

PRESS CONFERENCE for the presentation of the *Instrumentum laboris* for the first session of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, 20 June 2023

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The Methodology of the Synodal Assembly

The task given me now is to present the working methodology that will be followed during the Synodal Assembly in October 2023.

The framework of reference for the Assembly's proceedings remains, of course, the Apostolic Constitution *Episcopalis Communio* (EC), in particular Articles 13-18. The proposed methodology is therefore in continuity with that of the most recent Assemblies, with some variations. These are partly for practical reasons, related to the increased number of Members. Due to increased number of Bishops around the world the number of Bishops is higher: some twenty more than at the last Ordinary General Assembly in 2018. Following the participatory extension approved by Pope Francis in April, the addition of non-Bishops also increases the number of Members. A total of about 370 Assembly Members, excluding experts, are expected, while in 2018 there were 267 Synod Fathers, plus about 50 Auditors.

These variations are particularly necessary in order to reflect significant developments within the synodal process. They also reflect the fact that we are approaching the Synodal Assembly after a long phase of consultation and listening in which the seven Continental Assemblies expressed a series of priorities.

Surprisingly clear among these priorities was the desire to continue to use, for listening and discernment in common, the method of conversation in the Spirit, which profoundly marked the consultative phase of the synodal journey.

The method of conversation in the Spirit

Conversation in the Spirit can be described as shared prayer with a view to discernment in common and for which the participants prepare themselves by personal reflection and meditation. Participants mutually offer each other the gift of a thoughtful word nourished by prayer and not an opinion improvised on the spot. The conversation, however, is dulled if the distinct voices are not articulated and the fruits of the encounter are not grasped in a missionary dynamism that points to action. Conversation in the Spirit is all the more fruitful the more all participants engage in it with conviction, sharing experiences, charisms and ministries in the service of the Gospel. From these contributions, the discernment will identify concrete steps that the Holy Spirit invites the Church to take in order to grow in communion, mission and participation.

The experience of the consultation phase has demonstrated that Conversation in the Spirit opens up “spaces” in which, together, it is possible to address even controversial issues around which, whether in society or the Church, whether in person or via social media, there is often more conflict than dialogue. In other words, Conversation in the Spirit offers a viable alternative to polarisations.

The dynamic of this Conversation in the Spirit unfolds in three fundamental steps, to be adapted to different situations. The first step is devoted to each person taking the floor based on his or her own experience which has been reviewed in prayer during the time of preparation. The second step, which aims at forging bonds, consists of each person taking the floor again, this time to express what touched him or her most profoundly as they listened and how he or she heard the voice of the Holy Spirit resound. This is possible the more each person cultivates familiarity with the Lord through meditation on the Word and a sacramental life, thus growing in the ability to recognise His voice. Lastly and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the third step is dedicated to identifying key points that emerged during the conversation and to gathering the fruits of the work in common with a view toward action. The purpose is to reach an inclusive consensus, in which each person can feel represented, without neglecting either marginal views or points of dissension which should be subjected to discernment and not eliminated.

Thus it is clear that the Synodal Assembly is not called to live the dynamics of parliamentary bodies, where debate ends with a vote that divides the majority from the minority, but rather to live a spiritual process that seeks the will of God. This spiritual process offers the Synodal Assembly the opportunity to listen to brothers and sisters in Christ, and, through them, to the Spirit, who, as Pope Francis repeats, is the authentic protagonist. Those who have never experienced this spiritual process struggle to understand the dynamism inherent to it and which is a defining aspect of the working methodology at hand.

The Various Steps of the Assembly

The work of the Assembly will be structured in five segments that follow the development of the IL (cf. Figures 1 and 2). One difference with respect to the past will be the introduction of moments of common prayer and various liturgical celebrations throughout the Assembly. In addition, each session will open and close with prayer.

In the first segment of the proceedings, the Assembly will address Section A of the IL, which is entitled "For a Synodal Church. An integral experience" and expresses the lived understanding of synodality acquired during the consultation phase. The purpose of this segment will be to further focus on the fundamental characteristics of a synodal Church and possible ways forward.

