



General Secretariat For the Synod of Bishops



Message of Cardinal Mario Grech, Secretary General for the Synod of Bishops, to the Latin American and Caribbean Ecclesial Assembly 25 November 2021

Following the inauguration of the first phase of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod, in my ministry as General Secretary of the Synod, almost every day I have to speak about synodality and about the Synod on synodality. However, I am truly honoured to be able to speak to you, considering the history of this Assembly: Medellín, Puebla, Santo Domingo, Aparecida are the stages of a post-conciliar journey, in which the Churches of Latin America and the Caribbean have lived an extraordinary experience of ecclesial communion, which could be an example for many Episcopal Conferences. The concluding Documents of those General Assemblies constitute the milestones of a journey that has gradually deepened an awareness of a dynamic Church, through a communion between Bishops and delegates of the Churches which is at the foundation of your ecclesial identity and the particular way - I would dare to say characteristic – in which you seek to be the Church in this time so complex and troubled. All of this has a lot to do with synodality.

More directly and immediately, this Ecclesial Assembly is linked to the Aparecida CELAM Conference, which is also one of the foundations of the approach of pastoral conversion promoted by *Evangelii Gaudium*. This event represents an expression of the pastoral vision of Pope Francis. This Assembly represents also a bridge between the Amazon Synod - *Querida Amazonia* as a truly transformative experience for your region and the Synod on Synodality. They are explicitly connected through the periphery-center approach and the Ecclesiology of the People of God. This double reference allows me to make explicit the close relationship between synodality and mission.

Evangelii Gaudium is in fact a document on the missionary dimension of the Church. If I were to use an ecclesiological formula to describe the content of the apostolic exhortation appropriately, I would say with the Vatican Council II that "the Church is missionary by nature" (AG 2). The pastoral conversion that *Evangelii Gaudium* proposes has a missionary dimension. But the principles it poses for putting into effect the "outgoing Church" can all be inflected in a synodal sense. Let us try to inflect in a synodal key EG 24: "The outgoing Church" is the community of missionary disciples who take the initiative, who get involved, who accompany, who bear fruit and celebrate". The subject of the five verbs is the "evangelizing community". We can apply this to a "synodal community":

1. The synodal community knows that the Lord has taken the initiative, preceded it in love (cf. 1 Jn 4:10), and for this reason it knows how to take the first step, knows how to take the initiative without fear, to go out to meet, look for those who are far away and stand at crossroads to invite the excluded. The synodal Church has an inexhaustible desire to offer mercy.

2. As a consequence, the synodal Church knows how to "get involved". As we highlight in the Preparatory Document for the Synod Jesus was constantly open to the "widest possible audience, which the Gospels refer to as the "crowd Jesus' interlocutor is the "people" of ordinary life, the "everyone" of the human condition" (no.18). The synodal community places itself through works and gestures in the daily life of others, shortens distances, lowers itself to humiliation if necessary, and takes on human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in the people. The *truly synodal men and women* thus have the "smell of sheep" and these listen to their voice.

3. Therefore, the synodal community is always ready to "accompany". It accompanies humanity in all its processes, however hard and prolonged they might be. It knows what hard work and apostolic endurance mean. Evangelization entails lot of patience and knows no limits.

4. Faithful to the gift of the Lord, the ecclesial community also knows how to "bear fruit". The synodal community is always attentive to fruit, because the Lord wants it to be fruitful. It takes care of the grain and does not lose its peace because of the weeds. The sower finds a way how to make the Word sink in a concrete situation and bear fruits of new life, even though they are apparently imperfect or incomplete.

5. Finally, the synodal community always knows how to "celebrate". It celebrates every little victory, every step forward in synodality. Joyful synodality becomes beauty in the Liturgy in the midst of the daily need to advance in life.

If the Holy Father concludes the paragraph by saying that "the Church evangelizes and evangelizes itself through the beauty of the Liturgy, which is also a celebration of evangelizing activity and a source of a renewed impulse to give oneself", this truth is even more valid for the "celebration" of the Synod: the Church grows in synodality, assumes an ever more synodal form the more it lives and practices a synodal style. It is so easy to understand *Evangelii Gaudium* in a synodal light, that we can argue that not only is the Church synodal and missionary at the same time, but that it is only missionary if synodal, and synodal if missionary.

