

A synodal Church: a prophetic voice in a fragmented world

Paolo Foglizzo

Editor, *Aggiornamenti Sociali*, Milan, foglizzo.p@aggiornamentisociali.it

I would like to begin our journey with the most important moment that the Church experienced in 2025: the election of Pope Leo. The words he spoke when he appeared on the balcony for the first time are particularly significant because they place the vision of a synodal Church at the roots of his new pontificate. With great clarity, Pope Leo said: “We want to be a synodal Church” and immediately afterwards explained what he means by a synodal Church: “a Church that moves forward, a Church that always seeks peace, that always seeks charity, that always seeks to be close above all to those who are suffering”. To these words we can add those he had spoken shortly before, addressing the diocese of Rome: “Together, we must look for ways to be a missionary Church, a Church that builds bridges and encourages dialogue, a Church ever open to welcoming, like this Square with its open arms, all those who are in need of our charity, our presence, our readiness to dialogue and our love.”

The notion of synodality

Despite the brevity and emotion of the occasion, these words clearly connect to the process of progressively defining the notion of synodality throughout the synodal journey. This is how the Final Document expresses the awareness that matured along the way:

During the synodal journey, we have witnessed a fruitful convergence regarding the meaning of synodality that forms the basis of this Document. Synodality is the walking together of Christians with Christ and towards God's Kingdom, in union with all humanity. Oriented towards mission, synodality involves gathering at all levels of the Church for mutual listening, dialogue, and community discernment. It also involves reaching consensus as an expression of Christ rendering Himself present, He who is alive in the Spirit. Furthermore, it consists in reaching decisions according to differentiated co-responsibilities. [...] In simple and concise terms, synodality is a path of spiritual renewal and structural reform that enables the Church to be more participatory and missionary so that it can walk with every man and woman, radiating the light of Christ [FD 28].

It is not possible to examine in detail all the richness of this text. Here I will simply emphasise how clearly it affirms that a synodal Church is mission-oriented, outward-looking and not inward-looking. Therefore, it is a great mistake to reduce synodality to an issue of internal organisation within the Church, to the way its structures function (e.g. pastoral councils)

or to decision-making processes. In a synodal Church, relationships are fundamental because they are a crucial factor in making the proclamation of the Gospel credible: “The Church as ‘a people made one by the unity of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit’ (LG 4), can witness to the power of relationships founded in the Trinity, especially where individualism pervades cultures and societies” (FD 34). For this reason, the Final Document strongly calls for a relational conversion:

What emerged throughout the entire synodal journey, and in every place and context, was the call for a Church with a greater capacity to nurture relationships: with the Lord, between men and women, in the family, in the local community, among social groups and religions, with all of creation. [...] The evangelical quality of relationships in a community is decisive for the witness that the People of God are called to make in history. “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (Jn 13:35). [...] we must once again learn from the Gospel that attending to relationships is not merely a strategy or a tool for greater organisational effectiveness. [...] When our relationships, even in their fragility, allow the grace of Christ, the love of the Father, and the communion of the Spirit to shine through, we confess with our lives our faith in God the Trinity. [FD 50]

Striving to become more synodal is a task for the Church today, but it is also deeply meaningful for our world. The synodal Assembly was very well aware of this, as we can read in the Final Document.

Practised with humility, the synodal style enables the Church to be a prophetic voice in today’s world. ‘A synodal Church is like a standard lifted up among the nations (cf. *Is* 11:12)’ (Francis, *Address for the Commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops*, 17 October 2015). We live in an age marked by ever-increasing inequalities; growing disillusionment with traditional models of governance, disenchantment with the functioning of democracy, increasing autocratic and dictatorial tendencies and the predominance of the market model without regard for the vulnerability of people and of creation. The temptation can be to resolve conflicts by force rather than by dialogue. Authentic practices of synodality enable Christians to be a critical and prophetic voice over against the prevailing culture. In this way, we can offer a distinctive contribution to the search for answers to many challenges faced by our contemporary societies in building the common good. [FD 47]

I will now try to quickly outline three possible axes of this distinctive contribution: managing diversity, exercising authority and practising participation.

