



Chapter – 10 March 2022 Towards a Synodal Way of Life



Very dear Sisters and Friends:

I wish you a very happy Feast of Saint Marie Eugenie!

I consider it a special grace to celebrate the feast of Saint Marie Eugenie together with the community of the General Plenary Council in Madrid.

Reflections on synodality take precedence over other things in the deliberations of the Church today. Saint Marie Eugenie desired that we have a special place in our hearts for the concerns of the Church. In her own words: "For us, this spirit of zeal must manifest itself in a labour of love for our Lord, of devotion and zeal for souls, since we are consecrated to their service, and in that filial love for the holy Church which will make everything that pertains to the Church, everything that touches it, everything that interests it, everything that concerns it be for us the object of a thought, a desire, a prayer, the reason of a continual and very constant preoccupation."¹ It is in line with this dream of St Marie Eugenie that we celebrate her feast this year by reflecting on a synodal way of life in the Church and in the Assumption.

Although Marie Eugenie does not talk about synodality, the concept can be gleaned from her writings. She wrote: "We must convince ourselves that each of us has, to a certain extent, responsibility for the institute which is still in its beginnings."² In the same letter, she talked about "the true zeal that we must have for our institute" which I think is the foundation of the co-responsibility that each member should assume for the building up of the institute. What Marie Eugenie meant when she talked about the institute is the Congregation, but in today's context, it can also refer to our own families, communities, and local churches.

How do we understand the vision of Pope Francis when he convoked the Synod with the theme: "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission"? The term "synod" comes from two Greek words which mean "together on the way" or "journeying together." In John's Gospel, Jesus presented himself as the WAY (14:6); and in Acts, Christians were referred to as people who belonged to the WAY (cf. 9:2). So, Christians are the people who follow the Way of Jesus. At the ceremony commemorating the 50th anniversary of the institution of the synod of bishops³, Pope Francis brought the theme of synodality to the centre of the life and mission of the Church by saying: "From the time of the Second Vatican Council until the present Assembly, we have experienced ever more intensely the necessity and beauty of journeying together." And he continued in the same speech: "We must continue along this path. The world in which we live, and which we are called to love and serve, even with its contradictions, demands that the Church strengthen cooperation in all areas of her mission. It is precisely this path of *synodality* which God expects of the Church of the third millennium." In the Preparatory Document, synodality is presented as "the nature of the church as the pilgrim and missionary people of God" (PD 1). The document also affirms that synodality is "the form, the style and the structure of the Church" (PD 2). As the Preparatory Document reminds us that the major objective of the synod is to listen to God through

¹ Marie Eugénie, Instruction de chapitre, 14 décembre 1873, « L'esprit de l'Assomption ».

² Marie Eugénie, Instruction de chapitre, 12 juillet 1874, « Le zèle pour notre Institut ».

³ On 17 October 2015.

the entire people of God in which no one is excluded, and minority views should not be ignored but are considered to be prophetic (PD 15).

In what follows I would like to present a biblical story (Matthew 15)⁴ to illustrate the meaning and implications of the theme of the Synod: For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission.

Jesus and the Canaanite Woman (Matthew 15)

The evangelist Matthew presents the woman as the mother of a daughter possessed by a demon who will become the beneficiary of Jesus' healing ministry.⁵ The story, however, gives no attention to the



healing itself; instead, it gives importance to the dialogue between Jesus and the woman. By the specific reference to the place as Tyre and Sidon (Gentile territories) and the designation of the woman as Canaanite (indigenous people of Canaan and ancient enemies of Israel), Matthew presents the woman as a political enemy of, and a religious outsider for, the Jews.⁶ Moreover, she encounters Jesus in a public place – the domain of men. The true image that emerges from the text, therefore, is that of a bold and courageous woman who takes the initiative to come out on her own and make her request to Jesus by shouting: “Have mercy

on me, Lord, Son of David” (Matt 15:22). Her request reflects both the Christological titles of the early Christian communities (“Lord, Son of David”) and the language of the Jewish prayer – the language of the lamentation psalms (“Have mercy on me”). Her persistent request coupled with her liturgical posture of kneeling underlines her desperate need as well as her confident faith in Jesus' divine power (as the expected Davidic Messiah) to heal her daughter (Matt 15:25). The woman thus seems to have transcended the boundaries of her own religious traditions and beliefs.

