



STUDY GROUPS

on relevant questions from the *Synthesis' Report* of the First Session of the XVI General Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops

FOR A SYNODAL CHURCH:
COMMUNION, PARTICIPATION, MISSION

STUDY GROUP N. 7

**SOME ASPECTS OF THE PERSON
AND MINISTRY OF THE BISHOP
(CRITERIA FOR SELECTING CANDIDATES
TO EPISCOPACY, JUDICIAL FUNCTION OF THE BISHOPS,
NATURE AND COURSE OF AD LIMINA
APOSTOLORUM VISITS)
FROM A MISSIONARY SYNODAL PERSPECTIVE**

**FINAL REPORT OF THE 2ND PART
THE *AD LIMINA* VISITS
IN A MISSIONARY SYNODAL PERSPECTIVE**



FINAL REPORT

[Original text: Italian. Working translation]

INDEX

1. Introduction: Rationale and Purpose of the Proposals.....	2
2. The Ecclesial and Theological Significance of the <i>Ad Limina</i> Visits.....	3
3. The <i>ad limina</i> visit within the Framework of the Ordinary Dialogue between the Local Churches and the Holy See.....	5
4. Preparation within the Local Churches.....	5
5. The Stay in the City of Rome	7
6. Return to the Local Churches	8

1. Introduction: Rationale and Purpose of the Proposals

- a. Study Group 7 receives from the 2021-2024 Synodal Process the request for a profound revision of both the understanding of the *ad limina* visits and of their procedure, hitherto governed by the Directory of 29 June 1988. The Final Document of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops underscores their importance and states: “*The visits ad limina Apostolorum are the apex of the relation between the Bishops of local Churches and the Bishop of Rome and his closest collaborators in the Roman Curia. Many Bishops desire that the way these visits are conducted will be reviewed to make them more and more an opportunity for open exchange and mutual listening.*” (no. 135). The Document further proposes that the local processes of accountability and evaluation be incorporated into the reports submitted on the occasion of the *ad limina* visits (cf. no. 101), and that a review be initiated of the functioning of the Episcopal Conferences and of the relationships among the Episcopates and with the Holy See, identifying the *ad limina* visits as a fitting occasion for doing so (cf. no. 125c).
- b. Aware that some Dicasteries of the Roman Curia are already engaged in work on a procedural reform, the following proposals are intended to offer a framework of reference, from a missionary synodal perspective, within which to situate their work. They consist of fundamental orientations and practical suggestions in keeping with the Apostolic Constitution *Praedicate Evangelium*, according to which the *ad limina* visit “*has a particular importance for the unity and communion in the life of the Church*” (III, no. 39). In particular, the Study Group takes into account the perspective of understanding the Curia as a body that simultaneously assists both the Bishop of Rome and the Episcopal College, placing it not above the local Churches and their groupings but at their service (cf. I, no. 8; II, nos. 1-4; III, nos. 38-42).
- c. The consultation of the Episcopal Conferences and the corresponding Eastern hierarchical Structures, conducted specifically by the Study Group, confirms the need for the above-mentioned revision. Numerous responses express high expectations, demonstrating how important the *ad limina* visit is for Bishops. Many desire shorter questionnaires, more time to prepare them, and a more attentive discussion of their contents during the meetings in Rome. They attribute great importance to the spiritual dimension of the *ad limina* visit and ask that greater attention be devoted to it. They hope for more time for meetings with the heads of the Curial Institutions and, above all, with the Bishop of Rome, and express the desire to establish a dialogue characterized by sincere exchange in a synodal style. Some recommend that the *ad limina* visits be held according to the timetable established by the current norms and be spread over a more extended period.
- d. For their part, the Curial Institutions most directly involved in the preparation of the *ad limina* visits (the Dicastery for Evangelization – Section for the First Evangelization and New Particular Churches, the Dicastery for the Eastern Churches, the Dicastery for Bishops, and the Prefecture of the Papal Household), which participated in the work of the Study Group, observe that some of the Bishops’ expectations are legitimate and feasible, wholly or in part, whereas others, although understandable, appear difficult to realize because of, among other things, the Pope’s many commitments, the workload of the Curial Institutions themselves, and the concrete possibilities of their Officials. In any case, these Institutions agree on the need to continue fostering a change of mentality in a synodal key, both within the Curia and among the Bishops.
- e. In this same spirit, these proposals are linked to those previously developed by the Study Group concerning the revision of the procedures for the selection of candidates for the episcopate. Their

purpose, once again, is to foster the growth of a culture of synodality throughout the Church, understood as a mentality marked by fraternity, broad participation, synergy, transparency, and accountability. According to this perspective, moments such as the succession of a Bishop or the *ad limina* visit must be understood and lived as events that involve, insofar as possible, all the members of the People of God.

