as much a temptation for lay people as clergy., as the report from the Central African Republic underlines: *"some parish priests behave like 'order-givers', imposing their will without listening to anyone. Lay Christians do not feel they are members of the People of God. Initiatives that are too 'clericalistic' should be deplored. Some pastoral workers, clerics and lay, sometimes prefer to surround themselves with those who share their opinions and stay away from those whose convictions are hostile and in disagreement with them."*

59. Although frank in their diagnosis of the problem, the reports are not hopeless. They express a deep and energetic desire for renewed forms of leadership – priestly, episcopal, religious and lay – that are relational and collaborative, and forms of authority capable of generating solidarity and co-responsibility: *"The tasks of the authorities include encouraging, involving, leading and facilitating participation in the life of the Church [...] and delegating part of the responsibilities"* (EC Slovakia). Lay people, religious and clerics desire to put their talents and abilities at the disposal of the Church, and to do so they call for an exercise of leadership that enables them to be free. The reports express gratitude for those leaders who already exercise their role in these ways.

### Rethinking women's participation

60. The call for a conversion of the Church's culture, for the salvation of the world, is linked in concrete terms to the possibility of establishing a new culture, with new practices and structures. A critical and urgent area in this regard concerns the role of women and their vocation, rooted in our common baptismal dignity, to participate fully in the life of the Church. A growing awareness and sensitivity towards this issue is registered all over the world.


61. From all continents comes an appeal for Catholic women to be valued first and foremost as baptised and equal members of the People of God. There is almost unanimous affirmation that women love the Church deeply, but many feel sadness because their lives are often not well understood, and their contributions and charisms not always valued. The



Holy Land report notes: *"Those who were most committed to the synod process were women, who seem to have realised not only that they had more to gain, but also more to offer by being relegated to a prophetic edge, from which they observe what happens in the life of the Church;"* and continues: *"In a Church where almost all decision-makers are men, there are few spaces where women can make their voices heard. Yet they are the backbone of Church communities, both because they represent the majority of the practising members and because they are among the most active members of the Church."* The Korean report confirms: *"Despite the great participation of women in various Church activities, they are often excluded from key decision-making processes. Therefore, the Church needs to improve its awareness and institutional aspects of their activities"* (EC Korea). The Church faces two related challenges: women remain the majority of those who attend liturgy and participate in activities, men a minority; yet most decision-making and governance roles are held by men. It is clear that the Church must find ways to attract men to a more active membership in the Church and to enable women to participate more fully at all levels of Church life.

62. In every area of their lives, women ask the Church to be their ally. This includes addressing the social realities of impoverishment, violence and diminishment faced by women across the globe. They call for a Church at their side, and grater understanding and support in combating these forces of destruction and exclusion. Women participating in the synodal processes desire both Church and society to be a place of flourishing, active participation and healthy belonging. Some reports note that the cultures of their countries have made progress in the inclusion and participation of women, progress that could serve as a model for the Church. *"This lack of equality for women within the Church is seen as a stumbling block for the Church in the modern world"* (EC New Zealand).

63. In different forms, the problem is present across cultural contexts and concerns the participation and recognition of laywomen as well as women religious. The report from Superiors of Institutes of Consecrated Life notes: *"Sexism in decision-making and Church language is prevalent in the Church... As a result, women are excluded from meaningful roles in the life of the Church, discriminated against by not receiving a fair wage for their ministries and services. Women religious are often regarded as cheap*




labour. There is a tendency – in some Churches – to exclude women and to entrust ecclesial functions to permanent deacons; and even to undervalue religious life without the habit, without regard for the fundamental equality and dignity of all baptised Christian faithful, women and men” (USG/UISG).

64. Almost all reports raise the issue of full and equal participation of women: *“The growing recognition of the importance of women in the life of the Church opens up possibilities for greater, albeit limited, participation in Church structures and decision-making spheres”* (EC Brazil). However, the reports do not agree on a single or complete response to the question of the vocation, inclusion and flourishing of women in Church and society. After careful listening, many reports ask that the Church continue its discernment in relation to a range of specific questions: the active role of women in the governing structures of Church bodies, the possibility for women with adequate training to preach in parish settings, and a female diaconate. Much greater diversity of opinion was expressed on the subject of priestly ordination for women, which some reports call for, while others consider a closed issue.