Managing diversity

In my opinion, one of the most impressive fruits of the synodal journey is the definitive awareness of diversity and pluralism within the Church. During the Assembly, it was an almost physical experience, but you could sense it also when reading the contributions that arrived from all over the world. But it was also an opportunity to experience unity in this diversity, or

if you prefer, diversity within unity. The Final Document states this very clearly:

The whole Church has always been comprised of a plurality of peoples and languages, of vocations, charisms and ministries at the service of the common good, as well as of local Churches. In turn, these local Churches have always possessed their own rites and disciplines as well as their own distinctive theological and spiritual heritage. The unity of this diversity is realised by Christ, the cornerstone, and the Holy Spirit, the source of all harmony. This unity in diversity is precisely what is meant by the catholicity of the Church. The richness of the plurality of the Churches *sui iuris* highlighted by the synodal process is a sign of this very catholicity. The Assembly asks that we continue along the path of encounter, mutual understanding and exchange of gifts that nourish the communion of a Church of Churches. [FD 38]

Variety, differences and diversity are not an obstacle to unity, but an opportunity to experience the exchange of gifts, that is, relationships of gratuitousness and mutual enrichment, which cannot exist between “clones”.

In this way, different cultures are enabled to grasp the unity that underlies their plurality and become open to the prospect of an exchange of gifts. “The unity of the Church is not uniformity, but an organic blending of legitimate diversities” (NMI 46). There is a variety of ways in which the message of salvation is expressed. This helps avoid reducing this message to a single understanding of the life of the Church and of the theological, liturgical, pastoral and disciplinary forms it takes. [FD 39].

This experience is exactly what is lacking in today’s world, where diversity continues to grow but produces fragmentation, division and polarisation. And so, we all end up closed in bubbles and algorithms that select and offer us only the opinions of those who think alike. Politics seems unable to function without fuelling radical opposition between “we” and “they”. “We” is the homogeneous group of those to whom we feel bonded. “They” is the group of those who bear some difference, with whom we feel no bond. And today we are also offered theological justifications for this attitude, as is the case with U.S. Vice President J.D. Vance’s interpretation of the *ordo amoris*. Implicit in this mindset is the conviction that peace and a just society can only be achieved by getting rid of them so that it is just us. Whether it is migrants crossing the Mediterranean, those crossing the Rio Grande or children in Gaza.

But as Anna Abram made clear yesterday, Christian solidarity is towards everyone, indeed “tutti, tutti, tutti” as Pope Francis would say, and knows no boundaries. Yesterday again, Pope Leo XIV, too, took a clear stance on this kind of political visions:

Great spiritual traditions and the maturation of critical thinking enable us to go beyond blood or ethnic ties, beyond those kinships that

recognise only those who are similar and reject those who are different.

[Leo XIV, *Address to the Participants in the 3rd World Meeting on Human Fraternity*, 12 September 2025].

Besides refoulement, repatriation or expulsion, there is another subtler way of dismissing or denying diversity, which is cultural imperialism (possibly the speciality of us Westerners).

I am certainly not proposing an authoritarian and abstract universalism, devised or planned by a small group and presented as an ideal for the sake of levelling, dominating and plundering. One model of globalisation in fact 'consciously aims at a one-dimensional uniformity and seeks to eliminate all differences and traditions in a superficial quest for unity... If a certain kind of globalisation claims to make everyone uniform, to level everyone out, that globalisation destroys the rich gifts and uniqueness of each person and each people'. This false universalism ends up depriving the world of its various colours, its beauty and, ultimately, its humanity. [FT 100]

What Catholic Social Teaching proposes in terms of diversity management within society is completely different:

Here our model is not the sphere, which is no greater than its parts, where every point is equidistant from the centre, and there are no differences between them. Instead, it is the polyhedron, which reflects the convergence of all its parts, each of which preserves its distinctiveness. [...] It is the convergence of peoples who, within the universal order, maintain their own individuality; it is the sum total of persons within a society which pursues the common good, which truly has a place for everyone. [EG 236]

The more the Church succeeds in becoming synodal, the more it will be able to bear credible witness to this vision.

