

# The Synod on Young People, a Laboratory of Synodality

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## Abstract

The Fifteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, held in October 2018 with the theme “Young People, Faith, and Vocational Discernment,” was truly a profound experience of “walking together” under the guidance of the Spirit. Through a process including two years of preparation with local consultations and a Pre-Synod with three hundred youth from all over the world, the church has been deeply listening to the young adults between the ages of sixteen and twenty-nine. Thus the church has understood clearly how synodality is truly a key to the proclamation and transmission of the faith today.

## Keywords

youth, synodality, church, discernment, mission, Pope Francis, Synod of Bishops

On October 28, 2018, the Fifteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, with the theme “Young People, Faith, and Vocational Discernment” (which Pope Francis informally called the “Synod on Young People”),<sup>1</sup> ended in Rome. Participants were aware that they had experienced an important historical milestone on the church’s path to synodality.<sup>2</sup> The processions of entry and of exit (held at St. Peter’s Basilica and presided over by Pope Francis) symbolically integrated for the first time all the listeners and experts—lay and religious, men and women, young and old, alongside the synod fathers, bishops, and priests—which gave a very concrete view of what had been truly lived throughout this synod of a synodal church. A church on the move, the church of the people of God, where everyone has a voice and takes an active part whatever one’s age, sex, or state of life. That is to say, a church of coresponsibility

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that discerns together in partnership, collaboration, fraternity, and mutual listening the voice of the Holy Spirit calling it to respond to the missionary challenges of the present time.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, we emerged from this month of the Roman assembly with an unspeakable joy and with the strengthened conviction that synodality, “the constitutive element of the Church,”<sup>4</sup> is truly a key to the proclamation and transmission of the faith today. This incredible experience of the universal church in the form of a “new Pentecost,” lived in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, has given us a clear understanding of the call to live and deploy synodality as the church’s “missionary style” to meet the challenges of our contemporary world. For this reason the drafters<sup>5</sup> of the Final Document of the Synod<sup>6</sup> were led to devote an entire chapter to this theme of “missionary synodality,” translating into words the journey we have made.

The fruit of this Synod, the choice that the Spirit has inspired in us through listening and discernment, is to walk with the young, going out towards everyone, so as to bear witness to the love of God. We could describe this process by speaking of synodality for mission, or missionary synodality: “Making a synodal Church a reality is an indispensable precondition for a new missionary energy that will involve the entire People of God.”<sup>7</sup> We are dealing here with a prophecy of the Second Vatican Council, which we have yet to absorb in all its profundity and to develop in its daily implications, as Pope Francis reminds us when he says: “It is precisely this path of *synodality* which God expects of the Church of the third millennium” [SB50]. We are convinced that this choice, a fruit of prayer and debate, will allow the Church, by God’s grace, to be and to appear more clearly as the “youth of the world.”<sup>8</sup>

If this conclusion has not necessarily always been perceived by external observers, there is no doubt that for the participants this synod constituted a major step in the development of synodal activity that Pope Francis wanted. They thus left Rome for their particular churches with the feeling that, in a way, the synod was only just beginning.<sup>9</sup> So they went back home, bringing the challenge of working for the local implementation of this missionary synodality at all levels as a condition and process for a new missionary impulse.

## **From text to synodal practice, the innovative preparation of the 2018 synod**

This synod of October 2018, which was part of the continuation of two previous synods on the family, can be understood only in the light of its two years of preparation, marked by several innovations, illustrating in a very concrete way the vision presented by Pope Francis in his key text on synodality (SB50). Indeed, this document was used as a compass to guide the synodal preparation. Moreover, it largely underlies the idea for the Synods of Bishops expressed in the new apostolic constitution *Episcopalis communio*, promulgated on September 15, 2018. In a way, it capitalizes on the changes initiated since the last two synods on the family and can be considered as a form of “refoundation” of the Synod of Bishops, inviting us to consider it more as a process

than an isolated event,<sup>10</sup> therefore emphasizing the importance of the preparation and reception phases.

In his announcement of this synod on October 6, 2016, Pope Francis explained his choice to focus on people between the ages of sixteen and twenty-nine as an “expression of the Church’s pastoral concern for the young.”<sup>11</sup> Simultaneously expressing the major challenge of their involvement and active participation in this process so that they could be true protagonists, Pope Francis likely had the intuition that this synod could constitute a motor of synodality, which would enable him to advance the missionary reform of the church that he has called for since the beginning as described in *Evangelii gaudium*. Especially, having called on the young people to make “a mess in the dioceses” and asking them to be protagonists of this synod, he opened the door of the church to the surprises that they would certainly bring. And that’s what we’ve seen! The young people indeed did not hesitate to push the church throughout the synodal meetings they attended. For instance, at the end of the synod itself they organized a thanksgiving party in their own way in the Paul VI Hall, leading cardinals and bishops in their dancing under the astonished and benevolent eye of Pope Francis! And by so doing they contributed to giving the church a more synodal face, opening it to the grace of “a new Pentecost.”<sup>12</sup>

From what I observed both in France<sup>13</sup> and in Rome during the international preparatory meetings,<sup>14</sup> and even more so during the October synod, this “journey together” with and for young people constituted for the church an exemplary synodal experience, a true laboratory of practical synodality. In this article, by reviewing the experience of the 2018 synod, I would like to highlight some essential aspects of this synodal church of which Pope Francis dreams, as do most young Catholics<sup>15</sup> and many faithful all over the world. In this way I will try to show how communal discernment must actually become the way of life of the baptized, who are called to be missionary disciples in order to bring about the day-to-day implementation of this outgoing church, which is a church “permanently in a state of mission.” as expressed in *Evangelii gaudium* §25.