65. A key element of this process concerns the recognition of the ways in which women, especially women religious, are already at the forefront of synodal practices in some of the most challenging social situations we face. The contribution submitted by the Union of Superiors General and the International Union of Superiors General notes: *“There are seeds of synodality where we break new ground in solidarity: securing a future of racial and ethnic justice and peace for black, brown, Asian and Native American brothers and sisters (United States); connecting in depth with indigenous and native sisters and brothers (Americas); opening new avenues of presence of religious sisters in diverse movements; alliance with like-minded groups to address key social issues (such as climate change, refugees and asylum seekers, homelessness), or issues of specific nations.”* In these contexts, women seek collaborators and can be teachers of synodality within wider Church processes.

#### Charisms, vocations and ministries


66. Responsibility for the synodal life of the Church cannot be delegated, but must be shared by all in response to the gifts the Spirit bestows on the faithful. *“One group in Lae Diocese commented about the*



*synodality in their parish: 'In our parish pastoral council meeting, we see that we take the opinion/suggestion of all the people and also of woman before taking decision which will affect the life of all people in our parish.' Another parish commented: 'When we want to do anything in our parish, we meet together, take the suggestions of everyone in the community, decide together and carry out the decisions together'" (EC Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands). However, there is no shortage of expressions of difficulty in actually practicing co-responsibility: "As bishops we recognize that the 'baptismal theology' promoted by the Second Vatican Council, the basis of co-responsibility in mission, has not been sufficiently developed, and therefore the majority of the baptized do not feel a full identification with the Church and even less a missionary co-responsibility. Moreover, the leadership of current pastoral structures, as well as the mentality of many priests, do not foster this co-responsibility. Likewise, religious men and women, as well as lay apostolic movements, often remain subtly or openly on the margins of diocesan dynamics. Thus, the so-called 'committed laity' in parishes (who are the least numerous) end up being overburdened with intra-ecclesial responsibilities that exceed their strength and exhaust their time" (EC Mexico).*

67. This desire for co-responsibility becomes grounded first of all in the key of service to the common mission, that is, with the language of ministeriality. As the Italian report says, *"The experience made [...] has helped to rediscover the co-responsibility that comes from baptismal dignity and has let emerge the possibility of overcoming a vision of Church built around ordained ministry in order to move toward a Church that is 'all ministerial,' which is a communion of different charisms and ministries."* The theme of ministry as central to the life of the Church, and the need to articulate the unity of mission with the plurality of ministries, emerges from the consultation of the People of God. Recognizing and promoting it *"is not here an end in itself, but an enhancement in the service of mission: different actors, equal in dignity, complementary to be a sign, to make credible a Church that is sacrament of the Kingdom"* (EC Belgium).

68. Many reports refer to practices for the recognition and promotion of ministries, which enable an effective entrustment by the community: *"The promotion of lay ministries and the assumption of responsibilities takes place through the election or appointment of the faithful who are considered*




*to possess the requisites laid down” (EC Mozambique). In this way, each ministry becomes a structural and structuring element of community life: “The assumption of responsibility is guaranteed by the mandate received and the principle of subsidiarity. Catechists are instituted and have a special status in the Church Family of God. [...] Some of them are ‘instituted’ as Community Leaders, especially in rural areas where the presence of priests is rare” (EC RD Congo). There is no shortage of questions regarding spaces for the possible exercise of lay ministry: “Many groups would like to see greater participation of the laity, but the margins for maneuver are unclear: what concrete tasks can the laity perform? How is the responsibility of the baptized articulated with that of the parish priest?” (EC Belgium).*

69. In some contexts, there is a need to consider the variety of charisms and ministries that emerge in an organized form within associations, lay movements and new religious communities. Attention is needed to their specificities, and also to safeguarding the harmony within each local Church. When it enters into the concrete life of the Church, the theme of ministeriality inevitably meets with the question of its institutionalization. This raises the question of the structures through which the life of the Christian community unfolds.

70. In the Catholic Church, the charismatic gifts freely bestowed by the Holy Spirit, which help ‘rejuvenate’ the Church, are inseparable from the hierarchical gifts which are linked to the Sacrament of Orders in its various degrees. A great challenge of synodality that emerged during the first year is the harmonisation of these gifts, without pitting them against each other, under the guidance of the pastors, and thus without opposing the Church’s charismatic and institutional dimensions.

