



General Secretariat For the Synod of Bishops



The Synodal Spirituality of the Community of Sant'Egidio

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The synod is set in an all-global time: we have all experienced the pandemic, which has knocked on everyone's door, as a global reality beyond borders and walls. Yet, globalization has given rise to so many reactionary phenomena: localism, closure, sovereignty, nationalism, racism: in short, divisive processes, reactions of the massification of the global world in which we have already been living for a few decades now.

The situation of our time

In 1968, when the Community of Sant'Egidio was taking its first steps, the wise and old Patriarch of Constantinople, Athenagoras, wrote: "Woe if peoples, one day, accede to union outside the theology of the Church". And he added: "Today the distant becomes physically close. It must become so spiritually". Today, immersed in the global world, in which the distant becomes close, in which distances are shortened, we discover instead great spiritual, human, cultural and religious distances. Religions, and Christianity in its differentiations, have not responded to the challenge of a world that is unified in its economy, communications, and information. Sometimes religions and spirituality risk *blessing* walls and distances.

Why do I start from this premise? The synodal path today has a particular mission in our time. The unity of the Catholic Church, in its own way, has always been a globalization: "The dweller in Rome deemeth the Indians a member of himself"¹ said John Chrysostom. Catholic globalization cannot be verticalized, but it is called to include the richness of multiple experiences, the faith lived in different lands and cultures: all this has been compressed too much into an institutional model (such a model leads to self-referentiality). Instead, the Lord enriches us with different charisms and opens up new paths: synodality gives voice and flesh to this global and local reality, charismatic and diverse, fruit of the Spirit.

Saint Egidio and the "we"

I thank you for your desire to ask questions about the Christian experience of Sant'Egidio, which has little more than half a century of history, even if it lives in different countries and cultures. I want to recall that it was born in Rome in the 20th century at the end of the 1960s. In this Roman world at that time, one met with an ecclesiastical, institutional vision of the Church that was top-down. At the same time, the reception of Vatican II was in the air and its accompanying enthusiasm of a Church, people and community, of a Church of the poor, of openness to dialogue. We feel ourselves to be children of the Council. There was, however, the other aspect consisting of that which we lived, especially in the world of youth, in the climate of 1968: very assembly-based, critical of forms that were too institutional and delegated. We are children of our times which have been signed by the conciliar dream of the Church, which speaks with sympathy of the Gospel to its contemporaries; by a climate of being together, of being in assembly, as in '68, where we decide together and we speak, because speaking is never useless.

¹ John Chrysostom, *Homily on John*, 65,1: PG 59,361. Translation found at: chrome-extension://efaidnbmninnibpcapjpcglclefindmkaj/viewer.html?pdfurl=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.documentacatholicaomnia.eu%2F03d%2F0345-0407%2C_Iohannes_Chrysostomus%2C_Homilies_on_The_Gospel_Of_John%2C_EN.pdf&clen=1691254&chunk=true

The experience of "us", which was more spontaneous at that time, today has become more difficult in an era of fragmentation and individualism. The "we" is immersed in listening to the Word of God, in prayer, in friendly communion. We always remind Sant'Egidio that Christians were called to this in Antioch, but they were (and are) born as "disciples" beginning in Galilee. Without listening, there is no Christian; there is no "we", but only a sum of "I". This "we" has always been at the heart of our charism, aware of the words of Jesus: "where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them". "We" is the individual local Community grappling with its reality, but also the Community, as a fraternity of Communities in the world, united by a bond of communion and co-responsibility.

Pope Francis, speaking of Sant'Egidio, offered a synthesis of his own:

To each of you too, whatever your age, is given at least one talent. Upon it is inscribed the charism of this Community, a charism which [...] I summed up in these words: prayer, the poor, and peace. The three "Ps". [...] 'as you walk this path, you help compassion grow in the heart of society — which is the true revolution, that of compassion and tenderness — to cultivate friendship in place of the ghosts of animosity and indifference.'² Prayer, the poor and peace are the talents of the Community, ripened over 50 years.³

Living this talent or charism in a "we": it has been nourished from the earliest days, because of the post-conciliar and social climate in which we grew up and matured. We have not called it synodality, but practiced it from the earliest times, in a necessary family atmosphere: friendship is not just sentiment, but a human attitude, shaped by the Spirit. Jesus calls us friends. It is a matter of a fraternal and co-responsible sense of relationship (which means feeling responsible for the other in a respectful way and not merely as collaborators in work; neighbors on good and bad days); but first of all co-responsibility in listening together to the Word of God, light for our steps, which makes us overcome that easy egocentrism, to which we return from time to time.

Listening

The dimension of listening is decisive, starting from the Word of God and then extending to the brother and the sister, to the small or large story around us, to the voice of those who have no voice, often the poor. Listening to our brothers and sisters also involves taking time to comment, to discuss the different experiences of reality, as well as to make decisions together. I am thinking of the many services to the poor in the Community, or of meetings with them, of many complex situations: it is not just a matter of deciding what to do, but of understanding together. Listening and friendship go together and create a common awareness that is broader than what I do. Even the poor are not the users of the Community's services, but they participate in some way in its life, so much so that there is a confusion between who helps and who is helped and, often, the poor themselves become the helpers. Listening cannot be limited to members of the Community, but the poor and others are at the center.