2. The Ecclesial and Theological Significance of the *Ad Limina* Visits

- a. The *ad limina* visit is an opportunity for the particular Churches to perceive themselves as journeying together in a synodal way. This is especially true with regard to the “conversion of processes”: ecclesial discernment for mission; the articulation of decision-making processes; transparency, accountability, and evaluation; synodality and participatory bodies (cf. Final Document, Part III: “Cast the Net.” The Conversion of Processes). It also fosters the exchange of gifts among the Churches (cf. *ibid.*, Part IV: “A Great Catch.” The Conversion of Bonds).
- b. The New Testament recounts that Paul went to Jerusalem for the first time to meet the Apostle Peter after his conversion and the beginning of his preaching ministry in Damascus (cf. Acts 9:26-28). Elsewhere we read that, after his three-year stay in Arabia, Paul felt the need to meet the Apostles (cf. Gal. 1:18-20). Thereafter he remained in constant contact with the Mother Church of Jerusalem and visited it after each of his missionary journeys. The words, “*For I handed on to you as of first importance what I also received*” (1 Cor 15:3), confirm that he based himself on a solid tradition, that of the Apostles. Many years later, he returned once again to Jerusalem to meet the “pillars” of the Church—Peter, James, and John (cf. Gal 2:1-10). In all of these episodes, the focus is on mission and communion: Paul wishes to ensure that his preaching to the Gentiles corresponds to the Gospel proclaimed by Christ and, to that end, recognizes the need to remain firmly in communion with the Church of Jerusalem and, in particular, with the Apostle Peter, who presides over it. The same is true in another well-known passage, the so-called “Council of Jerusalem” (cf. Acts 15:1-28).
- c. Although the biblical texts cannot be used as the direct foundation for ecclesiastical structures that developed later, these episodes help us to understand the meaning of the visit of the Bishops, the “Apostles of the nations,” to the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul, already regarded in the second century as the founders of the Church of Rome, which presides in charity over all the Churches. From the fourth century onward, following the legalization of Christianity, the *ad limina* visits took the form of the pilgrimage of individual Bishops of the West to the Eternal City, taking on the character of a spiritual event whose high point is found in the celebration of the Eucharist. Associated with this pilgrimage is the meeting with the Bishop of Rome, who, as Successor of Peter, confirms each particular Church in its faith and offers it support in its mission.
- d. The *ad limina* visits arose within the context of a Church that understood itself as a communion of Churches (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 23). Frequently, the visit of the Bishops to the Eternal City took place on the occasion of the Roman Synods, in which groups of Bishops, greater or smaller in number, took part. Even today, mission and communion remain at stake in the *ad limina* visit, according to a logic of reciprocity. On the one hand, it enables the Bishops of the world to give an account of the Gospel preached among the nations, to illustrate the practices adopted within the various cultural contexts in which the Church is present, and to ensure that these find their

proper place in “Catholic unity” (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 8, 13; *Ad Gentes*, 6, 22). On the other hand, it enables the Bishop of Rome to address a word of encouragement to the “Apostles of the nations” and to offer them a testimony of communion, since the Chair of Peter “*presides over the universal communion of charity, safeguards legitimate diversity and at the same time watches over the fact that what is particular not only does no harm to unity but rather serves it*” (*Lumen Gentium*, 13). Through the *ad limina* visit, the exercise of the Petrine primacy becomes concrete, manifesting its nature as a service to all the Churches, while the Roman Curia fulfills its own “vicarious nature,” insofar as “*each Curial Institution carries out its mission by virtue of the power received from the Roman Pontiff, in whose name it acts with vicarious authority in the exercise of his primatial munus*” (*Praedicate Evangelium*, II, no. 5).