### **3.4 Synodality takes shape**

71. The synodal journey has brought out a number of tensions, made explicit in the preceding paragraphs. We should not be afraid of them, but articulate them in a process of constant communal discernment, so as to harness them as a source of energy without them becoming destructive: only in this way will it be possible to continue walking together, rather than each going their own way. This is why the Church also needs to give a synodal form and way of proceeding to its own institutions and structures, particularly with regard to governance. Canon law will need to accompany




this process of structural renewal creating the necessary changes to the arrangements currently in place.

72. However, to function in a truly synodal way, structures will need to be inhabited by people who are well-formed, in terms of vision and skills: *“The entire synodal exercise was one of active participation at diverse levels. For this process to continue, a change of mindset and a renewal of existing structures are needed”* (EC India). This new vision will need to be supported by a spirituality that will sustain the practice of synodality, avoiding reducing this reality to technical-organizational issues. Living this vision, as a common mission, can only happen through encounter with the Lord and listening to the Spirit. For there to be synodality, the presence of the Spirit is necessary, and there is no Spirit without prayer.

### Structures and institutions

73. In terms of global-local tension– which in ecclesial language refers to the relationships of local Churches among themselves and with the universal Church – the dynamic of the synodal process places before us a novelty that is constituted precisely by the Continental Stage that we are currently living. Apart from a few regions characterized by a particular historical dynamic, so far the Church lacks established synodal practices at the continental level. The introduction of a specific Continental Stage in the process of the Synod does not constitute a mere organizational ploy, but corresponds to the dynamics of the incarnation of the Gospel which, taking root in areas characterised by a certain cultural cohesion and homogeneity, produces ecclesial communities with particular features, linked to the traits of each culture. In the context of a world that is both globalised and fragmented, each continent, because of its common historical roots, its tendency towards socio-cultural commonality and the fact that it presents the same challenges for the mission of evangelisation, constitutes a privileged sphere for stirring up a synodal dynamic that strengthens links between the Churches, encourages the sharing of experiences and the exchange of gifts, and helps to imagine new pastoral options.

74. Moreover, the dynamic of synodality challenges the Roman Curia itself: *“It is necessary to recall the collaboration with the other Dicasteries of the Roman Curia, with which we consult regularly [...]. It is felt, however, that in this area more means should be found to encourage the growth of a*




*more synodal practice and spirit to be implemented in the Roman Curia, as desired by the Holy Father with the new Apostolic Constitution Praedicate Evangelium” (Contribution of the Secretariat of State – Section for Relations with States and International Organisations).*

75. Episcopal Conferences are also questioning what synodality means for them: *“The bishops too have prayed and debated the question: ‘How to make an Episcopal Conference more synodal? And how to live it in a more synodal way?’” (EC Paraguay). For example, “While maintaining their collegiality and freedom of decision-making that is devoid of any kind of pressure, the Episcopal Conferences should include representatives of the clergy and laity of the various dioceses in their debates and meetings, in the name of synodality” (Contribution of the Secretariat of State – Section for the Diplomatic Staff of the Holy See).*

76. During the Continental Stage, Episcopal Conferences will be able to experience a new role, related not only to the promotion of communion within themselves, but also of dialogue between Churches linked by geographical and cultural proximity. In addition, the Continental Stage, through the proposed ecclesial and episcopal assemblies, will offer the opportunity to work out in grounded and practical terms how to articulate ecclesial synodality and episcopal collegiality. It will also offer the chance to reflect on ways to improve the harmony between the ordinary ways of exercising episcopal ministry and the assumption of a fully synodal style, a point on which some reports register a certain lack of energy. Revisiting the experience gained during the Continental Stage will help discern how to proceed more smoothly.


77. Far more than the Latin Church, the Oriental Churches offer a wealth of synodal structures, which are called to renewal today: *“The ancient synodal structures and ecclesial processes existing in the Syro-Malabar Church (Prathinidhiyogam, Palliyogam and Desayogam) express the synodal nature of the Church at the local, regional and universal levels, and are useful for forming us to synodality. They are at the service of the parishes and communities, which discover collaborative exercise of the pastoral ministries to move forward by listening to the Holy Spirit. Moreover, there are some new initiatives and attempts which try to empower the synodal structures of the Church” (Syro-Malabar Catholic Church).*



78. The dynamic of co-responsibility, with a view to and in service of the common mission and not as an organizational way of allocating roles and powers, runs through all levels of Church life. At the local level, it calls into question the bodies of participation already envisaged at the various levels and with the specificities proper to the various rites, and those that may possibly be appropriate to set up in service to a strengthened synodal dynamic: *“it was discussed to have structure and organization which sincerely reflects the spirit of synodality”* (EC Korea). These are first and foremost pastoral councils, called to be increasingly institutional places of inclusion, dialogue, transparency, discernment, evaluation and empowerment of all. In our time they are indispensable. Economic, diocesan and parish councils should then be added, taking note also of the episcopal and presbyteral councils around the bishop. Many reports show the need for these bodies to be not only consultative, but places where decisions are made on the basis of processes of communal discernment rather than on the majority principle used in democratic regimes.