### **“A synodal Church is a Church which listens”<sup>16</sup>**

At the heart of synodality, Pope Francis places listening, the mutual listening through which listening to the Holy Spirit is done: “A synodal Church is a Church which listens, which realizes that listening ‘is more than simply hearing’ [*Evangelii gaudium* §171]. It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn. The faithful people, the college of bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the ‘Spirit of Truth’ (*Jn* 14:17), in order to know what he ‘says to the Churches’ (*Rev* 2:7). The Synod of Bishops is the point of convergence of this listening process conducted at every level of the Church’s life.”<sup>17</sup> This central statement of SB50 really took shape in the process of the 2018 synod, whose preparatory phase was fundamentally aimed at listening to young people in many ways. The consultation phase of the “People of God” was pursued on an unprecedented scale, with some differences because of the various countries and dioceses, thanks to the

innovations introduced (in particular, the creation of a multilingual online questionnaire allowing direct consultation with young people throughout the world), and above all, the convening of the Pre-Synod in Rome on March 19–24, 2018.

This gathering brought together three hundred young people from all countries. In many direct or indirect ways—through meetings, questionnaires, conventions, consultations, and other means—young people were listened to and heard. They also recognized themselves well in the *Instrumentum Laboris*,<sup>18</sup> which quoted extensively from the final document of the Pre-Synod written by their representatives.<sup>19</sup> But even more so, during the synod I was particularly struck and touched to hear the voice of young people in the bishops' voices when they spoke. Many of the bishops who were in charge of the Youth Commission of their Episcopal Conference and/or who took the time to meet them beforehand to prepare the synod testified to what they had heard from the young people. Thus this synod has truly been “a privileged instrument for *listening* to the People of God”<sup>20</sup> because it allowed a real listening to the young people, who largely “made their cry heard,” as the pope had asked them to do.<sup>21</sup> This was particularly noticeable in France,<sup>22</sup> where there is a strong synodal ground because of the large number of diocesan synods,<sup>23</sup> as well as a number of past and present synodal processes. But it was also present in many other countries that launched multiple initiatives to involve young people in the preparation of this synod and even in the Synodal Aula, where the thirty-five young participants there as observers did not fail to express themselves and were listened to with great attention. It can even be said that those young adults played a major role in this synod. These young men and women observers also took a very active part in the various groups, not hesitating to react, give their opinion, and propose amendments.

Moreover, during the synod itself, which was first and foremost an extended listening exercise, the awareness that listening is a true theological act was deepened as we realized that it is the very way God is acting with us.<sup>24</sup> This “church of listening” experienced at the 2018 synod is indeed the most fundamental feature of synodality. It is part of the very attitude of the risen Christ on the road to Emmaus, heard and recognized as a call to develop more than ever the posture of accompaniment among our contemporaries, especially the youngest and poorest, whose first need is often simply to be heard.<sup>25</sup>

## **A synodal church is a missionary communal church at the service of all**

Synodality is, in a way, a property of the church deriving from its nature as a communion, in that it is rooted in the Trinitarian mystery and allows for the establishment of greater effective communion. It is an appropriate form of the exercise of collegiality, which passes through a process of community discernment, whose aim is intrinsically missionary and communion-based. Synodality, because it is fundamentally missionary, is to be developed not primarily for reasons of internal organization but to respond to the call of “the world in which we live, and which we are called to love and serve, even with its contradictions, [which] demands that the Church strengthen

cooperation in all areas of her mission.”<sup>26</sup> A synodal church is therefore intrinsically in history and for the world.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, the objective of the Synod on Young People from the outset was to serve all young people<sup>27</sup> in order to better “take care” of them.<sup>28</sup> The purpose of this synod was to help the church to discern how to better reach and accompany youth between sixteen and twenty-nine so that they could commit themselves to the service of others. And this vision was combined with the conviction that young people, in today’s rapidly changing world, are key actors in the transformation of the world. If they are well mentored, they will be able to find solutions to the current impasses and crises. Indeed, the October synod allowed the active involvement of all, including the auditors. We experienced with joy the coresponsibility of a true collaboration with the bishops and cardinals. And it has paid off. We felt that we were united by a common passion for young people, desiring to proclaim Christ to them and to help them discern their path in life. We tasted the joy of missionary communion, of unity in diversity. This “spiritual attunement”<sup>29</sup> has given us a renewed energy to move forward boldly, even as we experience the fragility of the church in these turbulent times of crisis. Thus, at the heart of our work, we experienced a kind of new Pentecost, receiving like a flame the power of the Spirit. With a burning heart, we left the synod after the vote on the Final Document,<sup>30</sup> like Peter and the apostles of the upper room, sent on mission to all nations to transmit the fire of the synod, not being able to keep silent about what we had received. We left Rome joyful and full of hope with a strong desire to be coactors with the young people of this missionary church, which goes out to meet all young people, paying particular attention to those who are the most distant and most in difficulty.

