

Frequently Asked Questions on the Continental Stage

1. What is the Continental Stage?

The Continental Stage consists of a **time of listening and discernment of all of the People of God** and of all local Churches **on a continental basis**, leading to a series of continental assemblies.

This does not mean a replication of the consultation, listening and discernment that has already taken place, which was an invitation to all of the People of God. This is, rather, a deepening of that discernment process by the people identified to represent the local Churches in the pre-assembly processes prior to each Continental Assembly. It is understood that there will be differences in approach that take account of the established practices, cultural and language elements, geography, and logistics of each continent.

This Continental Stage is marked by the *Document for the Continental Stage (DCS)*, which will be written after careful reflection on the fruits of the first stage from syntheses of all of the Episcopal Conferences of the Universal Church, as well as the Eastern Churches, and groups such as Religious Institutes, Lay Movements and so on. The DCS will be released at the end of October.

2. Why was this Stage added?

This Continental Stage is part of this synodal process to emphasise the dialogical movement between the universal Church and the particular Church (cfr. CIC 368; *Communio Notio* n.7). This process involves a discernment on the main synodal theme "**how we walk together today**" and its priorities are developed in a manner as inclusive as possible. We are convinced that a synodal Church is a Church of local Churches with the vision of a mutual dialogue and connection between the universal Church and the particular Church.

Furthermore, with this stage, we intend to encourage the creation or strengthening of links of neighbouring Churches (cf. *Fratelli Tutti* n.151) because, while it is true that the relationship between the Universal Church and the Particular Church remains fundamental, it has become evident over time that there are dynamics, tensions, challenges and historical-cultural peculiarities specific and traceable at the level of the individual continent and region.

To better grasp the peculiarities of this continental stage, it is important to **move away from a merely temporal and spatial vision** (first a local stage, then the continental stage, the universal stage and finally the local implementation stage), **and adopt the dialogical approach** existing between the Universal Church and the particular Church (the individual Christian communities of a circumscribed territory, led by a bishop, and "in which and from which subsists the one and only Catholic Church" (CIC 368; *Communio Notio* n.7) within a single and unique process that always involves, but in a differentiated manner, the entire People of God.

3. When does the Continental Stage start?

In a very general and functional sense, the Continental Stage begins after the local-National Stage, which mainly started last 17th October 2021 and completed last 15th August 2022. However, it is hoped that the worldwide synodal process opened by Pope Francis last 9-10 October 2021 will have a continuity among stages, and a seamless movement from one to the other. There is not an exact starting date as some regions have already activities planned that dovetail with the Continental Stage. In addition, some dioceses and Episcopal Conferences have heeded the advice of the General Secretariat of the Synod to maintain the people and infrastructure used for the listening and discernment in dioceses, thus already implementing some of the fruits from that listening process,

such as a greater involvement of lay people in parishes. This is now the *modus vivendi* for a synodal Church.

All Continents are urged to ensure they have people and processes in place to plan the steps in the journey toward their regional ecclesial assembly to be completed prior to March 31st 2023.

4. Will there then be five continental meetings?

No. Although referred to as the "Continental Stage", the proposed subdivision does not correspond exactly to the five continents. In fact, it is better to speak of geographical areas generally corresponding to the International Meetings of Episcopal Conferences (called by different names: Council, Federation, Symposium...), which are the ecclesial bodies that group together (generally) the national Episcopal Conferences of a given geographical area.

For this synod, the subdivision decided upon is as follows:

- 1) That expressed by the 5 International Meetings of Episcopal Conferences (indicated in brackets), corresponding roughly to the five continents: Europe (CCEE), Latin America and the Caribbean (CELAM), Africa and Madagascar (SECAM), Asia (FABC) and Oceania (FCBCO).
- 2) North America (USA+Canada) and the Middle East (which will specifically see the contribution of the Eastern Catholic Churches).

5. What is the goal of this Continental Stage?

The intent of the continental stage is to deepen our discernment on what has emerged from the previous stage of local and national listening, with the **aim of formulating open questions more accurately, and to better substantiate and flesh out the insights coming from the local Churches, now at a continental perspective.** The DCS will assist the reflection on what has emerged from the consultation of the People of God in the local Churches around the world. This stage also wants to be an opportunity to listen to those realities on the margins of the Church not integrated in the previous stage. **This stage is not yet the time to suggest answers, nor to decide on courses of action.**

6. How does this stage fit into the synodal process?

It is important to understand that synodality was the way of the early Church and consist of a tension and dynamism that belongs to the very identity of the Church, that is, to its very being and acting. As a dynamism of ecclesial life, it is a **learning by doing process.** For this reason, the process of rediscovering this dynamism of ecclesial life, begun in this particular Synod with the diocesan phase, **does not, nor can it, have an end, a limit,** a deadline by which to acquire it or not. Synodality is like communion among people, demanding the daily yes of those involved. In this sense, it is important to note that the current process does not end with the diocesan stage, the continental stage, or the celebration of the Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. These events are integrated into the ongoing unique dynamic of synodal conversion in the Church. Everyone is called to live this call to synodal conversion every day in their faith experience and to continue the concrete work of listening-discernment according to the guidelines of their respective pastors.