79. In different parts of the world, transparency is seen as an essential practice for a Church growing into a more authentic synodality: *“The Catholic Church needs to become more open and transparent, everything is done in secret. Parish Council agendas and minutes are never published, financial committee decisions never discussed or balance sheets shared”* (individual observation from UK). Transparency will propel toward true accountability of all decision-making processes, including the criteria used for discernment. A style of leadership anchored in a synodal way of proceeding will produce trust and credibility: *“On some issues, the exercise of authority is effectively collegial, through consultation with the bodies embedded in the various structures of administration, management and pastoral animation [...]. But it is sometimes sad to note that in our Catholic Church there are bishops, priests, catechists, community leaders ..., who are very authoritarian. [...] Instead of serving the community, some serve themselves with unilateral decisions, and this hinders our synodal journey”* (EC Chad). In addition, many reports note the need to involve people with adequate professional competence in the management of economic and governance issues.

80. All Church institutions, as fully participatory bodies, are called to consider how they might integrate the call to synodality into the ways in which they exercise their functions and their mission, renewing their structures




and procedures. A special case in point is represented by universities and academic institutions, which will be able to develop research addressing questions of synodality, helping to innovate in the design of educational and formation programmes. In particular, theological faculties will be able to deepen the ecclesiological, Christological and Pneumatological insights that synodal experiences and practices bring.

81. The adoption of an authentically synodal style also challenges consecrated life, beginning precisely with those practices that already emphasize the importance of the participation of all members in the life of the community to which they belong: *“Synodality in consecrated life affects discernment and decision-making. Although communal discernment has been practised in our Institutes, there is room for improvement. Membership in a body requires participation. [...] A shared desire is the establishment – both in the life of the Church and in the consecrated life – of a circular (participative) and less hierarchical and pyramidal style of governance”* (USG/UISG).

### Formation

82. The overwhelming majority of reports indicate the need to provide for formation in synodality. Structures alone are not enough: there is a need for ongoing formation to support a widespread synodal culture. This formation must articulate itself in relationship to the local context so as to facilitate synodal conversion in the way participation, authority and leadership are exercised in view of more effectively fulfilling the common mission. It is not simply a matter of providing specific technical or methodological skills. Formation for synodality intersects all dimensions of Christian life and can only be *“an integral formation that includes personal, spiritual, theological, social and practical dimensions. For this, a community of reference is essential, because one principle of ‘walking together’ is the formation of the heart, which transcends concrete knowledge and embraces the whole of life. It is necessary to incorporate in the Christian life a continuous and permanent formation to put synodality into practice, to mature and grow in faith, to participate in public life, to increase the love and participation of the faithful in the Eucharist, to assume stable ministries, to exercise real co-responsibility in the governance of the Church, to dialogue with other Churches and with society in order to bring those who are far away closer in a spirit of fraternity”* (EC Spain). This training will have to be




addressed to all members of the People of God: *“For the realization of the said elements of synodality, there is an urgent need for the education and formation programmes for clergy and lay people for developing a shared understanding of synodality that is so vital for journeying together in the local Churches”* (EC Myanmar). In this way, the perspective of synodality will converge with catechesis and pastoral care, helping to keep them anchored in a mission perspective.

83. However, the need for more specific formation in listening and dialogue is also emphasised, for example through the establishment of synodality agents and teams. Many reports point to the need to ensure formation in synodality for those who will be called to assume leadership roles, especially priests: *“Though long, seminary formation is geared toward preparing the clergy for a priestly lifestyle and devoid of forming them for pastoral coordination. The formation and training on working together, listening to one another and participation in the mission together is essential in priestly formation”* (EC Sri Lanka).