## **A synodal church is a humble church on the path of conversion**

At the synod, particularly in considering the crisis of sexual abuse, which revealed the horror of this tragic evil committed by pastors and the immeasurable suffering of the victims, the assembly felt the need to make a path of truth, to confront the real weaknesses and problems of the church, to acknowledge the wrongs,<sup>31</sup> failures, and sins and to realize that no one can move forward alone. Hence the insistence of many bishops on the challenge of giving more space to young people, of working more with the laity, especially women, by involving them more in the decision-making process. In their interventions, the synod fathers humbly and realistically expressed the joys and aspirations of the young people, but also their sufferings, sorrows, and difficulties. In this synodal exercise of discernment there is a form of rereading ecclesial practices that gives an insight into the research, the relevant proposals, but also all the difficulties of the church in reaching young people in this contemporary world: difficulties in facing the changes in progress, realistic recognition of existing problems, ecclesial weaknesses and poverty, the horror of the abuses committed, the shortcomings and failures, and so forth. The synod was a true process of discernment with this first phase of “recognizing” (the title of part 1 of the *Instrumentum Laboris*), which is a path of

realistic consideration of reality through listening and consulting the people of God, a path of truth that leads to conversion. Many can testify to this process. At the synod we really saw the face of a humble church that recognizes its fragility, a church immersed in human reality to its very depths, a church that can look at young people without fear because it is rooted in trust in him who is the Savior. That is, we experienced the synod as first of all a journey of conversion, that is to say, a journey of transformation through mutual listening in a dynamic of common and collaborative search to discern to what the church is called today in order to be more faithful to its mission.<sup>32</sup>

The starting point of a synod is the observation of a problem—in this case, it was the recognition that the majority of young people are generally far from the church. A synodal church is a pilgrim church rooted in history that puts itself in a state of profound humility to hear the call to change.<sup>33</sup> Only this attitude of humility, of self-decentralization, can make it possible to abandon particular interests in order to truly seek the good of the church in the service of the universal common good.<sup>34</sup> However, the interventions and exchanges during the synod showed that it is not so simple for everyone to enter into this self-detached vision. Each bishop comes first from a particular church with his own concerns and problems related to his social and ecclesial context, and the differences in perspectives on certain subjects—such as the way of seeing homosexuality or the reality of the question of sexual abuse—can be very great.<sup>35</sup>

To desire a synodal church in the perspective of Pope Francis is to recognize that no one is above others and to hold closely the truth that the Holy Spirit speaks to all by giving an important place to the *sensus fidei* and that it is necessary to humble oneself to serve in the manner of the Master, whose “only power is the power of the cross.”<sup>36</sup> The challenge is therefore to implement synodality in pastoral practices and concrete ways of doing things that embody this church on the move, which is truly the synodal church, a church where we walk together with Christ on a path of conversion as on a pilgrimage. Living in the synodal church invites us to value dialogue and teamwork, collaboration in a spirit of equality and mutuality, the welcoming of all in inclusive communities, the participation and interdependence of active people in solidarity, while recognizing the specific place of pastors and their ministry of presidency in the service of communion. With this strong image of the inverted pyramid, whose top is at the bottom,<sup>37</sup> Pope Francis invites us to think outside of a worldly image, too often hierarchical, at the top of which is the pope, located above bishops, who stand above the community of the baptized.<sup>38</sup> The point is to enter further into the very mystery of the church, which cannot be reduced to a human community or organization. The vision of the synodal church is, in fact, deeply rooted in the Trinitarian mystery, which values the relationships of communion between divine persons. Synodality is lived in faith and cannot be reduced to a mechanism of a democratic parliament. The accord or symphony targeted by synodality, in Greek terms, is an effect of the presence of Christ, who is at work through his Spirit. For this reason it is difficult to find the words to describe this profound spiritual and ecclesial experience, which leads us to a deeper understanding of the very mystery of the church and the Trinitarian life.

My personal experience of the synod, lived spiritually as a form of deeper incorporation into the ecclesial “we,” a strong immersion in the very mystery of the church,

made me realize that synodality is undoubtedly today the very way to taste and perceive what the church is, the mystery of communion in mission.<sup>39</sup> To give everyone the chance to live a synod or a synodal approach is to allow our contemporaries, often shaped by a culture centered on the individual, to enter further into the community dimension by discovering the ways of living together in the church, which can also prophetically open the ways of living together in an increasingly fragmented plural society. It gives them the opportunity to take root more deeply in this church, the body of Christ, the temple of the Spirit, the people of God. Indeed, the synodal structure of the church is a constitutive principle, a gift of the Holy Spirit. It is part of the ecclesial being by virtue of its very Trinitarian eucharistic foundation. A synod is celebrated; it is opened and closed with a solemn Eucharist. For synodality has an intrinsic link to the Eucharist, the matrix and model of every ecclesial assembly, necessarily communion. Synodality, which is thus “an expression of the ecclesiology of communion,”<sup>40</sup> is therefore presented as an opportunity and a grace for all those who experience it. For it is a path of conversion, of spiritual growth, and of ecclesial incorporation.