These are two constitutive dimensions of the Church, which - precisely because they are constitutive - stand or fall together. Try to think of the mission scenario of a non-synodal Church; a Church in which we do not walk together, proceed in no particular order, each claiming the right to mission. Evangelization would no longer be the work of the Church, but of many individuals, denominations, groups, movements, which would approach others on the basis of their own personal and exclusive gifts, not because of Christ's command. If in the past it was the Pope, by reason of his proper and universal power, who sent the missionaries, in a model of the Church that exists "in and starting from the Churches" (LG 23), the proclamation of the Gospel must be an evident manifestation of the ecclesial communion. A missionary project can only arise from the synodal process of listening-discernment, which is, moreover, an exercise in discipleship. In this perspective, the Final Document of the Amazon Synod spoke of "missionary synodality". Quite the opposite of certain forms of self-referential evangelization, which form people into a closed membership - hopefully non-sectarian! - that risks sliding towards forms of proselytism.

The deepening of the link between these two dimensions of the Church can be one of the most significant contributions of this Assembly and of the synodal journey of the Churches of Latin America and the Caribbean. It is a contribution in continuity with the history and experience of the Church in Latin America, which from the Council onwards has been characterized by the particular form of "walking together". Your General Assemblies are not just meetings of bishops; they are not even meetings where there are only a few bishops. The presence of the Pastors, who are the principle of unity in their Churches, allows these Conferences to be a visible re-presentation of the Church which lives in this continent. If in the path of synodality we are all apprentices, you have been so for a long time; for this reason, it is right to expect from you a significant contribution of synodal experience, from which the other Churches and the whole Church will have much to learn!

Another contribution that can come from the Churches of Latin America and the Caribbean concerns the way how the steps of the first phases of the synodal process are carried out. The initial wide consultation phase in the particular Churches is a novelty for all; then also the national episcopal conferences are called to adopt a different approach by making an ecclesial discernment starting from listening to the people of God. Then a continental level of listening and discernment will follow. Because you have already gained considerable experience through your general conferences, you can be of help to the other continental episcopal conferences. Already from this General Assembly it is legitimate to expect a contribution that will open perspectives on the how to make the intermediate instances of synodality operational.

In the logic of catholicity as an exchange of gifts between the Churches, indicated by the Second Vatican Council (cf. LG 13), the Church of this continent also has another gift to offer to the whole Church - a gift that you have treasured better than the other Churches: that of understanding the Church as the People of God. It is no coincidence that this perspective, delivered to the Church by the Second Vatican Council in Chapter II of *Lumen Gentium*, has re-emerged strongly with the election of Pope Francis. The theology of the People of God has once again become the reference framework for the journey of the Church, without polemical connotations, as unfortunately happened in the immediate post-council period, but as a "theological place" (*locus theologicus*) within which can be inflected in full harmony and complementarity - both theoretical and practical - synodality, collegiality and primacy. On this point too, it is legitimate to expect a great contribution from this Assembly and from the whole ecclesial journey that will develop from here on in the Churches of the continent.

However, another aspect has characterized the ecclesial life of this continent, at least for thirty years now: the radical contrast between two visions of the Church, which has given rise to a profound division of the ecclesial body. A famous book on the Church in Latin America speaks of a "torn tunic". The Synod asks us to "walk together". A missionary conversion will not be possible if a synodal conversion is not carried out, which involves a humble and respectful listening to the other and his or her reasons; who has the courage to ask and give forgiveness; who wants unity not at the price of truth, but never identifies truth with "my" truth. Perhaps this will be the greatest effort, but it will also constitute the strongest witness, which will give substance to the gift of synodal experience that you will be able to offer to the whole Church.

On the other hand, this path also appears to be the answer to those Christian groups and sects that promote an individualistic and intimate understanding of the faith. To these proposals, that often appeal so much to a people poorly formed, the most credible answer is that of communion: "they were assiduous in the teaching of the Apostles, in fraternal communion, in the breaking of bread and in prayers" (Acts 2:42). The Synod, by putting the synodal Church as a theme, and asking to read communion, participation and mission in this context, constitutes the concrete possibility of returning to the *evangelica vivendi forma*, which must be developed in an original way in every cultural context. If "the People of God are incarnated in the peoples of the earth, each of whom has their own culture" (EG 115), I hope that you can "build the communion and harmony of the People of God" in this land (cf. EG 117) starting from the traditions and cultures of the continent to translate the one Gospel of Christ in a Latin American style. This, as the pope says, will not threaten the unity of the Church, but will show that Tradition is not a song in unison, a single-voice melodic line, but a symphony, where every voice, every register, every vocal timber enriches the only Gospel, sung in an infinite possibility of variations.

Thanks for your listening.