- e. For some time now, the *ad limina* visits have been carried out by groups of Bishops corresponding to the members of an Episcopal Conference or, in the case of nations with a large number of dioceses, of a more limited territory. An exception is made for dioceses that do not belong to an Episcopal Conference, for which consideration may be given either to grouping together those belonging to the same continent or to including such dioceses in the *ad limina* visit of neighboring Episcopal Conferences. In this way, the Pastors of the same socio-cultural region have the opportunity to share among themselves their concerns, their journeys, and their pastoral orientations, experiencing collegiality and overcoming the isolation and self-referentiality that do not serve the cause of evangelization. The *ad limina* visits can thus, for their part, strengthen processes of regional synodality, increase co-responsibility among the Pastors and synergy among the Churches, and also offer the Apostolic See the opportunity to identify the challenges and potential of an entire region. *Praedicate Evangelium* itself, after observing that “*the emergence of Episcopal Conferences in the Latin Church represents one of the more recent forms in which the communio Episcoporum has found expression in service to the communio Ecclesiae grounded in the communio fidelium.*” (I, no. 7; cf. also Final Document, no. 18), states that the *ad limina* visit “*constitutes the summit of the relationship of the Pastors of each particular Church, each Episcopal Conference and each hierarchical structure of the Eastern Churches with the Bishop of Rome.*” (III, no. 39). In this light, the *ad limina* visits, in an increasingly global Church, point to the need for a deeper examination of the theological and juridical status of the Episcopal Conferences, a matter entrusted to the discernment of Study Group 12.
- f. Taking into account as well the 2021-2024 Synodal Process, which, following the teaching of the Second Vatican Council and the post-conciliar Magisterium, has given attention to the essentially missionary nature of the Church and to the demands of evangelization in today’s world, the *ad limina* visit should not concern itself primarily with matters relating to the internal administration of the particular Church, matters that can be addressed just as effectively through the ordinary contacts with the Curia, but rather, in keeping with the biblical witness, should support the mission that the Christian community is called to carry out in the world in which it lives, becoming an instrument at the service of the missionary conversion of ordinary pastoral ministry.

3. The *ad limina* visit within the Framework of the Ordinary Dialogue between the Local Churches and the Holy See

- a. The following proposals situate the *ad limina* visits within the framework of the ordinary dialogue between the local Churches and the Apostolic See, and of the systematic accompaniment that the latter offers to the local Churches by virtue of the universal solicitude of the Church of Rome. They may be regarded as the culminating moment of that dialogue and accompaniment, insofar as they form part of an ongoing process and serve as instruments at the service of the relationship between the local Churches throughout the world and their regional groupings, on the one hand, and the Church of the City of Rome, on the other. This is a process that should unfold not so much in a linear manner as in a circular one: within it, under the guidance of their Bishops, the local Churches reflect upon their mission, engage with the Churches of their own region, enter into dialogue with the Apostolic See, and receive from it renewed impetus for their pastoral activity. Consequently, attention must be given not only to the celebration of the *ad limina* visit in the City of Rome, but also to its preparation and its implementation within the local Churches.
- b. What has been said requires the Roman Curia to strengthen the bodies responsible for the organization of the *ad limina* visits. It is desirable that an interdicasterial body be established under the coordination of the Prefecture of the Papal Household, with representation from the Secretariat of State and the interested Curial Institutions. The General Secretariat of the Synod should also participate in this body and should ensure the synodal quality of its work. This body should be responsible for the logistical aspects, which are fundamental to the successful conduct of the *ad limina* visits, and should possess the competence necessary to discern the specific needs of the local Churches of a given territory. Without such a body, many of the proposals that follow may prove difficult to implement. It should therefore plan, each year, the calendar and overall approach of the *ad limina* visits, while entrusting the implementation of these orientations to the appropriate offices of the three Dicasteries competent by reason of territorial responsibility. The Episcopal Conferences and the corresponding Eastern Hierarchical Structures (without neglecting those local Churches that do not belong to an Episcopal Conference) should refer to these offices through the mediation of the Pontifical Representations.

4. Preparation within the Local Churches

- a. The response to the Holy Spirit's call to synodality for mission should be reflected in the preparation of the *ad limina* visit, taking as both its starting point and the perspective of its evaluation the conversion brought about in diocesan structures, decision-making processes, and the relationships among ecclesial subjects, with an aim toward the fruitfulness of the mission. To this end, it will be necessary for the Bishop to convoke the People of God so that they may engage co-responsibly in the preparation of the Preliminary Report through a process of ecclesial discernment, nourished by prayer and participation, in a manner corresponding to the various charisms, missions, and ministries.
- b. The questionnaire for the Preliminary Report, prepared by the Holy See, currently exhibits certain limitations. While the emphasis placed on statistical data is generally considered excessive (especially since such information can now be transmitted to the Holy See at another time and

through other means), greater attention should be devoted to contextualization (avoiding identical questions for all the local Churches throughout the world) and more space should be given to the free expression of what the Churches expect from the visit and of the forms of collaboration or support that they perceive to be needed. Particular attention should be given to the fruits of evangelization, to pastoral challenges, and to those tensions that require clarification. By focusing the Preliminary Report on the essential matters to be discussed during the *ad limina* visit, the remaining information may be provided by the local Churches through the ordinary processes of accompaniment carried out by the Curial Institutions. Moreover, where these Institutions customarily request periodic reports from the local Churches (or their regional groupings) on specific matters, such documents may usefully be made available to the coordinating body in order to facilitate a more effective preparation of the *ad limina* visit.