### **“A synodal Church is a Church of participation and coresponsibility”<sup>41</sup>**

In its definition of the word “synod” (i.e., laypeople, pastors, bishops of Rome walking together) and in the rest of his SB50 address, Pope Francis insists on the unity of the people of God, beyond the differences between pastors and herdsmen, and the common condition of the baptized.<sup>42</sup> For this reason he strongly insists on listening to the *sensus fidei*, and thus the importance of widely consulting the people of God in any synodal preparation.<sup>43</sup> In doing so, he values the intimate and inseparable bond that exists between the bishop and his people. One cannot think and represent itself without the other. They are as if interconnected in a relationship of reciprocity, called to live in an increasingly effective and affective communion, up to the pope, who “is not, by himself, above the Church; but within it as one of the baptized, and within the College of Bishops as a Bishop among Bishops, called at the same time—as Successor of Peter—to lead the Church of Rome which presides in charity over all the Churches.”<sup>44</sup> This vision of a synodal church that takes into account all the baptized as “active subjects of evangelization” values coresponsibility, the active participation of all, and the importance of collegial work, without wishing to level or erase differences.

One of the experts at the synod, Chiara Ghiaccardi, a lay Italian professor of sociology, expressed the fruits of this synodal approach as follows:

And we really walked, in a joyful and constructive way, without controversy and without wanting to erase the differences, transforming differences into opportunities for dialogue and thus succeeding in reducing distances, in writing a symphony with everyone’s notes. This very particular climate that has been created is a sign of a Church that knows how to regenerate itself by walking together, as a “caravan of solidarity” in which relationships are more important than structures and roles. The final document is the result of a real teamwork, where everyone is “author”: the young people, the Spirit. . . . The large bas-relief with

Pentecost in the atrium of Paul VI Hall, where thoughts and experiences were exchanged daily during the coffee break, really inspired the whole assembly. Beyond the result, the process is invaluable.<sup>45</sup>

This synod has thus given us the opportunity to see and experience in a very concrete and existential way how much pastoral care today demands putting relationships at the center, because faith is transmitted only through and in an encounter.<sup>46</sup>

From now on, we understand that “the commitment to build a synodal Church—a mission to which we are all called, each with the role entrusted him by the Lord”<sup>47</sup>—is deeply rooted in the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council. And this way of looking at the church is correlated with a theology of vocation in which the diversity of charisms and ministries can be thought of only as the common core of the baptismal vocation, which is a call to holiness and participation in the one ecclesial mission. Thus we must realize that our shared mission as baptized is always stronger than the differences generated by the variety of multiple expressions in the *sequela Christi* (the following of Christ).<sup>48</sup> The image of the body evoked by St. Paul emphasizes that “each member is necessary and at the same time a part of the whole.”<sup>49</sup> In fact, one of the particularly striking results of this synod, which gave rise to a deepening of the dynamic of fraternity and collaboration between people with different vocations, was the experience of a truly fruitful common work developed among bishops and youth, observers and experts, which made it possible to cross paths between men and women more strongly. For the first time in a synod, women—including seven women religious<sup>50</sup> and about twenty young laywomen—represented 10 percent of the assembly, and they had a particularly active role. Their voice was considered precious and important by the synod fathers, who were overwhelmingly delighted by their presence.

A major step forward has been taken, in particular because both the Pre-Synod and the synod have suggested that the question of women in society and in the church is a major issue for mission today and has become an issue not only for women but also increasingly for men themselves, including bishops and cardinals. The Final Document therefore repeatedly addresses the issue of women in society and in the church, deploring in particular the lack of a female voice or a woman’s perspective and the reality of their discrimination.<sup>51</sup> For probably the first time in an ecclesial document of this type, the emphasis is on the reciprocal relationship that exists between men and women,<sup>52</sup> thus going beyond the ambiguous vocabulary of complementarity and “female genius.” It also relays the strong call to develop “the female presence in ecclesial bodies at all levels, including positions of responsibility, as well as female participation in ecclesial decision-making processes” by presenting it as “a duty of justice” in an entire paragraph entitled “Women in a Synodal Church.”<sup>53</sup>

In fact, at the synod we lived this style of synodal church, experiencing the circularity and reciprocity of our different vocations. The relationships of great fraternity and simplicity and the spirit of true collaboration experienced by the male and female members of the synod—beginning with Pope Francis, who impressed us all with his availability and closeness—gave us the opportunity to experience something of this image of the inverted pyramid, because we were all engaged in a collegial work of a

partnership style. For this reason many of us often felt uncomfortable about the configuration of the synodal hall, which was in total contrast to this vision. The cardinals were on the floor of the amphitheater, in front of the president's table. Then, moving away from the front, were seated successively the archbishops, the bishops, the auxiliary bishops, the priests, the religious, and finally the laity and therefore the young people. Many synod fathers would have preferred to see the young people sitting in their midst!

