

THE PASSIONISTS IN A SYNODAL CHURCH

The universal Church is embarking on a new path of renewal and revitalization that will lead to a new evangelisation. At the heart of this new thrust is the affirmation of the Synodal nature of the Church as the people of God gathered around Jesus and walking together with their Lord.

“Synod” is a Greek word composed of the preposition *syn* meaning “with” and the noun *hodos* meaning “path”. It is about a path taken together, under the guidance of the risen Lord, by all the People of God with the variety of its members, and the joyful exercise of the various charisms and ministries for the sake of the common good.

In the Synodal Church, the whole People of God in every local church are gathered together and moving together towards the Kingdom of God. Along the way, they are calling and inviting the whole of humanity to join them and to work together with them for the transformation of the world in accordance with God’s design.

The heart of God’s plan of salvation is the call of the whole human race to union with God. The goal of salvation is the unity for which Jesus implored the Father just before His Passion: “May they all be one, Father, just as you Father are in me and I am in you, so that they also may be in us so that the world may believe it was you who sent me” (*cf. John 17,21*). That unity is fulfilled in Jesus and brought about in history by the Holy Spirit through the ministry of the Church. The work for unity entails confronting all the injustices, divisions, obstacles, and conflicts that separate people and cause suspicion, violence and death.

The Spirit is calling us to be together and to walk forward together for the transformation of the whole world into the new Kingdom of God. The whole Church and every baptized Christian, the ordained, the lay and the consecrated religious have their part to play in this great adventure.



SYNODALITY AND VATICAN II

The idea of Synodality embraces the two great images of the Church promoted by Vatican II: the Church as the pilgrim *People of God* on the way and the Church as *Communio*, the assembly of the people called into unity by the Lord. The process of *walking together* to bring about the project of the Kingdom of God and to evangelize peoples includes the fact of *being together in assembly* to celebrate the risen Lord and to discern what the Spirit says to the Churches.

The whole People of God, embracing the laity, religious and clergy of every rank gathered in a communion of fraternal love and sent on mission into the world is the guiding idea of synodality. It implies the full, active participation of all the baptized in the one great ecclesial venture of transforming the whole creation into the Kingdom of God.

A SYNODAL CHURCH

It is the very life of the People of God to gather to pray, to listen to the Word of God and to discern the promptings of the Spirit. The Spirit is alive and active in every baptized person. In the great gathering of the people we encounter our brothers and sisters, we listen to them with profound attention and respect, and together we discern what the Spirit is saying in the assembly. It is only then that this pilgrim People of God can reach out to the whole world inviting all people into the family of God.

It is a feature of our time that there has been a significant decline in the participation of the faithful in the weekly gatherings. There are many reasons for this but one reason is surely that large gatherings of people are no longer the normal forum for people to relate or communicate effectively. Today, people get their information from the internet or social media. Large gatherings are for sports events and other forms of entertainment. Serious meetings that address matters of concern are conducted in more intimate settings. It is likely that in the future large church gatherings will be exceptional rather than the norm.

New ways of coming together at a local level and in a more informal and fraternal way will become normal. In such a setting, the people can worship God, share in the Eucharist and organize the life of the local community, its ministry to the poor and needy, and its mission to the wider society. It may well be that the synodal Church will be expressed

in the network of small local communities, each one immersed in its locality and collaborating with others for the greater good.

Central to synodality is the inclusion of everyone, especially those who for various reasons find themselves on the margins, giving them the opportunity to express themselves and to be heard in order to contribute to the edification of the people of God.

As Pope Francis reminds us, the path towards a Synodal Church is not about producing documents but it wishes “to plant dreams, draw forth prophesies and visions, allow hope to flourish, inspire trust, bind up wounds, weave together relationships, awaken a dawn of hope, learn from one another and create a bright resourcefulness that will enlighten minds, warm hearts, give strength to our hands.”

SYNODALITY AND RELIGIOUS LIFE

It is within the new Synodal vision of the communion of believers on the way, that the various services and charisms bestowed by the Spirit will find their place. The indispensable contribution to the Church and the world of consecrated men and women will also have to be reimagined and reaffirmed. Underlying the new approach is a greater appreciation of the *sensus fidei fidelium*, the dignity of all the baptised and the need for their full, conscious and active participation in the life and mission of the Church. We can look forward to a new era of closer collaboration of religious and laity in sharing the joy of the gospel with the whole world.

