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**1st General Congregation**  
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**PRESENTATION OF THE REPORTS OF THE 10 WORKING GROUPS  
ESTABLISHED BY POPE FRANCIS**

**Group 9**

**Synodal theological and methodological criteria for shared discernment of controversial  
doctrinal, pastoral and ethical issues (SR 15)**

**I. Framing of the task**

In order to frame the task entrusted to us in tune with the synodal path, we considered it essential to adopt a methodology could be tested, modified or corrected during the unfolding of the work, in order to coherently formulate the specific issues that will need to be examined.

**1. Crisis as a *kairós*.** First of all, it seems fundamental that we courageously and radically take up the challenge/*opportunity* currently facing the Church's mission today: *conversion of thought and reform of practices* in contextual fidelity to the Gospel of Jesus, who is "the same yesterday today and always" (Heb 13:8), but whose "richness and beauty are inexhaustible" (EG 11). This requires the maturation of a shared awareness and gestation of the evident and pressing epochal, anthropological-social and political-environmental crisis as a call to discern and promote the unfolding of the unprecedented *kairós* that we experience in the history of salvation.

**2. *The need for a new paradigm ... as ancient as the Gospel*** (cfr. VG 3). In this context, we are challenged to undertake a re-enactment - rooted in Tradition, but innovative and creative because it listens to what was 'from the beginning' (cf. 1Jn 1:1ff) - of the gift of God in Jesus, with a responsible and joyful openness to "what the Spirit says to the Churches" (Rev 2:17). According to the historical and dialogical understanding of Revelation as re-proposed by Vatican II (cf. DV), "the Gospel invites us to respond to the God of love who saves us, to see God in others and to go forth from ourselves to seek the good of others" (EG 39). We are therefore called to an complete and challenging conversion; a conversion that takes concrete shape in the way we present and translate the truth of the Gospel as manifested and practiced in the *agápe* of God in Christ (cf. Eph 4:15). It is not a matter of proclaiming and applying abstract doctrinal principles, but of vitally inhabiting the experience of faith in its personal and social relevance so that we will be open to the ever new promptings of the Holy Spirit; this in turn enables us to come to affirmations of the truth that are shared in the communion of the one and catholic Church, as consistent with the Gospel and in keeping with reality. Only a vital, fruitful, and reciprocal tension between doctrine and practice embodies the living Tradition and is able to counteract the temptation to rely on the barren scleroticism of verbal pronouncements.

**3. The question of “how?”.** The decisive question underlying specific controversial doctrinal, pastoral and ethical arguments of today can be formulated as follows: how can and should we articulate the two foci of the ellipse that delineates the Christian experience: the focus of the *eschatological end* (the universal salvific will of God in Jesus, through the ministry of the Church, at the service of the coming of the Kingdom) and the focus of the *concrete, varied, complex and challenging condition* of the reality in which we live (the historical mediation of the Gospel, with its specific instruments for cultural production and the creation of resistance)? How do we do this in fidelity to the Revelation of God who is *Agápe* (cf. 1 Jn 4:8. 16) and in fidelity to the concrete journey of the community and of individuals? This is how the horizon of experiencing and understanding the salvific truth that ‘shines out for us in Christ’ (cf. DV 2) opens up to us in the present day and in different contexts. The truth that is *Agápe* requires that we grasp and embrace that truth/*Agápe* offers itself both from within and from beneath the concrete and locally situated journey of individuals and communities.

## **II. The way forward**

In light of the above framework, the path of searching, listening, deepening, and of discerning practices entails the *invention* (in the original meaning of “finding” and “testing”) of both *theological criteria* and *conditions of operational possibility* involved in the paradigm shift being propagated by the synodal process. In the phases carried out so far at the outset of this work, our group experienced first-hand the difficulty inherent in the task entrusted to us. While it was fairly easy for us to arrive at a certain consensus on the first part of this text (the basic framework), the search for a path made up of concrete steps to be taken as a group proved much more complex. In the experience of the entire Church, in fact, it is precisely in this *how?* where, the scarcity of - and unfamiliarity with - necessary vocabulary and concepts lurks; where implicit paradigmatic resistances, of which we are not always theoretically aware, lurk; where we understand the necessity of undertaking a process in order to recognise and value diversity while reaching a shared objective. Bearing in mind the two aforementioned elliptical foci which delineate the Christian experience (the focus of the *eschatological end* and that of the *concrete condition* of the historical and cultural mediation of the Gospel), and aware of the provisional nature of these indications, which will have to be ascertained through discussion, we believe we can work:

**1. At the theological level,** we must describe the criteria - at work in the experience of Revelation received and lived by the *sensus fidei* of the People of God - that trigger an effective conversion in the ability to embrace, bear witness to and proclaim the truth of the Gospel. Ethically speaking, it is not a matter of applying a pre-packaged objective truth to different subjective situations, as if they were mere particular cases of an immutable and universal law. The criteria of discernment arise from listening to the live self-gift of Revelation in Jesus in the today of the Spirit. Therefore, we must begin in history and its narration - that is, from experiences, relationships and events - in order to recognise in them an invitation for the good and then to promote with the Gospel the good possible in each of these situations, so that the message of salvation for all may regain its centrality (Jn 3:17).

**2. On the level of synodal discernment practices,** It is necessary to value the meaning of *temporality/historicity* and of *locality/contextuality* (i.e. the cultural *dimension*) in the discernment and assumption of the demands of truth and goodness that are rooted in and spring from the grace of Christ: thus, the promise of goodness, mediated in the commandment, and the search for the possible good, (according to the ‘law of gradualness’), is charged with salvific significance by virtue of the action of the Holy Spirit who guides to the whole truth (cf. Jn 16:13). It is a question of aligning fidelity to the *kerygma* and its essential implications with an anthropology and a cultural-historical ethics capable of

offering our communities and their commitment to evangelization the practical means to identify the following transitions: the transition toward *identifying emerging states* (i.e. listening to the new that is revealed in reality); the transition toward *the development of founding states* (i.e. discerning that which requires a recognised and recognisable form); and the transition toward the *gathering of member states* (i.e. impetus capable of gathering others, even through partial agreements). This task is linked to that of specifying - as the *Instrumentum laboris* says (cf. nos. 67-72) - the procedures for exercising and linking *decision-making* and *decision-taking* in synodal bodies and events, in order to appropriately activate ecclesial discernment regarding issues to be studied in depth from time to time.

**3. Regarding controversial ethical questions**, we will try to offer some concrete guidelines for discernment - to be carried out locally and with attention to specific contexts - on at least two of today's most relevant issues. On the social and political level, we will offer some guidelines regarding questions surrounding peace, fraternity and care for our common home in the face of the many forms of conflict, hatred and exploitation. Our guidelines will include the search for non-violent methods of reconciliation that are inspired by the Gospel from the very beginning. On the personal and family level, we will offer some guidelines regarding the meaning of sexuality, marriage, the generation of children, and the promotion and care of life.

### **Biblical Icon**

We have chosen *Acts of the Apostles* chapter 15 as a biblical paradigm. This text gives witness to the path of discernment experienced by the nascent Church. We begin with the narrative that records Paul and Barnabas' experience of the Church at Antioch, reading this against the background of Peter's experience in Jaffa (cf. Acts 10). Thus, the criteria offered to the discernment of an authority that is synodally expressed and structured (Peter and James, with the other apostles, the elders and the whole Church) are: the absolute precedence of God's universal salvific will and the prohibition to hindering God's universal salvific will with anything that no longer has any efficacious meaning. In light of the eschatological Revelation that took place in Jesus, the Church thus created its Tradition with the decision not to impose the practice of circumcision, accompanied by certain contingent prescriptions that the Church's later experience will drop. This discernment is sealed in the praise to God for the salvation given to all with the formula 'it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and us' (Acts 15 28; cf. *Instrumentum laboris*, 62), making room for a legitimate difference between Barnabas and Paul in the path to follow in fidelity to what is recognised as essential and is shared as such.

**Steps to be taken:** in addition to the *online* meetings, with which we have proceeded in recent months, we plan to hold an in-person group meeting (as feasible), in Rome on 7 and 8 December, and a second similar meeting in February 2025, on a date to be determined. We also plan to ask for input from two experts, without excluding other possible consultations: one from Sacred Scripture and one from sociology, with particular expertise in shared deliberation processes.