The evangelist portrays the woman as an active dialogue partner who dares to confront Jesus with counter arguments. Jesus' categorical statements: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt 15:24) and “It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs” (Matt 15:26) are very rude and harsh. They contradict the usual charm, respect, and compassion of Jesus. What is striking is the fact that in spite of Jesus' harsh words, she does not give up but challenges Jesus with equally powerful counter arguments: “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.” The implication of her response is that God takes care of Gentiles as well as Jews. Although she accepts the priority of the Jews in Salvation History, she challenges Jesus to include Gentiles as an integral part of the new salvific community. She wins in this theological dispute concerning the boundaries of Jesus' mission and gets her daughter healed. And she is praised by Jesus for her “great faith” required of all true disciples of Jesus. (“O woman, great is your faith” [15:28b]). This great faith consists in her ability to interpret her faith in response to the needs of the new situation. She is reading the “signs of the times” and building bridges by making non-Jews recipients of God's blessings and bringing them into the family of God's chosen people.

What do we make of this story in the context of synodality? This story is all about an encounter that is characterized by synodal listening that transforms both dialogue partners. It is a dialogue in which both Jesus and the woman learn from each other, and both enter into a process of conversion. It is all about the mission of God, the will of God for her daughter's destiny that redefines Jesus's mission. The divine

⁴ This story is referred to in the Preparatory Document of the Synod on Synodality (PD, No. 18).

⁵ For a detailed analysis of the story of the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15, see Rekha Chennattu, “The Dignity of Women: Christian Perspectives,” *Journal of Dharma* 37:1 (2012): 70-72.

⁶ For the importance of these cities during the OT and NT periods, see LaMoine F. De Vries, *Cities of the Biblical World* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2006) 73-82.

power of Jesus is for all and all should be the beneficiaries of Jesus's healing ministry, the blessings of God's reign. It is about a bridge-building dialogue that fosters communion between religions (Jews and Gentiles), cultures (Jewish and Canaanite), and genders (men and women). The story thus highlights radical inclusion and deeper communion, as well as creative participation and shared responsibility in discerning and fulfilling the will of God.

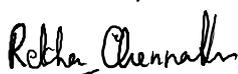
Synodality as an Assumption Way of Life

How can we be on a "synodal path" in our day-to-day lives: in our families, religious communities, parishes, and places of ministry? Synodality as an Assumption way of life implies journeying together, listening to the Spirit and being educated by the Spirit, following the way of Jesus, and translating the mission of Jesus for our times. In the light of the above discussion, I propose the following seven pillars of the Assumption Way of Life that makes a synodal journey possible for us in our families, communities, and places of ministry.

1. This way of life is founded on our experience of God's love that heals us and empowers us. Love makes everything possible. When we choose to walk in love and compassion, forgiveness follows, and then we have the power of God's love in our lives. Let us bring more love into our relationships in families and communities.
2. It is a Christo-centric way of life. The life and mission of Jesus, the Gospel values and attitudes, then become the yardstick to measure our lives and reread our experiences. Let giving life and doing good become our way of life.
3. It is mission-driven and focuses on God's Kingdom. The synodal journey is at the service of God's mission. The wellness and wellbeing of all members, especially the invisible and voiceless, would take a central place in all family and community discernment. Let us become more and more free and secure to become a healing presence of God in our wounded world.
4. It is all about an attitude of transformative listening – mutual listening. This is one of the fruits of being educated by the Spirit. Let God give us the grace "to speak in such a way that everyone wants to listen to us and to listen in such a way that everyone wants to speak to us".
5. It is characterized by radical inclusion, an ever-widening family spirit. Let us promote dialogues that break down the barriers of prejudices, foster deeper communion and promote co-responsibility. Let us create a synodal culture in which no one is left behind nor forgotten, but everyone "brings his/her stone to build up" families and communities.
6. It is characterized by equity, fairness and reciprocal respect. It promotes the idea of walking beside. Let us promote the spirit of collaboration, interdependence and complementarity.
7. It presupposes an experience of the paschal mystery. We have to be prepared to die daily, to die over and over again. We have to lose ourselves – our ideas, preferences, choices, and secure places – to find our strength in God as well as in common good. Let us hold on to the truth of what is good and life-giving for all and let go of everything that does not belong to us anymore.

Let me conclude by praying with the Psalmist: "Make us know your ways, O Lord! Teach us your paths" (Ps 25:4). May Saint Marie Eugenie bless our synodal journey!

With all my love and prayers!



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