



SECRETARIA GENERALIS
SYNODI

Vatican, 26 January 2023

Prot. No. 230028

Dear Brothers,

As you know, at the conclusion of the consultation stage "in the particular Churches", the Synod 2021-2024 process foresees the celebration of Continental Assemblies. It is in view of this Continental stage that we address all of you, who, in your particular Churches, are the principle and foundation of unity of the holy People of God (cf. LG 23). We do so in the name of our common responsibility for the ongoing synodal process as Bishops of the Church of Christ: there is no exercise of ecclesial synodality without exercise of episcopal collegiality.

The apostolic constitution *Episcopalis communio* reminds us that "each Bishop possesses simultaneously and inseparably responsibility for the particular Church assigned to his pastoral care and solicitude for the universal Church" (EC, n. 2). To enable the exercise of the latter has been the *raison d'être* of the Synod of Bishops since its inception. With great foresight, in his own founding document, *Apostolica Sollicitudo*, St Paul VI states that the Synod "like all human institutions, can be improved upon with the passing of time". This is what we are experiencing now: *Episcopalis communio*, far from weakening an episcopal institution, in highlighting the process-oriented nature of the Synod, makes the role of Pastors and their participation in the various stages even more crucial. Thank you therefore for all that each of you has already contributed to the service of Synod 2021-2024, by allowing the consultation of the People of God in the particular Churches and discernment carried out within the Synods/Councils of the Churches *sui iuris* and the Bishops' Conferences.

On the eve of the Continental Assemblies, we feel the urgency to share a few considerations for a common understanding of the synodal process, its progress and the meaning of the current Continental stage. There are in fact some who presume to already know what the conclusions of the Synodal Assembly will be. Others would like to impose an agenda on the Synod, with the intention of steering the discussion and determining its outcome. However, the theme that the Pope has assigned to the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops is clear: "For a Synodal Church: communion, participation, mission". This is therefore the sole theme that we are called to explore in each of the stages within the process. The expectations for Synod 2021-2024 are many and varied, but it is not the task of the Assembly to address all the issues being debated in the Church.

TO DIOCESAN BISHOPS
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Those who claim to impose any one theme on the Synod forget the logic that governs the synodal process: we are called to chart a "common course" beginning with the contribution of all. It is perhaps superfluous to recall that the apostolic constitution *Episcopalis communio* transformed the Synod from an event into a process, articulated in stages. This means that it is since its solemn opening, on 10 October 2021 in St. Peter's, the Synod has been addressing and developing the given theme, first in the stage of consultation of the People of God, then in the discernment of the Pastors in the Synods/Councils of the Churches *sui iuris*, in the Bishops' Conferences, and now in the Continental Assemblies. It is precisely because of the intrinsic relationship between the different phases that other themes cannot be surreptitiously introduced, thereby exploiting the Assembly and disregarding the consultation of the People of God.

It is understandable that, in the first phase of listening, the scope or margins of the theme were not clearly defined, given the novelty of the method and the difficulty in understanding and recognising that the entire "holy People of God share also in Christ's prophetic office" (LG, n. 12). However, this lack of clarity has diminished in the subsequent steps, as evidenced by the tenor of the syntheses sent by the Synods/Councils of the Churches *sui iuris* and the Episcopal Conferences to the Secretariat of the Synod. It is important to remember that these syntheses are the result of the discernment of the Pastors regarding the contributions made during the consultation of the People of God. From these syntheses, the *Working Document for the Continental Stage* (DCS), in which the voice of the particular Churches clearly resounds, was drafted.

The decision to restore the DCS to the particular Churches, asking that each one listen to the voice of the others (a listening which resounds throughout the DCS, thus rereading the stages of the synodal process at a level of greater awareness), truly manifests that the only rule we have given ourselves is to constantly listen to the Spirit: "A synodal Church is a Church which listens [...] The faithful people, the college of bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit" (Francis, *Address for the Commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops*, 2015).