### Spirituality

84. A culture of synodality, which is indispensable for animating structures and institutions, requires adequate formation, and, above all, needs to be nurtured by familiarity with the Lord and the capacity to listen to the voice of the Spirit: *“spiritual discernment must accompany strategic planning and decision-making, so that each project is welcomed and accompanied by the Holy Spirit”* (Greek Melkite Catholic Church). For this we must grow in a synodal spirituality that is based on attention to interiority and conscience. *“In personal spirituality and in the message of the Church, the joy of the risen Christ must prevail and not the fear of a God who punishes”* (EC Czech Republic).

85. As has already been stressed many times, a synodal Church first of all needs to deal with the many tensions that emerge from encountering diversity. Therefore, a synodal spirituality can only be one that welcomes differences and promotes harmony, and draws from the tensions the energies to continue on the journey. To achieve this, it will have to move from accentuating the individual dimension to the collective dimension: a spirituality of “we,” which can enhance the contributions of each person.



86. The first year of the synodal journey has already offered stimulating experiences in this direction, through the proposed method of spiritual conversation. This method has enabled the People of God to savor the flavor of an interpersonal encounter around the Word of God and the varied resonances it arouses in the heart of each person. In addition to making it an ordinary practice in the life of the Church, as is demanded by many, this method must evolve in the direction of communal discernment, particularly within the bodies of participation. This entails a greater effort to integrate the spiritual dimension within the ordinary life of ecclesial institutions and of their governance structures, articulating discernment within decision-making processes. Prayer and silence cannot remain extraneous to these processes, as if it were a preamble or an appendix.


87. Christian spirituality is expressed in different ways, related both to the multiplicity of traditions between East and West and to the variety of charisms in consecrated life and ecclesial movements. A synodal Church is built around diversity, and the encounter between different spiritual traditions can be a formative “gymnasium” insofar as it is capable of promoting communion and harmony, contributing to overcoming the polarizations that many Churches experience.

### 3.5 Synodal life and liturgy

88. The reports emphasise in many ways the deep link between synodality and liturgy: “In ‘walking together’, prayer, devotion to Mary as a missionary disciple listening to the Word, lectio divina and liturgical celebration inspire the purpose of belonging” (EC Colombia).

#### Roots that reach deep

89. The Eucharist is already, in itself, the ‘source and summit’ of the Church’s synodal dynamism. *“Liturgical celebration and prayer are experienced as a force for uniting and mobilizing human and spiritual energies. The prevailing opinion is that prayer fosters joy of life and a purpose of community, because it is seen as a point of reference, a place of strength and an oasis of peace. [...] the contributions underscore two modalities to be developed in view of a synodal journey: the unity of the community and the joy of life. This journey would pass through the great liturgical gatherings (pilgrimages...), to nourish popular piety, renew faith, nourish the feeling of belonging, and thus better accompany Christians so*




*that they witness to the Gospel of charity in the face of communitarianism and 'identity withdrawal' which are more and more visible and aggressive"* (EC Burkina Faso e Niger).

90. In countries in diverse areas of the world *"the bond of many baptised people with the Church passes above all through the phenomenon of popular religiosity. [...] Many people consider it a sign of belonging to the Church; for this reason, we must promote and evangelise [it], with a view to a more intense participation and a conscious incorporation into Christian life"* (EC Panama).

### Managing tensions: renewal and reconciliation

91. Many reports strongly encourage the implementation of a synodal style of liturgical celebration that allows for the active participation of all the faithful in welcoming all differences, valuing all ministries, and recognising all charisms. The synodal listening of the Churches records many issues to be addressed in this direction: from rethinking a liturgy too concentrated on the celebrant, to the modalities of active participation of the laity, to the access of women to ministerial roles. *"While being faithful to the tradition, its originality, antiquity, and uniformity, let us try to make the liturgical celebration more alive and participatory of all the community of believers; priests, laity, youth and children, reading the signs of the time with sound discernment. The young people are trying to have a space in the liturgy with songs and it is positive"* (EC Ethiopia).

