



Congregazione Generale I

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Relazione introduttiva

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Relatore generale

Holy Father,
Beatitudes,
Your Eminencies, Your Excellencies,
dear brothers and sisters,

The setting of this aula might seem unusual to many of you. So, let me start with a reflection on this place.

We are not sitting in hierarchical order but at round tables, which is a way to foster genuine sharing and authentic discernment. The aula is not arranged in this way for practical reasons or because of a decision by the Secretariate of the Synod. It mirrors the experience of the people of God along the synodal path that started in 2021. Both the order in which we sit and the *Instrumentum laboris* are the fruit of this synodal experience and help us discern which way God is asking us to go.

The Synod process the whole Church has gone through since 2021 is the constant reference point for our work during this Assembly. Bishops who were not very active in the process but have been elected by their Conferences to this 16th General Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops may face challenges at the beginning. On the other hand, there are the members who are not bishops. Many among them were particularly involved in the Continental Stage of this Synod and are called to testify their experience.

Round tables also remind us that none of us is a star in this Synod. The protagonist is the Holy Spirit, and only with a heart fully open to the Spirit's guidance will we be able to respond to the call we have received as Synod members. Speaking about the Holy Spirit does not mean we forget our focus on Christ. On the contrary, the Holy Spirit makes Christ present among us here, as he did in the Eucharist we have celebrated together. God the Father, through the Holy Spirit, brings us into communion with Christ crucified and risen.

The Church is the people of God, walking through history, with Christ in her midst. It is only normal that there is a group walking at His right, another at His left, while some run ahead

and others lag behind. When each of these groups looks at Christ our Lord, together with Him they cannot help but see the group that is doing the opposite: those walking on the right will see those walking on the left, those running ahead will see those lagging behind. In other words, the so-called progressive cannot look at Christ without seeing the so-called conservatives with Him and vice-versa. Nevertheless, the important thing is not the group to which we seem to belong to, but walking with Christ within His Church.

This Church is not made up of only the ordained, bishops, priests and deacons, but by all the baptized who participate in the mission that our Lord Jesus Christ entrusted to Her. Therefore, mission plays a key role in the notion of synodality. In order to grasp the reality of the mission of the Church we need to broaden our vision, from this aula to the whole world.

The world suffers in pain, the earth, our mother and sister, is crying and so are the poor. The Holy Father could not be more vocal in spelling out the evils plaguing our world: climate change – thank you Holy Father for the new exhortation *Laudate Deum* –, migration, so many wars, extreme polarization in society and also within the Church, and a consumeristic lifestyle which in the end seems to deny the existence of God. Millions of people are suffering. Sound sociological, political and economic analyses are necessary, and generous commitment is necessary. However, no analysis or commitment can succeed if we do not recognise that sin is the root of these evils. This is why the Holy Father is so vocal in calling us to conversion, a conversion which changes our daily behaviour.

This is the context in which the Church receives the call to become more and more synodal. We do not start from scratch. We already have a rich theological tradition on synodality, and we have the magisterium of many Popes, and now also the deep teaching of Pope Francis.

We are called to learn the grammar of synodality. Just like the grammar of our languages changes as they develop, so does the grammar of synodality: it changes with time. Therefore, reading of the signs of our time should help us discover a grammar of synodality for our time. In grammar there are some basic rules which never change. For us, these are the rules of Catholicity, such as the dignity stemming from Baptism; the role of Peter in the Church; episcopal collegiality; ordained ministry, the common priesthood of the faithful and their interrelation (cf. *Lumen gentium*, n. 10). With these fundamental elements of our Catholic grammar, we have to find the way to express the new insights the Holy Spirit gives us.

While working to accomplish this task we have always to keep in mind that a Synod is not a Parliament! In Parliament, politicians discuss text A proposed by the majority. The opposition then proposes text B. In the best cases, some points of B will be integrated into A...

at least until new elections may swap positions. But, in any case, it is a narrow majority who decides what the whole population has to accept. Some will feel that they have won, other that they have lost. And they will try to resist.

We have one text to start from: the *Instrumentum laboris*. It is the fruit of the synodal process which has involved the whole People of God. The process is not finished; it is now entrusted to our discernment. It should not be a battle between position A and B. Through genuine discernment, the Holy Spirit opens our minds and our hearts to new positions, leaving A and B behind!