Moreover, aware of the negative image reflected by the photos of the synodal hall thus arranged, which did not correspond to what we were experiencing of a true synodality, several suggested that this arrangement could change to better communicate this beautiful synodal dynamic. But no change was possible. Synodality, which requires a framework to be deployed in space and time, also requires a very practical reflection on the places in which it takes place, which, by their concrete arrangement, may or may not encourage this common dialogue and discernment. This factor, as well as the process itself and the way in which the synodal meetings are animated and broken up, also has an influence on the process. This synod, for example, benefited greatly from a much-appreciated innovation: the introduction of a three-minute period of silence after every five presentations in plenary, as requested by Pope Francis.<sup>54</sup> Participants highlighted the benefits and fruitful impact of those silent times. Similarly, the organization of the work on the *Instrumentum Laboris*, with a week devoted to the preparation of each part, as well as the distribution and articulation between plenary sessions and group work sessions, changed from the last synod on the family and was very positively received. Several synodal fathers who had already been part of several synods thus testified that this youth synod was for them “the best synod.”<sup>55</sup>

## **Conclusion: The youth synod, a laboratory of ecclesial life?**

From the young people present, a symbolic and meaningful part of the people of God, we heard testimonies of faith that edified us, stories of salvation that gave us the opportunity to touch with our fingers the action of the Holy Spirit in the lives of those who let themselves be transformed by the encounter with Jesus Christ. All of us, and in particular the synod fathers, received a rejuvenation, a renewed faith, a missionary impulse, a new courage, and finally a call to dare to boldly invent new ways of being church today in creative fidelity, to be closer to young people and to walk with them, confidently giving them more responsibility. For we have understood more deeply that they are a full part of the church and are even a missionary driving force. For this reason we must now seek in our different places of the church how to associate with them more as partners in the mission, first of all, but not only, to evangelize young people. They are indeed an accelerator of synodality by showing us at the highest level that synodality is the key to evangelization today.<sup>56</sup>

Finally, this synodal journey, with its focus on accompanying vocational discernment among young people, has enabled the church to deepen these key words expressed

in the second part of the Final Document—vocation, discernment, accompaniment. *Vocation* (ch. 2 of pt. 2) is presented as the mystery of God’s singular call for everyone that invites each person to receive his or her life as a gift to give to others. Vocation is thus to live as an adventure, a path of transformation, a continuous creation, a dynamic identity. A vocation can be understood and received only within the very vocation of the church, a community of called people, made up of a great variety of charisms. *Accompaniment* (ch. 3 of pt. 2) is presented as the mission of the whole church, which is called to accompany each one in their different choices (commitments, profession, form of life, etc.). Vocational discernment is lived in both community and personal accompaniment, which today requires an emphasis on the formation of quality spiritual guides capable of practicing and transmitting to others the art of discernment. This art of *discernment* (ch. 4 of pt. 2) is a service of freedom exercised in the place of personal conscience and in what the biblical tradition calls “the heart,” the inner place of listening and meeting God. But these key words for ministers to young people are, in fact, a gift for all. I believe they prefigure what can be the concrete implementation of a synodal church today, a church where all, whatever their vocation, accompany each other and discern together the paths of mission in today’s world by recognizing themselves “truly linked with mankind and its history by the deepest of bonds.”<sup>57</sup> Thus, the church may be ever more faithful to its vocation to be “in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race.”<sup>58</sup>

In the wake of the two synods on the family and *Amoris laetitia* (an apostolic exhortation by Pope Francis released in 2016, after these synods, addressing the care of families), this synod highlighted the challenge of thinking today about Christian life in a complex world as a *way of life*, that is, a life of discernment, which is an art of living listening to the Spirit, daring to make choices in response to Christ’s call that lead to a path of freedom and liberation. However, one cannot discern alone but only in a common listening to the Spirit with brothers and sisters. In this sense, the synod as a process is presented as a true ecclesial laboratory of discernment, as well as a laboratory of fraternity, to help us to become more concretely these “discerning” brothers and sisters called together to put into practice this missionary communion that is an outgoing missionary church. The synodality highlighted by this synod of young people can thus be understood as a way of formation to this art of living together in the pluralistic church of the pluralistic world, which is the art of living as a Christian according to the missionary style of Jesus and the first Christian communities. This style, in the school of Pope Francis, emphasizes the mercy and common vocation of the baptized, all called to holiness. In this synodal church, the missionary disciples who know themselves to be poor and fragile fishermen discover themselves with wonder, called to be witnesses through acts of mercy because they are coresponsible for a church that is always on the path of spiritual, pastoral, and missionary conversion.