92. The current experience of the Churches, however, records knots of conflict which need to be addressed in a synodal manner, such as discerning the relationship to preconciliar rites: *"Division regarding the celebration of the liturgy was reflected in synodal consultations. 'Sadly, celebration of the Eucharist is also experienced as an area of division within the Church. The most common issue regarding the liturgy is the celebration of the pre-Conciliar Mass.' The limited access to the 1962 Missal was lamented; many felt that the differences over how to celebrate the liturgy 'sometimes reach the level of animosity. People on each side of the issue reported feeling judged by those who differ from them'"* (EC USA). The Eucharist, sacrament of unity in love in Christ, cannot become a reason for confrontation, ideology, rift or division. Moreover, with direct impact on the life of many Churches, there are elements of tension specific to the ecumenical sphere,



such as the sharing of the Eucharist. Finally, there are problems related to the modalities of faith inculturation and interreligious dialogue, which also affect the forms of celebration and prayer.

93. The reports do not fail to point out the main shortcomings of the actual celebratory praxis, which obscure its synodal effectiveness. In particular, the following are emphasized: the liturgical protagonism of the priest and the risk of the passivity of the wider liturgical community; poor preaching, including the distance between the content of the sermon, the beauty of faith and the concreteness of life; and the separation between the liturgical life of the assembly and the family network of the community. The quality of homilies is almost unanimously reported as a problem: there is a call for *“deeper homilies, centered on the Gospel and the readings of the day, and not on politics, making use of accessible and attractive language that refers to the lives of the faithful”* (Maronite Church).

94. A particular source of suffering are those situations in which access to the Eucharist and to the other Sacraments is hindered or prevented by a variety of causes: there is a strong demand to find solutions to these forms of sacramental deprivation. For example, communities living in very remote areas are cited, or the use of charging fees for access to celebrations, which discriminates against the poorest. Many summaries also give voice to the pain of not being able to access the Sacraments experienced by remarried divorcees and those who have entered into polygamous marriages. There is no unanimity on how to deal with these situations: *“Access to Holy Communion is denied to the divorced and remarried, and they expressed hurt at this exclusion. Some expressed the view that the Church should be more flexible, but others felt this practice should be upheld”* (EC Malaysia).

#### A synodal style of celebrating

95. At the same time, the synod process represented an opportunity to experience anew the diversity in forms of prayer and celebration, increasing the desire to make it more accessible in the ordinary life of communities. The French report gives voice to three aspirations: *“the first [...] concerns the diversification of liturgies to the benefit of celebrations of the Word, that is, moments of prayer that place meditation on biblical texts at the centre. The second, less frequent, recalls the importance of pilgrimages and popular piety. The third calls for a renewed liturgical formation, to address a problem reported*

*by many reports, namely the incomprehensibility of the language normally used by the Church" (EC France). Some regions raise the question of the reform of the liturgy, even in the Oriental Churches where it is profoundly linked to the identity of the Church: "In our Church, a liturgical reform is opportune, so as to re-read in the light of the Holy Spirit the action and participation of the People of God in God's work in our time" (Greek-Melkite Church).*

96. Many Churches also emphasise the importance of habitually linking liturgical celebration with the various forms of dialogical sharing and fraternal conviviality. *"Conviviality and fraternity were always part of the experience [of synod meetings]. In every meeting, from the initial one to the subsequent consultations in parishes and pastoral structures, there was salu-salo (sharing of food). Many pointed out how the [synodal] meetings positively influenced the celebration of the liturgies" (EC Philippines).*

97. The variety of ritual traditions of liturgical prayer, as well as the symbolic forms with which diverse cultures express themselves, is considered by all to be an asset. A renewed love for spirituality, a commitment to care for the beauty and the synodal style of celebration all support the radiance of a missionary Church: *"All the contributions received speak of celebrations as spaces that can offer inspiration and help to live the faith in personal, family, professional life, in the neighborhood and in the community itself" (EC Uruguay).*






## 4. The next steps

98. Looking to the future of the synodal process requires considering two very different time horizons. The first is the long-term horizon, in which synodality takes the form of a perennial call to personal conversion and reform of the Church. The second, clearly at the service of the first, is the one that focuses our attention on the events of the Continental Stage that we are experiencing.