- c. It is desirable that the preparation of the Preliminary Report be rooted in those processes of discernment and accountability within the local Churches which, as stated in the document on the selection of candidates for the episcopate (cf. no. 4c), should take place periodically and involve Priests, Deacons, Consecrated Men and Women, and Lay faithful, particularly within the various diocesan bodies, beginning with the Presbyteral Council and the Diocesan Pastoral Council. The results of these processes may themselves constitute part of the Preliminary Report or, in any event, serve as supplementary material. This, however, requires that the request for the Preliminary Report be communicated by the Holy See well in advance, making appropriate use of digital means of communication where suitable. In the meantime, all the faithful should be invited to accompany the process through both personal and communal prayer.
- d. In this way, the drafting of the Preliminary Report will not involve only the Bishop (and his closest collaborators), and the People of God living within each local Church will come to perceive the *ad limina* visit as an event that directly concerns them. Such a manner of proceeding, as an expression of a culture of synodality, will greatly enhance the credibility of the Preliminary Report, since it will be the fruit of a discernment carried out by many participants, endowed with different sensibilities, competent in various areas of pastoral activity, and capable of substantiating the truthfulness of its affirmations.
- e. The results of the diocesan processes should subsequently be presented by each Bishop to the assembly of Bishops of the Ecclesiastical Province or, where circumstances suggest, of the Episcopal Conference. The Bishops, “*under the guidance of the Metropolitan (or the President of the Episcopal Conference), collegially assess the state of their Dioceses, with the aim of strengthening pastoral collaboration and shared planning*” (*The Procedures for the Selection of Candidates for the Episcopate*, no. 4e), so that they may prepare together for the *ad limina* visit and offer to the Pope and his Collaborators an overview of the strengths and needs of their territory that is, as far as possible, the fruit of a common discernment. These results should be transmitted to the coordinating body, with a copy sent to the Apostolic Nunciature, which will in turn submit its own report.
- f. Consideration may be given to the advisability of preceding the *ad limina* visit with online preparatory meetings involving certain officials of the Roman Curia, in order to lighten the program of the stay in the City of Rome and to facilitate the concentration of the meetings held there on those matters considered to be of greatest importance.

- g. Throughout this phase, the coordinating body should remain constantly available to the local Churches, the Episcopal Conferences, and the Eastern Hierarchical Structures.

5. The Stay in the City of Rome

- a. In the past, the *ad limina* visit took place every five years. For several decades now, above all because of the Pope's increased commitments and the growth in the number of local Churches throughout the world, such a frequency no longer proves to be sustainable. In this regard, the Study Group hopes that the *ad limina* visit may take place at least every eight years and encourages that its reduced frequency be compensated by the ordinary relationship of accompaniment between the local Churches and the Holy See described above.
- b. Priority should be given to the spiritual dimension of the visit. The pilgrimage and the celebration of the Eucharist in the Basilicas of Saint Peter and Saint Paul should constitute the heart of the stay in the City of Rome. In particular, it is recommended that a Eucharistic Celebration presided over by the Pope be scheduled as the sacramental expression of ecclesial communion. It is likewise desirable to provide for other moments of common prayer, for example, a penitential liturgy or a celebration with the national communities residing in Rome.
- c. The coordinating body should draw up, well in advance, the schedule of meetings with the Pope and the various Curial Institutions, agreeing with them beforehand on the agenda for each meeting. Taking into account the Preliminary Report and the requests of the Bishops, it may decide to allocate more time to visits with certain Institutions, to omit visits to others, or to combine visits to different Institutions into a single session. This is intended to avoid unnecessarily overcrowding the program and scheduling appointments that, because of their brevity, risk proving ineffective.
- d. In order that the dialogue with the Bishop of Rome and the heads of the Curial Institutions may be authentic and fruitful, it is advisable that the Bishops be divided into groups of limited size and that the *ad limina* visit take place over a suitably extended period of time. Above all, the meeting with the Pope should provide an opportunity for genuine spiritual exchange, something that can only be achieved in small groups. In any event, it is appropriate to develop different models for the conduct of the *ad limina* visit, sufficiently flexible in their format, setting, and duration according to whether the groups of Bishops are larger or smaller. The dialogue, understood as an "exchange of gifts" and conducted in a collegial style, should be frank, cordial, and reciprocal rather than one-directional. It should be capable of bringing to light both the strengths and the needs of the local Churches, while fostering the sharing of good practices. In order that everything may take place in a spirit of spiritual communion, it may be helpful to adopt a method inspired by Conversation in the Spirit.
- e. It is desirable that a diocesan delegation accompany the Bishop during the *ad limina* visit, according to the arrangements deemed most appropriate, giving preference to those who collaborated in its preparation at the local level. Care should be taken to ensure that the local Church itself designates the delegates to be sent to Rome, and, together with the coordinating body, consideration should be given to the occasions on which they should participate in the meetings alongside their Bishop. In order to ensure that Churches located farther from Rome or possessing fewer financial resources are not disadvantaged in comparison with others,