As noted above, this Continental Stage, in particular, is not a stand-alone stage, but is intended to express the continuity between the work of listening-discernment of the local-national level (first stage) and the work of listening-discernment of the next stage, the universal one, constituted by the Synod of Bishops in October 2023.

This connection will be ensured by working from a document: the **Document for the Continental Stage**, formerly called *Instrumentum Laboris I*. This document is **to be understood as the real working resource, which should facilitate the work of dialogue, listening and discernment** at the

continental level. This document is the fruit of the discernment of the previous stage (that of the local one) and will be developed from the syntheses received from the local level.

It is important to understand the Document for the Continental Stage, **not as a document to be amended**, corrected or enlarged in view of the universal stage, but as a true guide for an ongoing discernment, fruit of listening to the People of God.

7. How and when will these continental meetings take place? How will individual believers be able to participate in them?

The celebration of the Continental Stage is not limited to the celebration of an event, but **is a real process of listening and discernment at the continental level**, on the same and unique question of the synodal process as a whole, namely *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 ?* (DP No. 2). The only difference lies in approaching this question with a continental perspective, with respect to the challenges posed to the mission of the Church on a given continent.

This specific process related to the Continental Assemblies begins with the publication of the *Document for the Continental Stage*, which we expect to be ready by October 2022. This document will be made public and sent to all the bishops of the world. We have the fervent hope that, following the release of the Document for the Continental Stage, the thousands of local groups that were assembled for the local stage will then also extend their reflection on this document to continue deepening themselves in their own local synodal processes with the guidance of their pastor. However, it is important to underline that the main subjects of this pre-assembly process are the people identified to represent local Churches at the Continental Assembly.

In addition, specific continental Task Forces will be or have already been set up to guide the synodal journey within their continent. They will be accompanied by a Task Force of the General Secretariat of the Synod, which has the task of animating the full continental process and of supporting the continental assemblies.

As for the continental assemblies, these will take place **between January and March 2023**. The contributions (through a Final Document) from these 7 processes will have to be submitted **by March 31st**.

8. Who will participate in the Continental Assemblies?

All Continental Assemblies should be **Ecclesial Assemblies** (of the entire People of God) and not only Episcopal Assemblies (of bishops only). Thus, the participants should adequately represent the variety of the People of God: bishops, priests, deacons, men and women religious, laymen and laywomen. This is one of the **first fruits of the ongoing synod process**, as it corresponds to the wish of the majority of the Bishops' Conferences consulted on the subject by the General Secretariat of the Synod.

However, the bishops are invited to have their own specific time to meet with one another, most likely at the end of the Continental Assemblies, to collegially reread the synodal experience lived from their own specific charisma and role, especially to recognise the authenticity and freedom of the path taken before the Lord, rather than to correct or add themes and topics.

Finally, because the Continental Assemblies continue the work of listening and discernment of the local phase, they are a good opportunity to listen to those persons or groups that might have been excluded in the previous stage, particularly those living in conditions of poverty and marginalisation (or those who have direct contact with them) to whom the local phase had not been able to listen.

We also hope for the participation of fraternal delegates from other Christian denominations and representatives of other religions and faith traditions, as well as some people with no religious affiliation but aware of the importance of "walking together" also for our societies. The continental task forces might find different ways to ensure a broad participation of the People of God according to their particular realities and possibilities, but always keeping in mind the desire of a broad representation of the diversity of the Church in these Assemblies.

9. There is much talk of Bishops' Conferences and International Meetings of Bishops' Conferences, but what is the role of religious congregations, associations and movements that have a continental level or a continental body?

At this point of the synodal process, some of them are already engaged in implementing internally the fruits of the listening and discernment time of the previous stage. For the continental assemblies, we asked the local Churches to include some of them in their respective delegations.

10. What will happen at the end of this Continental Stage?

The Continental Stage will conclude in each 'continent' with the celebration of the Continental Assemblies and the drafting of a Final Document of the Continental Stage. This document will have to be the fruit of an authentically synodal path, respectful of the synodal process actually carried out, thus reflecting the voice of the People of God within the Continent. More precise instructions on how structure this document will be offered together with the DCS.

The 7 continental documents will be sent, no later than March 31st, to the General Secretariat of the Synod and will form the basis of the *Instrumentum Laboris*.

The conclusion of the continental stage does not mean the conclusion of the synodal process of the People of God that began with the consultation of the local phase. Our journeying together can thus become the foundation for how we participate in Church as the whole of the People of God.