### 4.1 A journey of conversion and reform

99. In the reports, the People of God express a desire to be less a Church of maintenance and conservation and more a Church that goes out in mission. A connection emerges between deepening communion through synodality on the one hand and strengthening mission on the other: being synodal leads into renewed mission. As the Spanish report says: *"we believe that communion must lead us to a permanent state of mission: meeting and listening to each other, dialogue, reflection, discernment together are all actions with positive effects in themselves, but they are not understandable if they are not directed at pushing us to go beyond ourselves and our communities of reference in order to carry out the mission entrusted to us as Church."*

100. The People of God have found joy in walking together and express the desire to continue doing so. How to do this as a truly global Catholic community is something that still needs to be fully discovered: *"To walk in a synodal way, by listening to one another, participating in mission, and engaging in dialogue, has possibly an 'already and not yet' dimension, it is there, but much more to be done. The laity are capable, talented and willing to contribute more and more, provided they are given opportunities. Further surveys and studies at the parish level can open up more avenues where the contributions of the laity can be immense and the result would be more vibrant and flourishing Church, which is the goal of synodality"* (EC Namibia). We are a learning Church, and to be so we need continuous discernment to help us read the Word of God and the signs of the times together, so as to move forward in the direction the Spirit is pointing us.




101. At the same time, walking together as the People of God requires us to recognize the need for continual conversion, individual and communal. On the institutional and pastoral level, this conversion translates into an equally continuous reform of the Church, its structures and style, in the wake of the drive for continuous ‘aggiornamento,’ the precious legacy of the Second Vatican Council to which we are called to look as we celebrate its 60th anniversary.

102. In the journey of conversion and reform, we are supported by the gifts we have received during the first year of the synodal journey, beginning with what Jesus shows us in the Gospels. The free and gratuitous attention to the other, which is the basis of listening, is not a limited resource to be jealously guarded, but an overflowing source that does not run out, but grows the more we draw from it. Listening and dialogue are the way to access the gifts that the Spirit offers us through the multifaceted variety of the one Church: of charisms, of vocations, of talents, of skills, of languages and cultures, of spiritual and theological traditions, of different forms of celebrating and giving thanks. The reports do not call for uniformity, but ask that we learn to grow in a sincere harmony that helps the baptised fulfil their mission in the world by creating the bonds necessary to walk together joyfully.

103. The message of our synodal way is simple: we are learning to walk together, and sit together to break the one bread, in such a way that each is able to find their place. Everyone is called to take part in this journey, no one is excluded. To this we feel called so that we can credibly proclaim the Gospel of Jesus to all people. This is the path we seek to continue on in our next Continental Stage.

## **4.2 Methodology for the Continental Stage**

104. This Document for the Continental Stage (DCS) invites us to take a further step in this spiritual journey “for a synodal Church: communion, participation and mission” and constitutes its point of reference: “Just as the experience of the disciples at Emmaus was only the beginning of their new mission, our synodal process is only a first step” (EC Russian Federation). The continental level constitutes an opportunity to live synodality, which we are still learning to grasp and which we are now invited to practise concretely.




105. The DCS, which gathers and restores to the local Churches, what the People of God from around the world said in the first year of the Synod, is meant to guide us and enable us to deepen our discernment, keeping in mind the basic question that animates the entire process: *“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?”* (PD, no. 2).

106. The DCS is thus the privileged instrument through which the dialogue of the local Churches among themselves and with the universal Church can take place during the Continental Stage. To pursue this process of listening, dialogue and discernment, the reflection will focus on three questions:

- “After having read and prayed with the DCS, which intuitions resonate most strongly with the lived experiences and realities of the Church in your continent? Which experiences are new, or illuminating to you?”
- “After having read and prayed with the DCS, what substantial tensions or divergences emerge as particularly important in your continent’s perspective? Consequently, what are the questions or issues that should be addressed and considered in the next steps of the process?”
- “Looking at what emerges from the previous two questions, what are the priorities, recurring themes and calls to action that can be shared with other local Churches around the world and discussed during the First Session of the Synodal Assembly in October 2023?”

### Key stages in the process

107. Each Continental Assembly is called to put in place a discernment process on the DCS that is appropriate to its local context, and draft a Final Document to account for it. The Final Documents of the seven Continental Assemblies will be used as the basis for drafting the *Instrumentum Laboris*, which will be completed by June 2023.



108. The vast majority of Episcopal Conferences that responded to the consultation sent by the General Secretariat of the Synod want representatives from the entire People of God to be involved in the Continental Stage. It is therefore asked that all Assemblies be ecclesial and not merely episcopal, ensuring that their composition adequately represents the variety of the People of God: bishops, presbyters, deacons, consecrated women and men, laymen and women. With respect to the participants in the Continental Assemblies, it is important to pay special attention to the presence of women and young people (laymen and laywomen, consecrated men and women in formation, seminarians); people living in conditions of poverty or marginalization, and those who have direct contact with these groups and persons; fraternal delegates from other Christian denominations; representatives of other religions and faith traditions; and some people with no religious affiliation. Furthermore, bishops are invited to meet at the end of the Continental Assemblies to collegially reread the lived synodal experience from the perspective of their specific charism and role. In particular, they are asked to identify appropriate ways to carry out their task of validating and approving the Final Document, ensuring that it is the fruit of an authentically synodal journey, respectful of the process that has taken place and faithful to the diverse voices of the People of God in each continent.