In 2014, speaking of Sant'Egidio as a Community that helps and that generates help, Pope Francis said: "The tension slowly ceases being tension and becomes an encounter, an embrace: it becomes unclear who helps and who is being helped. Who leads the action? Both of them, or, to say it better, the *embrace* leads."⁴ Without an embrace, without friendship, there is no communal listening, which has to be broadened, so that the most adequate definition I would give of Sant'Egidio is not the juridical one of a public association of the faithful, but of a "Community of the people", to quote Martin Buber. It is necessary to spend time, listening,

² Pope Francis, Basilica of Santa Maria in Trastevere, 15 June 2014, Meeting with the poor of the Sant'Egidio Community, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/june/documents/papa-francesco_20140615_comunita-sant-egidio.html.

³ Pope Francis, Basilica of Santa Maria in Trastevere, Sunday, 11 March 2018, Meeting with the Sant'Egidio Community to Mark the 50th Anniversary of its Founding, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2018/march/documents/papa-francesco_20180311_visita-sant-egidio.html.

⁴ Pope Francis, Basilica of Santa Maria in Trastevere, Sunday, 15 June 2014, *Address of Pope Francis to the Sant'Egidio Community*, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/june/documents/papa-francesco_20140615_comunita-sant-egidio.html.

relationships, to keep this reality together in a lively way, in give-and-take, in interpersonal solidarity; aware that it is not ideology or methodology of action that unites us, but rather it is listening to the Word of God that makes us disciples and brothers. This does not mean that there are not different sensitivities, different visions, even tensions, which represent a richness as well as a reality. This does not disturb peace. On the contrary, what often disturbs peace is indifference.

The world becomes a book: diversity and peace

Sant'Egidio is committed to the service of peace in various world situations, beginning with the peace that was forged thanks to its mediation in Mozambique in 1992, after a war that had caused a million deaths. We know what hatred leads to. But we are not afraid of the many enmities of society and the world: the peculiar characteristic of Christianity — says a great Eastern saint — is love for enemies. Enmity leads to exclusion, to disdain for others, to the hardening of differences into ideologies. Even in community life, in small and large situations, let us make John XXIII's teaching our own: seek that which unites and put aside that which divides. Indeed, in community life, by seeking that which unites, we experience divisions as non-divisive, but as enriching. This path is deepened in the community's periodic assemblies related to the management of works or services, so that every role of responsibility for or service to unity will exist within this "us" and grow in discernment and *not* in passive continuity.

In the history of a community, there is the risk that an older generation, even though it has merits, will make itself felt more than others. I have always appealed to the Rule of St. Benedict, which makes the younger generation the wiser, perhaps because it is freer. We read in Chapter III: "As often as any special business has to be transacted in the monastery, let the abbot convoke the whole community and himself state what is the matter in hand. And having listened to the counsel of the brethren, let him settle the matter in his own mind and do what seems to him most expedient. And we have thus said that all are to be called to council because it is often to a junior that the Lord reveals what is best."

A few reflections: going out into history

However, I must say that in a synodal Church, a synodal and participatory Community (in which everyone is integrated) the "mission" is a fundamental aspect of life. I have studied the Italian synods of the twentieth century and I have participated in the Synod of Rome. Bearing in mind also the synods of bishops in which I have participated, I have observed a tendency towards self-referentiality and the treatment of problems that are *internal* to the Church, of pastoral care, of institutions. The risk of many synods is to be introverted, an approach which produces one more book for the libraries. Documents that are often without pathos (or, as Pope John would have said, without *anointing*) or incapable of sharing a pathos, are of no use. The true model of the Synod is the Second Vatican Council — not because it can be repeated in the same way today — but because it was prepared by certain expectations and it generated a spirit and an enthusiasm that touched the people of God, even though it took place in Rome and among the Council Fathers: the first is decisive, but above all — as the East affirms — the reception afterwards. The Church, whose identity and inner life the Council so effectively deepened, was placed within history and (here is the decisive point) *ad extra*: the reading of the history in which we walk, that of this global world, which seems clear and shiny, but is complex and contradictory. Sant'Egidio feels that, in the exercise of a synodal life, the contribution of all is necessary to read the signs of the times: *Gaudium et Spes* states that "the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel" (GS 4). Scrutinizing the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel is the duty of every synod, if it speaks not only of mission but of the very life of Christians.

Paul VI said:

"one of the characteristic attitudes of the Church after the Council is that of a particular attention over human reality, considered historically; that is, over the facts, events, phenomena of our time. A word of the Council has become part of our habits: that of scrutinizing 'the signs of the times' "⁵.

And he continued:

"This locution 'the signs of the times' has therefore acquired [...] a profound, very broad and very interesting meaning; namely, that of the theological interpretation of contemporary history. "⁶

He concluded

"The world for us becomes a book...".

For Sant'Egidio — I would like to say — a book to read and discern that stands next to the book of nature of Franciscan memory and to the Book that is the Word of God. The world becomes a book to be read and understood with the Christian passion to look at history in order to discern God's plan, a passion which we have somewhat lost. It is what Giorgio La Pira called "historiography of the profound". Our reading of the "book of the world" is not that of politicians or intellectuals, but of the disciples of Jesus, enlightened by the Spirit. At Sant'Egidio, we discern together, but always with doors open to history.

The synodality of the Community is not an "among us", but an "us" at the service of the Gospel, of the poor, of the Kingdom of God: this primacy shows that everyone is needed, it frees us from ego-centrism and pushes us all to act in history.

⁵ Paul VI, General Audience, Wednesday, 16 April 1969, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/it/audiences/1969/documents/hf_p-vi_aud_19690416.html. The translation is that of Sr. Marie Kolbe Zamora, S.T.D.

⁶ Paul VI, General Audience, Wednesday, 16 April 1969.