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## Notes

1. See the address of Pope Francis on April 8, 2017, for the prayer vigil in preparation for the World Youth Day. He began by saying, “Thank you for coming! This evening marks a double beginning. It is the beginning of the *journey towards the Synod*, which has a very long name—“*Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment*,” but we can just call it the Synod of Young People. That way it is easier to understand!” ([http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/april/documents/papa-francesco\\_20170408\\_veglia-preparazione-gmg.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/april/documents/papa-francesco_20170408_veglia-preparazione-gmg.html)).
2. Synodality is a characteristic of the church that highlights the notion of “the People of God.” Synodality means “journeying together—laity, pastors, the Bishop of Rome.” Synodality that is constitutive of the church is in fact a practice, a way of being church as pilgrims under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, a way of discerning and acting, promoting the participation of all the baptized and people of good will. The vision of synodality particularly underlines the *sensus fidei* and the equal dignity of all the baptized, who are called to be missionary disciples. (The quote is from an address by Pope Francis on October 17, 2015, commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops; hereafter SB50. See [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco\\_20151017\\_50-anniversario-sinodo.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html).)
3. This article is an adapted translation of a French text that was published in *Marcher ensemble: Discours pour le 50e anniversaire de l’institution du synode des évêques*, by Pope Francis (Paris: Salvator, 2019). See <http://www.editions-salvator.com/A-27020-marcher-ensemble.aspx>. It appears with the permission of the publisher.
4. SB50.
5. These are the two special secretaries, Fr. Rossano Sala, SDB, and Fr. Giacomo Costa, SJ, who carried out this discernment and drafting work with the entire group of experts through genuine teamwork.
6. Available in English at <http://www.synod2018.va/content/synod2018/en/fede-discernimento-vocazione/final-document-of-the-synod-of-bishops-on-young-people—faith-an.html> (hereafter FD).
7. International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, March 2, 2018, §9.
8. FD §118, “Spiritual, Pastoral, and Missionary Conversion.” Rossano Sala considers this paragraph to be the “keystone” of this final document (“Il document finale del Sinodo sui giovani: Un invita alla lettura,” *La Rivista del Clero Italiano*, no. 11 [November 2018]).
9. “Finally, the Synod Assembly itself must be followed by the implementation phase, so as to initiate the reception of the Synod’s conclusions in all the local Churches, once they have been accepted by the Roman Pontiff in the manner he judges most appropriate” (Apostolic constitution *Episcopalis communio*, September 15, 2018, on the Synod of Bishops [hereafter EC], §7, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_constitutions/documents/papa-francesco\\_20180915\\_episcopalis-communio.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_constitutions/documents/papa-francesco_20180915_episcopalis-communio.html)).
10. In presenting this document at the press conference in the Holy See “Sala Stampa” on September 18, 2018, which is composed of a doctrinal and a disciplinary part, Cardinal Lorenzo Baldisseri, secretary general of the Synod of Bishops, immediately placed it in line with Pope Francis’s major speech of October 2015 for the fiftieth anniversary of the synod’s institution: “a speech of great significance, which many commentators consider to be one of the most significant theologically of his pontificate.” He added, “In a certain sense, this speech anticipated in synthetic form the main contents of the new Apostolic

- Constitution” (<https://www.lastampa.it/vatican-insider/it/2018/09/18/news/baldisseri-una-rifondazione-dell-organismo-sinodale-1.34046086>).
11. <http://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2016/10/06/161006b.html>.
  12. “A New Pentecost” is the title of FD §§59–62.
  13. From 2012 to 2018 I was director of the National Service for the Evangelization of the Youth and Vocations at the French Bishops’ Conference. We animated and supported the preparation of the synod in France to support and encourage the dioceses, communities, and movements involved with the youth to take part in the synod preparation, endorsing synodality and a synodal process.
  14. In preparation for the Synod on Young People, I was privileged to serve (1) as speaker at “‘From Krakow to Panama’: The Synod Journeying with Young People,” held in Rome, April 5–9, 2017, organized by the Dicastery for Laity, Family, and Life, in collaboration with the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops; (2) as participant at the International Seminar on the Condition of Youth in the World, held in Rome, September 11–15, 2017; (3) as keynote speaker at the international conference “Vocational Ministry and Consecrated Life: Prospects and Hopes,” held in Rome, December 1–3, 2017, organized by the Dicastery for Consecrated Life; and (4) as general coordinator of the Pre-Synod, held in Rome, March 19–24, 2018.
  15. During the Pre-Synod, it was particularly striking to see that the feedback from the twenty-six language groups on part 3, “Expectations of the Church,” was very similar, all insisting on the desire for an authentic and coherent church.
  16. SB50.
  17. *Ibid.*
  18. The *Instrumentum Laboris* is the working document prepared to be discussed for the Fifteenth Ordinary General Assembly of Synod of Bishops, <http://www.synod2018.va/content/synod2018/en/fede-discernimento-vocazione/instrumentum-laboris-for-the-synod-2018-young-people-the-faith.html>.
  19. According to its introduction, the FD was “borne out of the meeting of more than 300 young representatives from around the world, convened in Rome March 19–24, 2018 at the inaugural Pre-Synodal Meeting of Young People and the participation of 15,000 young people engaged online through the Facebook groups. The document is understood as a summary of all of our participants’ input based on the work of 20 language groups and 6 from social media,” in “Young People, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment”: Pre-Synodal Meeting; Final Document,” <http://www.synod2018.va/content/synod2018/en/news/final-document-from-the-pre-synodal-meeting.html>.
  20. “The Synod of Bishops must increasingly become a privileged instrument for *listening* to the People of God: ‘For the Synod Fathers we ask the Holy Spirit first of all for the gift of listening: to listen to God, that with him we may hear the cry of the people; to listen to the people until breathing in the desire to which God calls us’ [Address at the Vigil of Prayer in preparation for the Synod on the Family (October 4, 2014)]” (EC §6).
  21. “The Church also wishes to listen to your voice, your sensitivities and your faith; even your doubts and your criticism. Make your voice heard, let it resonate in communities and let it be heard by your shepherds of souls,” in “Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis to Young People on the Occasion of the Presentation of the ‘Preparatory Document’ of the 15th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops,” [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2017/documents/papa-francesco\\_20170113\\_lettera-giovani-doc-sinodo.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2017/documents/papa-francesco_20170113_lettera-giovani-doc-sinodo.html).