109. The process leading from the publication of this DCS to the drafting of the *Instrumentum Laboris* will be marked by the following steps:

1. The DCS will be sent to all diocesan bishops; each of them, together with the diocesan synodal team that coordinated the first phase, will arrange an ecclesial process of discernment on the DCS, starting with the three questions indicated above in no. 106. Each local Church will thus have the opportunity to listen to the voice of the other Churches, gathered in the DCS, and to respond to it from its own experience.
2. With the involvement of its synodal team, each Episcopal Conference has the task of collecting and synthesizing in the form most appropriate to its own context the reflections around the three questions coming from the individual Dioceses.

3. The reflection and discernment of each Episcopal Conference will then be shared within the Continental Assembly, according to the modalities identified by the Continental Task Force.
4. In planning the conduct of each specific Continental Assembly, it may be useful to reflect on how to use the widespread and much-appreciated method of “spiritual conversation” (see *Vademecum*, Appendix B, no. 8), which can facilitate the involvement of all in discernment. In particular, its three phases should be emphasized: the taking of the floor by each participant, the resonance of listening to others, and the discernment of the fruits by the group. As already highlighted in the Methodological Guidelines, it will be important to ensure the participation in the Continental Assemblies of bishops, priests, deacons, lay men and women, consecrated men and women, as well as people capable of expressing the views of those on the margins.
5. Each Continental Assembly will draft its own Final Document of a maximum of about twenty pages confronting the three questions from its own specific context. The Final Documents are to be submitted by each Continental Task Force to the Synod Secretariat by March 31, 2023. Based on the Final Documents of the Continental Assemblies, the *Instrumentum laboris* will be drafted by June 2023.



# The Synodal Process

PROCESS OF LISTENING,  
ENCOUNTERING, DIALOGUING,  
DISCERNING



## STAGE 1



May 2022 – 15 August 2022

9-10  
October  
2021

Worldwide  
Opening of the  
Synodal Process

Digital Consultation in the  
social media networks -  
Project "The Church listen  
to you"

15  
August  
2022

Deadline for the  
submission of the  
Syntheses

## STAGE 2



January – March, 2023

7 Continental  
Synodal Assemblies

27  
October  
2022

Publication of the  
DOCUMENT FOR THE  
CONTINENTAL STAGE

LOCAL  
CONSULTATION

DIALOGUE AMONG  
THE CHURCHES OF  
A SPECIFIC REGION

### ICON INDEX



Local  
churches



Bishops  
Conference



Universal  
Church



Document



Restitution  
Process

# 2021 - 2024



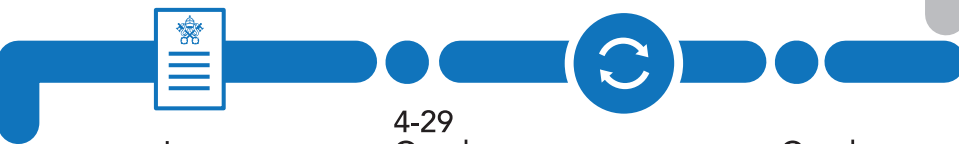
For a synodal Church  
communion | participation | mission



## STAGE 3



THE CHURCH  
CONTINUES TO  
IMPLEMENT HER  
SYNODAL  
DIMENSION



June  
2023

INSTRUMENTUM  
LABORIS

31  
March  
2023

Deadline for the  
submission of the  
Final Document of  
the 7 Continental  
Assemblies

4-29  
October  
2023

1<sup>ST</sup> SESSION  
XVI General  
Ordinary  
Assembly of the  
Synod of Bishops

October  
2024

2<sup>ND</sup> SESSION  
XVI General Ordinary  
Assembly of the Synod  
of Bishops

## RESTITUTION PROCESS



“Enlarge the space of  
your tent, spread out your  
tent cloths unsparingly,  
lengthen your ropes and  
make firm your pegs”

(Is 54:2)







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