

assumpta

2025

N°3 - Synodality: A Path of Spiritual Renewal and Structural Reform

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Editorial

Synodality: A Path of Spiritual Renewal and Structural Reform

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General Councillor

Introduction

Our 30th General Chapter took for its theme, “Moved by the SPIRIT, in dialogue with our Realities, we discern new Synodal Pathways for our times METANOIA – PROPHETIC MISSION – CULTURE OF CARING.”¹ Aligned with the whole movement of the Church and the call of Pope Francis for the Church to undergo deep spiritual and pastoral transformation to embrace synodality and address the challenges of our times, our Congregation set out to discern the will of God by taking stock of our realities (internal and external) and our aspirations and setting directions for the next six years for the Assumption. In the process, we discovered an “Assumption moving to the peripheries, where sisters and laity feel that they are the bearers of a relevant and dynamic charism. An intercultural Assumption, celebrating the beauty of diversity, invited to welcome this gift as a true gesture of adoration of the God of differences who invites us to polyhedral communion. An Assumption, in need of metanoia and of learning to live participative processes, moving towards structures more consistent with a new synodal sensibility.

¹ The General Chapter 2024 of the Religious of the Assumption took place at the Mother House, 17 rue de l'Assomption 75016 Paris from June 29 to July 28, 2024 with 61 participants – 47 Sister-Chapter Delegates and 14 Lay-Chapter Delegates representing each of the 14 Provinces in the Congregation.

We have recognized the steps taken in each Province to opt for life, to allow ourselves to be transformed by the cries of our world."² The Holy Spirit, the Giver of Life, moves in us and among us, impelling us to collaborate with Him in the renewal of our mission in the world today. Confronted with new and emerging realities, we are invited to dialogue and spurred to action, in discerning new Synodal pathways for our times.

In the next pages, we will explore the Final Document of the Synod on Synodality, its implications for Consecrated Life in general and in the Assumption in particular. Then, we will discuss synodality as a path of spiritual renewal and structural reform in the Assumption as expressed in our General Chapter 2024 Documents.

Some Definition of Terms and Processes

Synodality, according to the Final Document of the Synod on Synodality, is the walking together of Christians with Christ and towards God's Kingdom, in union with all humanity. Orientated 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. Along these lines, we can understand better what it means to say that synodality is a constitutive dimension of the Church (cf. ITC 1). 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.³ Synodality is presented as a Core Dimension of the Church, that is, the Church's way of life, emphasizing communion, participation, and mission. It involves walking together, listening to the Holy Spirit, and discerning God's will. Through the lived experiences of the members of the Church during the past three years, synodality has become more associated with

² *General Chapter 2024 Document*, Introduction, p. 5

³ *Final Document*, XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission", No. 28

the desire for a Church that is closer to the people and more relational, a Church that is God's home and family where everyone experiences it as a place of welcome, hope and joy.

Our Christian Baptism constitutes the basis of synodality. Through Baptism, “the holy People of God has a share, too, in the prophetic role of Christ, when it renders Him a living witness, especially through a life of faith and charity” (LG 12). The anointing by the Holy Spirit received at Baptism (cf. 1 Jn 2:20,27) enables all believers to possess an instinct for the truth of the Gospel. We refer to this as the *sensus fidei*. This consists in a certain connaturality with divine realities based on the fact that, in the Holy Spirit, the Baptised become “sharers [participants] in the divine nature” (DV 2). From this participation comes the aptitude to grasp intuitively what conforms to the truth of Revelation in the communion of the Church. This is the reason why the Church is certain that the holy People of God cannot err in matters of belief. They manifest this special property when they show universal agreement in matters of faith and morals (cf. LG 12). The exercise of the *sensus fidei* must not be confused with public opinion. It is always in conjunction with the discernment of pastors at the different levels of Church life, as the various interconnected phases of the synodal process demonstrated. The *sensus fidei* aims at reaching a consensus of the faithful (*consensus fidelium*), which constitutes “a sure criterion for determining whether a particular doctrine or practice belongs to the apostolic faith” (ITC, *Sensus fidei* in the life of the Church, 2014, 3).⁴

At the heart of synodality lies the call to conversion of heart - personal, communal and institutional - as a result of our encounter with the Risen Jesus who has gifted us with his Spirit. The light of faith needs to be rekindled in our hearts as we engage and start this journey.⁵ This manifests itself in the conversion and transformation of our pastoral and missionary actions.

⁴ *Final Document*, XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission”, No. 22

⁵ *Lumen Fidei*, Encyclical Letter of the Supreme Pontiff Francis to the Bishops, Priests and Deacons, Consecrated Persons and the Lay Faithful on Faith, “Faith is born of an encounter with the living God who calls us and reveals his love, a love which

Synodality is a process and a journey.