Having considered what our work is not - a parliamentary debate - it is good to be clear about what it is: a common work of discernment. Just like the layout of the aula, the time we will spend together is organised in such a way as to facilitate our work. We have already experienced a fundamental moment: the retreat that opened the Assembly. We cannot discern together without praying together. This is why I invite everyone to keep the inner disposition and fruits of the retreat in their hearts. To help us do this, over the coming weeks we will experience other moments of common spirituality, and each day we can celebrate the Eucharist together next door, in St. Peter's Basilica, in the morning, before the beginning of our sessions.

You already know a lot about the organisation of the work during the coming weeks, because you received information about it from the General Secretariat in August. In brief, our work will be divided into five modules. The first four will be devoted to discernment on the issues proposed in the *Instrumentum laboris*, following the order of its parts (Sections A, B1, B2, B3) and using the Worksheets prepared for this purpose. The one for the work on Section A, which we are beginning today, was distributed to you in Sacrofano. You can find the others in the *Instrumentum laboris*. The final module will instead be devoted to the discussion and approval of the synthesis report, which we will then hand over to the Holy Father.

Each module will see the alternation of moments in plenary assembly, the General Congregations, and group work, or *Circuli Minores*. In this way, our discernment will benefit both from the deepening made possible by working in small groups, and from the dialogue on a universal scale that is the characteristic and the privilege of an Assembly such as ours.

In continuity with the journey of the People of God over the past two years, the work in the *Circuli Minores* will follow the method of conversation in the Spirit. I will not dwell on an explanation of this because we have already experienced it in Sacrofano in the work that took place in the afternoons. Instead, I would like to take this opportunity to thank the facilitators, whose vigilance over the method and respect for time-keeping allows us to concentrate on the questions that are the subject of our discernment. I would like to include here my thanks to the

experts, who will have the certainly demanding task of progressively synthesising the fruits of the work of the *Circuli Minores* and the General Congregations in view of the drafting of the synthesis report on which we will work in the concluding module.

One of the strengths of the method of conversation in the Spirit is that it allows the expression of everyone's point of view, enhancing consonances without neglecting differences, but above all discouraging polarisations and polemics. As the Holy Father wrote recently, “In the conversation in the Spirit we find a way of participation oriented towards communion and renewal of mission, which encourages the participation of all and welcomes in communion and unity the great diversity that we are¹.” It aims to build consensus without dividing into factions or crushing into uniformity. In this way it fosters the passage from listening to one another to listening to the Spirit. As the *Instrumentum laboris* explains, “The interior traces that result from one’s listening to sisters and brothers are the language with which the Holy Spirit makes his own voice resound. The more each participant has been nourished by meditation on the Word and the Sacraments, growing in familiarity with the Lord, the more he or she will be able to recognise the sound of His voice (cf. Jn 10:14.27), assisted also by the accompaniment of the Magisterium and theology” (n. 38). Within this framework, the meaning of the consensus reached also changes. For example, at the end of each module, after the work in groups and the discussion in plenary, each of the *Circuli Minores* will be called upon to draw up a Report of the work done, expressing what there is agreement on, but also any differences or questions on which to continue reflection. On this Report, the group will be called upon to express a consensus, which is first and foremost the recognition that it faithfully represents the work carried out together, with the respect for each person that the profound listening envisaged by the method requires and at the same time encourages. For these reasons, the method of conversation in the Spirit seems particularly suited to the objective and style of this Assembly.

My heartfelt hope is that during this month’s work we can develop a road map for the following year, that we will then entrust to the Holy Father. Ideally this road map should indicate where we feel consensus has been reached among us and above all within the People of God, laying down possible steps to undertake as a response to the voice of the Spirit. But it should also say where deeper reflection is needed and what could help that process of reflection.

¹ POPE FRANCIS, “Prólogo”, in GUERRERO ALVES J. A. – MARTÍN LÓPEZ O., *Conversación espiritual, discernimiento y sinodalidad*, Editorial Sal Terrae, Maliaño (Cantabria), 2023, p. 10. [Original Spanish text: En la conversación en el Espíritu encontramos una vía de participación orientada a la comunión y renovación de la misión, que alienta la participación de todos y acoge en la comunión y en la unidad la gran diversidad que somos].

Thank you for accepting the call to be members of this Assembly. Thank you for your trust in the Holy Spirit, thank you for your readiness to listen to one another as children of the same Father, brothers and sisters in Christ.