Exercising authority

If "unity in diversity is precisely what is meant by the catholicity of the Church", then the main task of those who exercise authority in the Church is to preserve and foster this unity. With a more inspirational expression, the Final Document defines this task as the "Service of Harmony". This applies first and foremost to the bishop, who is the paradigm of the exercise of authority in the Church:

He who is ordained Bishop is not charged with prerogatives and tasks that he must perform alone. Rather, he receives the grace and the task of recognising, discerning and bringing together in unity the gifts that the Spirit pours out on individuals and communities, working with Priests and Deacons [...]. In doing this, the Bishop realises what is most proper and specific to his mission in the context of his solicitude for the communion of Churches. [FD 70]

Decision making is among the tasks that the Bishop is not required to perform alone:

As in any community that lives according to justice, the exercise of authority in the Church does not consist in an arbitrary imposition of will. Rather, authority should always be exercised in service of communion and the reception of Christ, who is the truth towards whom the Holy Spirit guides us in different moments and contexts (cf. *Jn* 14:16). [FD 91]

Therefore, “The way to promote a synodal Church is to foster as great a participation of all the People of God as possible in decision-making processes” (FD 87). The reason is that the task is not to make decisions, but to make good decisions, and the first characteristic of a good decision is that it does not tear the fabric of the community apart.

For this reason, the Final Document emphasises the value of consultation, which cannot be reduced to a mere formality:

In a synodal Church, the authority of the Bishop, of the Episcopal College and of the Bishop of Rome in regard to decision-making is inviolable as it is grounded in the hierarchical structure of the Church established by Christ; it both serves unity and legitimate diversity (cf. LG 13). Such an exercise of authority, however, is not without limits: it may not ignore a direction which emerges through proper discernment within a consultative process, especially if this is done by participatory bodies. It is not appropriate to set the consultative and deliberative elements involved in reaching a decision in opposition to each other: in the Church, the deliberative element is undertaken with the help of all and never without those whose pastoral governance allows them to take a decision by virtue of their office. [FD 91]

This notion of an authority with decision-making power that is not unconditional stands in stark contrast to an increasingly widespread view of the exercise of political power that emphasises in an individualistic way the almost demiurgic role of the decision-maker, but places on his shoulders expectations and responsibilities that are often disproportionate. We can also see this in the speed with which political leaders become worn out. This is one of the contradictions produced by the drift towards the personalisation of leadership at the expense of the role of institutions, which marks the crisis of Western democracies. In this context, consultative bodies and processes seem to have very little to do with a decision-making process that ends up being reduced to an arbitrary act of the decision-maker.

The Synod urges us to adopt a different interpretation of decision-making processes, one that emphasises the many contributions that decision-makers need in order to make truly good and prudent decisions, highlighting that, in various ways, many actors are involved with some agency. In this sense, it proposes a recovery of the original meaning and therefore of the original task of authority, which is not control, but the ability to foster growth, primarily by assuming the role of guaranteeing the participatory quality of processes. Those who hold positions of authority are not masters of processes and communities, but are at their service, so that they can achieve their goal. Within this vision of authority, leaders do

not place themselves “at the top” or “at the centre”: in this way, they cease to be a source of division and become guarantors of a unity that never becomes uniformity.

Practising participation

Catholic social teaching is as much a set of ideas, reflections and documents as it is a set of practices. From this point of view, too, it resonates with the synodal journey. In fact, the Synod can be summarised as a reflection on participation – one of the key words in the title – carried out through the promotion of experiences of participation. The method of “Conversation in the Spirit,” which was most widely used in the listening phase and then also in the two Synodal Assemblies, played a crucial role in this process. It is worth dwelling on this method also in view of its prophetic value.

Conversation in the Spirit is a tool that, even with its limitations, enables listening in order to discern “what the Spirit is saying to the Churches” (*Rev 2:7*). Its practice has elicited joy, awe and gratitude and has been experienced as a path of renewal that transforms individuals, groups, and the Church. [FD 45]

Conversation in the Spirit offers participants a space in which to speak on the basis of personal reflection and prayer. Each person’s speech is listened to by the others, while the method prevents the transition to arguing, confrontation and controversy. In many contexts, especially with people living in poverty or marginalization, the opportunity to speak was a new experience that touched people deeply, arousing enthusiasm and energy.

People of God remarked on the uniqueness of speaking freely and being heard in organized conversations that were open-ended and attentive with guidance of the Holy Spirit. They spoke of how, after decades of church going, they had been asked to speak for the first time.

