

## 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. 9

## THEOLOGICAL CRITERIA AND SYNODAL METHODOLOGIES FOR SHARED DISCERNMENT OF EMERGING DOCTRINAL, PASTORAL, AND ETHICAL EMERGING ISSUES

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

[Original text: Italian. Working translation]

From the outset of its journey of synodal reflection and learning, Study Group 9 has drawn inspiration from a central biblical image: the events narrated in chapters 10-15 of the *Acts of the Apostles*. These pages demonstrate how anthropological and cultural diversity can be valued without inhibiting or betraying the newness of the Gospel, allowing it instead to flourish through listening to the Holy Spirit and the mutual exchange of gifts.

The Study Group adopted a synodal working methodology, engaging with individuals from diverse ecclesial contexts and areas of expertise. This process of listening and dialogue took the form of two seminars, where participants shared reflections on an initial draft. These insights and the resulting exchange were integral to the subsequent development of the text.

As the work progressed, the Study Group chose to reframe “controversial issues” as “emerging issues”. While the former suggests a theoretical need for a “problem-solving” approach, “emerging issues” points toward the qualities, dispositions, and dialogue necessary for the “relational conversion” that the entire People of God is called to embrace on its synodal journey.

The document is organized into three parts, which are summarized below.

#### **I. A paradigm shift in the Church’s mission and the synodal dynamics that promote it**

The discernment of “emerging issues” offers a precious opportunity to experience an authentic “paradigm shift” (cf. *Veritatis gaudium*, 3) – a process initiated by Vatican II that challenges the models that have been prevalent in ecclesial life over the past centuries. Today, this shift means rediscovering the biblical conception of God’s truth as revealed in history, fostering processes of shared learning within the Christian community.

Implementing this shift requires a hermeneutics that is genuinely human, valuing the historical, experiential, practical, and contextual nature of humanity, which finds its fulfilment in Christ. Each person is a unique singularity, whose wholeness is formed in relationship with others, society, and

culture through a temporal and narrative lens. Furthermore, human beings exist not only in relation to their own bodies and the “you” of the other, but are situated within social and cultural institutions: called to express themselves within a greater “we”.

At the same time, the universal truth of humanity is not determined once and for all but is revealed through the concrete forms of different cultures. It unfolds in an incessant dialogue whereby communities and individuals progress through an exchange of gifts, prompted by the search for truth and justice in the light of the Gospel.

This paradigm shift serves the dynamic encounter with the *kerygma* of salvation. The anthropological relevance of the *kerygma* is expressed as an encounter of grace with the “ever-greater” *agape* of God in Christ. The *Final Document* (FD) promotes this paradigm shift by proposing several key dynamics to be lived out concretely by Christian communities in order to journey forward in a synodal manner, namely: *relational conversion*; *learning together*; and finally, *transparency*.

Relational conversion primarily refers to the processes by which all baptized men and women are able to learn through practices (ecclesial, liturgical, and social). Indeed, through these practices, people are not only able to handle the greater or lesser problems of their daily lives, but contribute to co-shaping the linguistic, symbolic, and cultural scene within which problems can emerge, be named, and be worked on together.

The dynamics of learning together are evangelically grounded when they enable the People of God to read and interpret the words and signs performed by Jesus, to discover their meaning ever more deeply for life today, and to open themselves to the voice of the Holy Spirit.

Finally, an ecclesial culture of transparency is not only attributable to a need that is felt in contemporary society, but must be understood in light of the evangelical and ethical imperative of “speaking and acting in truth”: it is a criterion of the Church’s fidelity to the *kerygma*, as well as to authentic relationships and mutual trust within the community.

## **II. Putting into practice the principle of pastorality in a synodal Church**

Following the path laid out by the Magisterium of the Second Vatican Council, the Study Group identified the “principle of pastorality” as the interpretative key for implementing the paradigm shift currently underway. By “principle of pastorality,” we mean that the proclamation of the Gospel needs to take responsibility for the interlocutor, in whom that proclamation is already at work through the Spirit (cf. GS 22), given that he or she can recognise it and adhere to it in freedom.

The subject acting out the principle of pastorality is the People of God as a whole, in the multiplicity of ministries, charisms, and roles, as well as in the diverse forms of participation that allow for living out the dynamics of relational conversion, learning together, and transparency proposed by the FD.

Since we are not primarily dealing with “problem solving,” but with building up the common good, the starting point does not consist in the correction (at a doctrinal, pastoral, or ethical level) of any particular situations considered problematic in concrete faith experience. Instead, it starts with recognising and discerning the signs of goodness that faith practices express, often through a form of wisdom that is widespread and informal. Along these lines, the specific role of authority is first and foremost to listen, to activate processes of discernment, and to accompany them in order to find

consensus – even a differentiated one – when this contributes towards the common good (cf. *Acts* 15).

In coherence with the principle of pastorality, the practice of conversation in the Spirit, as experienced during the synodal journey, takes on – in forms that are appropriately adapted to the concrete circumstances and the themes to be addressed – an indispensable value for developing an “ecclesial culture of synodality” with ever-greater conviction. For this reason, the report proposes certain ways of proceeding, which are meant to serve the discernment of emerging issues and the active participation of the concrete, personal, and communal subjects who are directly involved: listening to one another, paying attention to reality, and bringing together different fields of expertise.

### **III. Towards a synodal exercise of discernment in local Churches: Two issues emerging today**

In the third part of the document, two exercises of synodal discernment are proposed regarding two emerging issues: the *experience of people of faith with same-sex attractions* (Annexes A, 1 and 2); and the *experience of active non-violence by individuals and associations in situations of war* (Annex B).

In this perspective, two testimonies are presented based on concrete situations, in a process of re-reading and discernment. This allowed for recognising the various stages that people experience, offering some reflections and further questions as a contribution to the implementation of synodal discernment practices in different ecclesial contexts.

In the proposal for synodal discernment regarding the aforementioned issues, the disposition to listen to the testimonies shared by the people with first-hand experience takes on particular importance. Similarly, there was no intention to conclude the process of listening and reflection with a final pronouncement, but rather with some pathways for ethical and theological discernment as well as some questions for the continuation of the synodal journey. The intent is to provide help so that individual communities and the whole Church may personally take on the commitment to recognize and promote the good by which God acts in history and in people’s experience of life.