22. See the chapter “Réponse française au questionnaire du document préparatoire,” in *Les jeunes, la foi et le discernement vocationnel: Textes de référence du synode* (Montrouge: Bayard; Paris: Mame, Cerf, 2018).
23. See Arnaud Join-Lambert, *Synodes et concile en France: Bilan et perspectives*, Documents épiscopat no. 5 (Conférence des évêques de France, 2016).
24. “Listening transforms the hearts of those who do it, especially when it takes place with an inner disposition of harmony and docility to the Spirit. It is not simply a source of information or a strategy for achieving a goal, but the way that God himself relates to his people. God sees the distress of his people and hears their cry; deeply moved, he comes down to deliver them (cf. Ex 3:7–8). The Church, by her listening, enters into the movement of God who, in the Son, draws near to every human being” (FD §6, in Chapter 1, “A Church That Listens”).
25. “The young are constantly called to make decisions that give direction to their lives; they want to be heard, acknowledged and accompanied. Many find that their voice is not considered worthwhile or helpful in social and ecclesial circles. In various situations, little attention is paid to their cry, especially that of the poor and exploited, and there is a lack of adults prepared or willing to listen to them” (FD §7, “The Young Want to Be Heard”).
26. SB50.
27. Prayer Vigil in Preparation of World Youth Day, Address of His Holiness Pope Francis, April 8, 2017, “[This will be a synod] from which no young person should feel excluded! Some people say: ‘Let’s hold the Synod for young Catholics, for those belonging to Catholic groups; that way it will be better.’ No! The Synod is meant to be the Synod *for* and *of* all young people. Young people are its protagonists. . . . This is the Synod of young people and we want to *listen to one another*. Every young person has something to say to others. He or she has something to say to adults, something to say to priests, sisters, bishops and even the Pope. All of us need to listen to you!” ([http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/april/documents/papa-francesco\\_20170408\\_veglia-preparazione-gmg.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/april/documents/papa-francesco_20170408_veglia-preparazione-gmg.html)).
28. See Instrumentum Laboris §1 (“Synod Purposes): “Taking care of young people is not an optional task for the Church, but an integral part of her vocation and mission in history. In just a few words, this is the specific scope of the upcoming Synod: just as our Lord Jesus Christ walked alongside the disciples of Emmaus (cf. Lk 24:13–35), the Church is also urged to accompany all young people, without exception, towards the joy of love.”
29. According to the expression used in the Introduction of the FN in §1.
30. All paragraphs of the proposed FD were passed by more than two-thirds of the votes required to be adopted. Most were approved by a very large majority, but a few paragraphs on more-discussed topics had between 25 and 65 votes against. These numbers were still less than the one-third of the total vote required to suppress a paragraph, and thus these paragraphs were included as well.
31. See, for example, the remarkable comments by Anthony Fisher, OP, the archbishop of Sydney in Australia, asking forgiveness from the young people wounded by the abuses in the church, or those of Alain de Raemy, auxiliary bishop of Lausanne, Geneva, and Fribourg in Switzerland, deploring the lack of consideration given to the words of women: “To witness to Jesus fully also means to take into account all these women. Unfortunately, we do not do it enough. And we don’t do it in this aula. I do not understand how 80 percent of consecrated life, which are women, are represented here by three nuns without the right to vote, while the 20 percent, or men, are represented by ten fathers and brothers, full members of the synod” (<https://www.cath.ch/newsf/synode-mgr-de-raemy-propose-la-creation-dun-conseil-pontifical-des-jeunes/>).