appropriate funding strategies should be developed to support the stay in the City of Rome of the representatives of the local Churches, as an expression of fraternity among the Churches.

- f. During the *ad limina* visit, the Bishop and those who may accompany him should maintain regular contact with the local Church, which, for its part, should commit itself to supporting the proceedings in the City of Rome through prayer.
- g. It is necessary that the *ad limina* visit become the ordinary occasion for evaluating the commitment of the local Churches to the safeguarding of the most vulnerable, particularly minors and vulnerable adults. To this end, before the visit the Bishops should submit a specific report to be discussed in Rome also with the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors (in accordance with the provisions of the *Statute of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors*, 20 May 2026, art. 2 §4), thereby promoting transparent, public, and effective communication.
- h. Given the significant migration of faithful of the Eastern rites to countries where the Latin rite has traditionally predominated, the *ad limina* visit should foster among Latin Bishops, and, consequently, among the local Churches entrusted to their care, a greater awareness of the patrimony of faith of the Eastern Catholic Churches and encourage them to preserve and promote it through appropriate initiatives of listening and dialogue with the representatives of those Churches.

6. Return to the Local Churches

- a. It will be appropriate to organize, shortly after the conclusion of the stay in the City of Rome, an online meeting between the Bishops and the members of the coordinating body in order to evaluate together the outcome of the *ad limina* visit and, if necessary, to propose adjustments for the future.
- b. Within a reasonable period of time, all Curial Institutions should prepare and transmit a report on the *ad limina* visit to the Episcopal Conferences and the Eastern Hierarchical Structures, supplementing the text, where appropriate, with those matters that could not be addressed in Rome owing to lack of time. A copy should also be sent to the Dicastery responsible for the territory concerned. For their part, the Episcopal Conferences and Eastern Hierarchical Structures should likewise send their own feedback to Rome.
- c. Each diocesan Bishop, together with the other members of the faithful who may have accompanied him to Rome, should report to the local Church on the results of the *ad limina* visit through one or more public meetings. Thereafter, it will be the responsibility of the participatory bodies of the local Church and of the competent diocesan Offices to discern the steps to be taken in order to give effect to the *ad limina* visit.
- d. The Bishops of the Ecclesiastical Province, the Episcopal Conference, or the corresponding Eastern Hierarchical Structure, who prepared together for the *ad limina* visit and celebrated it together, should meet again in due course in order to discern together the pastoral directions that emerge from it for their territory.

- e. In the meantime, where the *ad limina* visit has brought to light matters requiring further dialogue between the local Churches and the Roman bodies, online meetings or even visits to the local Churches by representatives of the Curia may be arranged in order to foster ongoing accompaniment, monitoring, and mutual learning. Particularly valuable in this regard are the visits to the local Churches ordinarily carried out by the Apostolic Nuncio. In any event, provision should be made, between one *ad limina* visit and the next, for a mid-term online meeting between the Bishops and representatives of the Curia, during which a discernment may be made concerning the fruits that the visit is bearing and any difficulties that continue to persist.
- f. At regular intervals, by analogy with what has been proposed regarding the process for the selection of candidates for the episcopate (cf. no. 10c), an independent ecclesiastical commission should be established to evaluate the entire process. Its evaluation should also include the work of the coordinating body and of the competent Curial Institutions, with the aim of ensuring that the *ad limina* visit becomes ever more fully suited to its purpose.