[Working document for the Continental Stage 23]

The deepest meaning and value of participation, in fact, is not being involved in the exercise of some power, but is the recognition of a common dignity, providing the foundation of the equality of all. To be credible, the principle of common dignity and equality need to be experienced, not just affirmed.

After mutual listening, the method proposes a space of dynamic dialogue to trace points of convergence, but also divergences and the most promising insights, even if they are expressed by a minority. The goal is practical: to identify a direction in which to proceed together. In other words, the method aims at building a consensus that is not defined as the convergence of the minimum indispensable majority (half of the participants plus one), which “wins”. The price for that victory is that the

minority “loses” and will therefore inevitably resist, waiting to overturn the situation. In the method of Conversation in the Spirit, consensus is about finding a balance point that allows all participants to feel represented by the common conclusion. In most cases, it means that no one will be in full agreement with that conclusion, but everyone will be able to agree that the conclusion is representative of the process carried out, with the points of agreement and disagreement that have actually emerged. Conflicts will not be hidden under a veneer of unanimity, but neither will they explode, and it will be possible to continue walking together towards new arrangements, in mutual recognition.

The application of this method does not aim to supplant the majority rule, but highlights that it cannot be the sole reference point. For example, in highly polarised societies such as ours, the majority rule can be divisive and needs to be complemented by other dynamics that strengthen social bonds. Otherwise, it will push minorities to give up participation. Many of the cohesion problems afflicting our societies stem precisely from the withdrawal of those minority groups that feel excluded a priori, or rather that perceive no common ground that makes participation meaningful.

In the synodal process, there is another crucial methodological element: at every level, those who receive the fruits of conversation in the Spirit are required to give feedback to those who took part in the process. In other words, they must verify the quality of their listening and the validity of their synthesis, with a willingness to correct it. This is a concrete way of addressing the fundamental need for transparency implicit in any authentically participatory process: without it, an exercise in listening risks becoming an opportunity for manipulation, eroding trust and effectively denying the dignity of those involved. As numerous political and social processes show, the frustration of those who had invested in participation and felt manipulated is a powerful source of scepticism and disengagement.

As a conclusion, no one is so naive as to think that a few rounds of conversation in good spirit are enough to resolve any conflict. But the synodal process shows that genuine participation is possible.

Walking the talk

In this same vein, there is one last element of the synodal journey that deserves to be highlighted. The Final Document was published in the name of two authors: Pope Francis and the Synodal Assembly. This is an exceptional feature, at least to date. It is the result of an explicit decision by Pope Francis, who took ownership of the Final Document by signing it and declaring it part of the ordinary magisterium of the Successor of Peter.

[T]he *Final Document* [...] was voted on and approved by the Assembly in all its parts on 26 October. I, too, approved it and, signing it, ordered its publication, joining the “we” of the Assembly, which, through the *Final Document*, addresses the holy faithful People of God.

Acknowledging the value of the synodal journey undertaken, I now hand over to the whole Church all that is contained in the *Final Document*, restoring to the Church what has matured over these years through listening and discernment and as an authoritative orientation for the Church's life and mission.

The *Final Document* is part of the ordinary Magisterium of the Successor of Peter (cf. EC 18 § 1; CCC 892), and as such, I ask that it be welcomed and received. It represents a form of exercise of the authentic teaching of the Bishop of Rome that has some novel features but which, in fact, corresponds to what I had the opportunity to point out on 17 October 2015, when I affirmed that synodality is the appropriate interpretative framework for understanding hierarchical ministry.

[Pope Francis, *Accompanying note to the Final Document*, 24 November 2024]

In summary, Pope Francis chooses to close the synodal journey by putting into practice that form of exercise of authority that the Final Document itself sketched. He interprets his role as supreme authority first and foremost as a guarantor of the synodal quality of the process. The Synod is a consultative body supporting the exercise of the Petrine ministry. Pope Francis initiated the consultation and now that he has received the fruit of it, he recognises its value and makes it his own without changing a single comma. And then, in fidelity to the synodal method, he returns this fruit to the Church by opening a new process, implementation.

This seems to me a good example of what the expression “walking the talk” means.