32. In his article “Sinodo 2018: Il dono dei giovani” (*Aggiornamenti Sociali*, December 2018), Giacomo Costa, SJ, one of the two special secretaries of this synod, wrote, “The experience of this Synod has shown once again that such a process is not only possible, but also fruitful, and that it allows the variety and diversity of positions to be articulated in a text in which everyone can identify themselves, because no one has tried to impose their point of view. It is therefore truly legitimate to affirm, as the General Rapporteur did, Card. Sérgio da Rocha, Archbishop of Brasília, that each participant is the author of the FD.”
33. “An essential attitude in synodal dialogue is humility,” International Theological Commission, “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” March 2, 2018 (hereafter ITC), §112, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_20180302\\_sinodalita\\_en.html#\\_edn150](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html#_edn150).
34. “In the Church the purpose of any collegial body, whether consultative or deliberative, is always the search for truth or the good of the Church. When it is therefore a question involving the faith itself, the *consensus ecclesiae* are not determined by the tallying of votes, but is the outcome of the working of the Spirit, the soul of the one Church of Christ” (EC §7).
35. Note the paragraphs of the FD that obtained the most “no placet” (i.e., “no” votes), even while still less than the one-third necessary to block adoption, <http://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2018/10/27/0789/01722.html>.
36. SB50.
37. To use the image presented by Pope Francis in SB50.
38. “Those who exercise authority are called ‘ministers,’ because, in the original meaning of the word, they are the least of all” (SB50).
39. Nathalie Becquart, “Reflecting on the Experience of the Synod of the Youth,” <https://synod2018sistersvoice.blogspot.com/2018/11/reflecting-on-experience-of-synod-of.html>.
40. “Synodality as an expression of the ecclesiology of communion” is the title of ITC §2.3.
41. “A synodal Church is a Church of participation and co-responsibility. In exercising synodality she is called to give expression to the participation of all, according to each one’s calling, with the authority conferred by Christ on the College of Bishops headed by the Pope. Participation is based on the fact that all the faithful are qualified and called to serve each other through the gifts they have all received from the Holy Spirit” (ITC §67).
42. This vision is particularly developed in “Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis to Cardinal Marc Ouellet, President of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America” (March 19, 2016): “Looking at the People of God is remembering that we all enter the Church as lay people. The first sacrament, which seals our identity forever, and of which we should always be proud, is Baptism. . . . Our first and fundamental consecration is rooted in our Baptism. No one has been baptized a priest or a bishop. They baptized us as lay people and it is the indelible sign that no one can ever erase. It does us good to remember that the Church is not an elite of priests, of consecrated men, of bishops, but that everyone forms the faithful Holy People of God” ([https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2016/documents/papa-francesco\\_20160319\\_pont-comm-america-latina.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2016/documents/papa-francesco_20160319_pont-comm-america-latina.html)).
43. “The flock likewise has an instinctive ability to discern the new ways that the Lord is revealing to the Church” (SB50).
44. *Ibid.*
45. Chiarra Giaccardi, “I giovani risvegliano la Chiesa: Note dopo il Sinodo,” *La Rivista del Clero Italiano* 99, no. 11 (2018): 750.
46. Chapter 2 of part 3 of FD is entitled “Journeying Together in Daily Life,” with the subtitle “From Structures to Relationships.” The quality and authenticity of relationships and the life itself of fraternal communities evangelize more than structures do. “Missionary

- synodality does not merely apply to the universal dimension of the Church. The demand to journey together, bearing a real witness of fraternity in a renewed and more visible community, applies above all to individual communities. It is therefore necessary to reawaken in every local reality the awareness that we are the people of God, responsible for incarnating the Gospel in our different contexts and in all daily situations” (FD §128).
47. SB50.
  48. See FD §84, entitled “Vocation and Mission of the Church.”
  49. FD §85.
  50. It is possible to read the echoes of their very positive synodal experience on their blog “Reflecting on the Experience of the Synod of the Youth,” <https://synod2018sistersvoice.blogspot.com>.
  51. “The Synod recommends that everyone be made more aware of the urgency of an inevitable change, not least on the basis of anthropological and theological reflection on the reciprocity between men and women” (FD §55, “Women in the Church”).
  52. “The Bible presents man and woman as partners equal in God’s sight (cf. *Gen* 5:2); all domination and discrimination based on sex is thus an offence against human dignity. The Bible also presents the difference between the sexes as a mystery constitutive of our humanity, one that cannot be reduced to stereotypes. The relation between man and woman is understood in terms of a vocation to live together in reciprocity and dialogue, in communion and fruitfulness (cf. *Gen* 1:27–29; 2:21–25) in every area of human experience: living as a couple, work, education and so forth. God has entrusted the earth to the covenant of man and woman” (FD §13).
  53. FD §148.
  54. In his address at the opening of the Synod of Bishops on October 3, 2018, Pope Francis said, “*The Synod is an ecclesial exercise in discernment*. To speak frankly and listen openly are fundamental if the Synod is to be a process of discernment. . . . Discernment is the method and at the same time the goal we set ourselves: it is based on the conviction that God is at work in world history, in life’s events, in the people I meet and who speak to me. For this reason, we are called to listen to what the Spirit suggests to us, with methods and in paths that are often unpredictable. Discernment needs space and time. And so, during the work done in plenary assembly and in groups, after five interventions [presentations] are made, a moment of silence of approximately three minutes will be observed. This is to allow everyone to recognize within their hearts the nuances of what they have heard, and to allow everyone to reflect deeply and seize upon what is most striking. This attention to interiority is the key to accomplishing the work of recognizing, interpreting and choosing” (<http://www.synod2018.va/content/synod2018/en/news/address-by-pope-francis-at-the-opening-of-the-synod-of-bishops-.html>).
  55. Cardinal Carlos Aguiar Retes, archbishop of Mexico City, reported in an interview on October 30, 2018, with *Crux: Taking the Catholic Pulse*, “For me, I’ve said this before, and I’ve heard this from many bishops and cardinals, particularly from those who’ve participated in a synod before, for me this was the fifth, everyone says the same: this was the best synod among those we’ve participated in” (<https://cruxnow.com/interviews/2018/10/30/drafter-says-zero-tolerance-didnt-belong-in-a-synod-doc-on-young-people/>).
  56. See Nathalie Becquart, “Évangéliser la génération CO: Le défi de la synodalité,” in *Pastorale et catéchèse des jeunes: Quelle bonne nouvelle?* (= *Lumen vitae* 73, no. 2 [2018]: 151–59).
  57. *Gaudium et Spes* §1.
  58. *Lumen Gentium* §1.

**Author biography**

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