The themes that the DCS proposes do not constitute the agenda of the next Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, but faithfully return what emerges from the syntheses sent by the Synods/Councils of the Churches *sui iuris* and by the Bishops' Conferences, providing a glimpse of the face of a Church that is learning to listen to the Spirit through listening to one another. It will be the task of the Continental Assemblies, based on the resonances elicited in each particular Church through its reading of the DCS, to identify "the priorities, recurring themes and calls to action that can be shared with other local Churches around the world and discussed during the First Session of the Synodal Assembly in October 2023" (DCS, n. 106).

This is why we trust that in the Continental Assemblies the voice of the particular Churches will resound again with even greater strength, through the synthesis carried out by the Synods/Councils of the Churches *sui iuris* and by the National Episcopal Conferences. The more we grow in a synodal style of Church, the more all of us as members of the People of God — faithful and Pastors — will learn to feel *cum Ecclesia*, in fidelity to the Word of God and Tradition. Besides, how could we address pointed questions, often divisive, without first answering the great question that has been challenging the Church since the Second Vatican Council: "Church, what do you say of yourself?". The Council's long journey of reception leads us to affirm that the answer is in the Church that is "constitutively synodal", where all are called to exercise their ecclesial charism in view of carrying out the common mission of evangelisation.

The current synodal process is showing us how this is possible. By virtue of its participation in the prophetic function of Christ, the holy People of God is the subject of the synodal process through the consultation that each Bishop carries out in his Church: in this way, in fact, one can truly listen to the “entire body of the faithful, who anointed as they are by the Holy One, (1 Jn 2.20, 27) cannot err in matters of belief” (LG 12). The college of Bishops, which “is also the subject of supreme and full power over the universal Church, provided we understand this body together with its head the Roman Pontiff and never without this head” (LG 22), participates in the synodal process in the following two moments: 1) when each Bishop initiates, guides and concludes the consultation of the People of God entrusted to him; and 2) in the successive stages, when the Bishops together exercise their charism of discernment in the Synods/Councils of the Churches *sui iuris*, in the Episcopal Conferences, in the continental Assemblies and, in particular, in the Synod Assembly. Analogously, and with regard to an Ecumenical Council, it is the prerogative of the Bishop of Rome who is “the perpetual and visible principle and foundation of unity of both the bishops and of the faithful” (LG 23) to convoke, preside over and confirm the Synodal Assemblies.

Already in this first phase of the synodal process we have been able to see how each member has played their own part, respecting the role and contribution of others. We must continue along this path, not mistaking synodality for a mere method, but taking it on as a form of the Church and a style for fulfilling the common mission of evangelisation. The Pastors' ministry thus becomes even more decisive for the journey of the Holy People of God. We are convinced that, along this path, the Spirit, who guides the Church's journey, will allow us to experience how “the Synod of Bishops, representing the Catholic episcopate, becomes an expression of episcopal collegiality within an entirely synodal Church” (Francis, *Address for the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops*, 2015).

The continental stage can help us understand this vision if, as a College of Bishops, we are united in seeking ways which help the Church to be “the "sacrament of unity", namely, the holy people united and ordered under their bishops” (SC 26). Moreover, participation in the synodal process will enable us to reinforce that collegial union which is “apparent also in the mutual relations of the individual bishops with particular churches and with the universal Church” (LG 23). If it is true that all bishops “by governing well their own church as a portion of the universal Church, they themselves are effectively contributing to the welfare of the whole Mystical Body, which is also the body of the churches” (LG 23), it is also true that we are called, all together *cum et sub Petro*, to represent “the entire Church in the bond of peace, love and unity” (LG 23). What better way than by "walking together", in the certainty that “It is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium” (Francis, *Address for the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops*, 2015)?

In Christo

+ Mario Grech

Cardinal Secretary General of the Synod

+ Jean Claude Hollerich

Cardinal Archbishop of Luxembourg

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