The fruit of this work will then constitute the horizon within which to address the three priority issues that emerged from the consultation phase and are presented in Section B of the IL, which expresses them by linking them to the three key terms of the Synod: communion, mission and participation.

As IL 44 explains, the change in the order in which the three terms appear, with "mission" in the center, is rooted in an awareness of the connections between them that matured during the first phase. In particular, "communion" and "mission" are interwoven and reflection in each other. We are impelled, therefore, to move beyond a dualistic notion in which "communion" is understood as belonging to the realm of those relationships within the church community while "mission" is understood as belonging to the realm of relationships *beyond* the community, that is, *ad extra*. "Participation", in turn, can only be understood in relationship to both "communion" and "mission". On the one hand, "participation" is more concrete, giving solidity to both "communion" and "mission". On the other hand, "participation" receives orientation toward a final purpose preventing it from being reduced to the frenzy inherent to the claims that many can make to their individual rights.

Each priority issue (B1-B2-B3) will be developed during a specific segment of the Assembly, with the help of the Worksheets just presented by Cardinal Hollerich.

The Worksheets – five for each priority issue – constitute the second part of the IL. They provide a practical tool to facilitate work in small groups (*circuli minores*). Each Worksheet offers a question for discernment, which is prefaced by some contextualisation based on the final documents of the Synodal Assemblies. This same question for discernment is followed by a series of prompts for prayer, personal reflection and group work. These prompts express various perspectives and dimensions of the Church’s life while maintaining a connection with the experience of the People of God as gathered during the listening phase. Thus the Worksheets are not treatises on a theme, nor chapters of a book to be read in succession. Each one is a doorway to address the priority issue with which it is associated and can be used independently of the other Worksheets.

The goal of the work on Section B is to identify concrete steps that the Holy Spirit is calling us to take in order to grow as a synodal Church, and to develop proposals at different levels, from local to universal.

The organisation of the work in segments does not do away with the interconnection between the two parts of the IL. The synodal experience of the People of God addressed in Part A is the horizon within which we place the treatment of the priority questions posed in Part B. It is essential that the tension between the overview and the identifying of the steps to be taken be maintained. The latter give incisiveness and concreteness to the overview, while the overview helps us to maintain cohesion and to prevent us from getting lost in the details.

Fruit of the Assembly’s work

The last segment of the work will be devoted to gathering the fruit and formulating it into a text that is communicable and, in the case of the more concrete proposals, also implementable during the time between the two sessions (2023 and 2024). Voting will make it possible to capture the consensus that this formulation enjoys.

This will not be a conclusion. Between the two sessions we will continue to walk together in and between the Churches, to reread this experience of the People of God and to promote the necessary deepening, particularly from theological, canonical and pastoral points of view. The objective of the two sessions remains to formulate concrete proposals for growing as a synodal Church that can be presented to the Holy Father. For this reason, it is important to identify obstacles that hinder this growth and to deepen those issues on which a sufficient consensus has not yet matured. The year between the two sessions will be of fundamental importance to test how these questions might be addressed and to offer further elements for the discernment of the assembly in October 2024.

The Place

Permit me a final word regarding the place where the Synodal Assembly will unfold. The Assembly will be held in the Vatican, of course, but it will take place in Paul VI Audience Hall. This space is large enough to accommodate all the participants, whereas the New Synod Hall would barely accommodate the Members without including any Experts. Above all, Paul VI Audience Hall can be equipped with tables at which groups of a dozen or so can sit, making the transition between plenary sessions and group work quicker and, most importantly, facilitating the dynamic of Conversation in the Spirit. Those who are familiar with the images of previous Synod Assemblies must prepare to be surprised when they see those of the October 2023 Synod Assembly.

Heartfelt thanks

I cannot conclude without expressing my gratitude for the work you are doing and will be doing in October. The Synod will address issues of great importance for the Church's future and the effort to build a working methodology that will allow for constructive and fruitful work has been enormous (even if only to draft documents from an unprecedented amount of material). However, for this effort to bear fruit it must be communicated and circulated. Thank you, therefore, to the Dicastery for Communication and the Press Office for their support – we will continue to take advantage of it! – as well as to Thierry Bonaventura and his collaborators in the Synod Secretariat and around the world. And thank you to all of you for your work.