Until recently, much of the apostolic service of the Church was carried out by the vast army of religious men and women in the many religious orders and congregations. In the last 300 years in particular, there was a great upsurge in the number of apostolic religious congregations devoted to the works of mercy, the education of the poor, the care of the sick and the aged, and as missionaries in Africa, Asia and Latin America. All over the world there are churches, schools, hospitals, clinics, rest homes etc. that testify to the extraordinary devotion and commitment of thousands of religious. They gladly gave their lives to God; the Church and the world were greatly enriched by the service of these dedicated men and women of God.

From the beginning, the Church has been enriched by a great variety of gifts or charisms distributed among the faithful. The various charisms are given by God for the building and strengthening of the Church. No charism can flourish in isolation from the others; they belong together and

are most fruitful when working together to enhance the life and mission of the Church for the good of the world. The Passionists have been blessed with a special charism to keep alive and fruitful the memory of Jesus' passion. Until now, the Passionists have preferred to work as a separate group within the Church, drawing all they need for their life and mission from their charism. Today we are beginning to appreciate that the Passionist charism can be even more fruitful when working together with the other charisms in the Church.

The Body of Christ cannot live on one charism alone and the same is true of every part of the Body. Like all Christians, the Passionists need to be nourished by all the charisms in order to be integral members of the Body of Christ. More than that, our charism is an apostolic and missionary charism and it can best achieve its missionary goal when working together with the other charisms that are essential for the life of the Church. The Synodal path points us towards a new era of greater collaboration with the other charisms and religious families for the good of the Church and the mission to the whole world.

The Synodal Church wants to affirm all the gifts bestowed by the Spirit and to employ them for the transformation of the world according to the mind of God. It is a step beyond an earlier way of organising the Church that distinguished sharply between the teaching and acting clerical Church on the one hand, and on the other hand the passive, docile laity. The apostolic religious congregations fitted into this older structure on the active "clerical" side. They were part of the busy active Church, doing the many good things that had to be done for the laity. It is clear that the shift towards a synodal Church will have significant consequences for the role of religious in the Church.

A MISSIONARY CHURCH OF ALL THE BAPTISED

In the Synodal Church, all the baptised are called to be active subjects, fully engaged participants and no longer passive recipients. All the baptised will be called upon to claim their dignity and to discover the gifts and charisms they have received for the good of the Church. It will no longer be possible to assign all the apostolic ministries and services to the religious congregations. A new era of collaboration between the ordained, the laity and the consecrated religious is opening up.

Religious have always been present in the Church as a leaven, witnessing in an intense way to the priority of God and the Kingdom of God. They

will continue to be such but now with a new role in inviting and empowering the laity to live their Christian vocation to the full in the heart of the Church and the world. Religious men and women will no longer be the main actors in every sphere of Church life but will rather step back and make room for the new army of committed lay men and women who are looking for the many ways in which they can build up the Church and evangelise the whole world. Religious can be mentors, guides, and helpers in this new ancillary role.

This change in the role of the religious will not happen overnight. They continue to be engaged in many essential works that serve God and God's people. But as we move forward, and as the Synodal style of Church takes hold, the new role of religious will become clearer. This may manifest itself in a decrease in the number of vocations to the religious life and a flowering of new forms of service and ministry arising from the laity. There is already a growing awareness that the great needs for which many congregations were founded no longer exist, at least not in the same way or to the same degree. A new era for a new kind of religious life is opening up.

It is not easy to see how the religious life will find its rightful place in the Synodal Church. It is clear, however, that the new thrust is focused on togetherness and collaboration. Religious will experience a new call to greater collaboration with others and especially with the laity. In recent times, lay men and women have been collaborating with the religious in their various works, but in the future it is more likely that the religious will be collaborating with the laity in the many ways in which the laity will be living their Christian vocation and mission in the world.

God will continue to bless his Church with dedicated men and women consecrated to his service as religious. They will be an indispensable help and inspiration to all the baptised who will want to assume their proper role in the life and mission of the Church. They will be close to the poorest and those on the margins and help them to make their voices heard. Through the consecration of their entire lives to God, religious will continue to witness to the priority of God and his Kingdom and work with all the baptised, and all people of good will for the transformation of the world into the Kingdom of God.