As a process, the Synod on Synodality took three years (2021-2024). The opening of the Synodal process on October 9-10, 2021 started with the initial listening phase. Synodal listening started at the small local communities and moved towards diocesan, national and continental levels. Synthesis reports and working documents were published.⁶ In itself, synodal listening, that is, listening to God and to one another, largely promoted the culture of encounter as Pope Francis envisioned and has been a transformative experience for many, notwithstanding the challenges and even the tensions that were brought to light in many assemblies and gathering. These challenges and tensions certainly needed further reflections and dialogue yet they were also reminders that there is still a long way to go in this process.⁷ The Final Document explicitly states that the synodal process did not end with the Assembly of the Synod of Bishops last October 2024 but also includes the implementation phase.⁸

The synodal journey has three integral practices that are closely intertwined: discernment, the care for decision-making processes,

precedes us and upon which we can lean for security and for building our lives. Transformed by this love, we gain fresh vision, new eyes to see; we realize that it contains a great promise of fulfilment, and that a vision of the future opens up before us.", No. 4

⁶ *Instrumentum Laboris*, XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, "How to be a Missionary Synodal Church", was published and used for the Second Session of the Synod on Synodality in October 2024. Its drafting has been done in the light of the answers to the guiding question sent in by most of the Episcopal Conferences (EC) and their continental groupings, the Eastern Catholic Churches, the Dioceses that are not part of an Episcopal Conference, the Dicastries of the Roman Curia, the Union of Superiors General and the International Union of Superiors General representing consecrated life, as well as the testimonies of experiences and good practices received from all over the world and the observations of almost two hundred groups: university faculties, associations of the faithful, communities and individuals from all over the world. In this way, it is rooted in the life of the People of God present throughout the world.

⁷ There were 10 Study Groups that Pope Francis initiated to pursue the in-depth study and reflections of particular topics such as the role of women in the Church, LGBTQ+ community issues and the Church's engagement in digital spaces, etc. *Final Document*, XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission", No. 8

⁸ *Ibid.*, No.9

the commitment to accountability and the evaluation of decisions.⁹

Ecclesial discernment is not an organizational technique but rather a spiritual practice grounded in a living faith. It calls for interior freedom, humility, prayer, mutual trust, an openness to the new and a surrender to the will of God. It is never just a setting out of one's own personal or group point of view or a summing up of differing individual opinions. Each person, speaking according to their conscience, is called to open themselves to the others who share according to their conscience. In this sharing, they seek to recognize together "what the Spirit is saying to the Churches" (Rev 2:7). As ecclesial discernment entails the contribution of everyone; it is both the condition and a privileged expression of synodality, in which communion, mission and participation are lived. The more everyone is heard, the richer the discernment. Therefore, it is essential that we promote the broadest participation possible in the discernment process, particularly involving those who are at the margins of the Christian community and society.¹⁰

As a spiritual practice grounded in a living faith, the starting point and criterion of all ecclesial discernment is the listening to the Word of God in the liturgy, through the living Tradition of the Church, the Magisterium, personal and communal meditation on the Scriptures, and the practices of popular piety. God continues to manifest Himself through the cry of those who are made poor and in the events of human history. God also communicates with His People through the elements of Creation, whose very existence points to the Creator's action and which is filled with the presence of the life-giving Spirit. Finally, God also speaks through the personal conscience of each person, which is "the most intimate center and sanctuary of a person, in which he or she is alone with God and whose voice echoes within them." (GS 16)

The steps in discernment include the following elements and guidelines that are indispensable for a successful outcome: a) clearly setting out the object of discernment and disseminating

⁹ Ibid., No.79

¹⁰ Ibid., No.82

information and the means for adequately understanding it; b) giving sufficient time for prayerful preparation, for listening to the Word of God and for reflection on the question; c) an inner disposition of freedom regarding one's own interests, both personal and as a group, and a commitment to the pursuit of the common good; d) listening attentively and respectfully to each person's voice; e) searching for the widest possible consensus which will emerge when our hearts burn within us (cf. Lk 24:32), without hiding conflicts or searching for the lowest common denominator; f) the leaders of the process formulate the consensus in such a way that allows the participants to say whether they recognize themselves in it or not.

The structure of the decision-making process in a synodal journey promotes participation based on differentiated co-responsibility. Each member is respected and their contributions valued according to their gifts and abilities in the light of shared decision-making. These processes typically involve a period of elaboration and preparation "through a joint exercise of discernment, consultation and co-operation" (ITC 69), which informs and underpins the subsequent taking of a decision by the competent authority. There is no competition or conflict between the two elements of the process; rather, they both contribute to ensuring that the decisions taken are the fruit of the obedience of all to what God wants for His Church. For this reason, it is necessary to encourage procedures that make reciprocity between the assembly and the person presiding effective in an atmosphere of openness to the Spirit and mutual trust in search of a consensus that could, possibly, be unanimous. Once the decision has been reached, it requires a process of implementation and evaluation in which the various participants are once again involved, yet in new ways.¹¹

Synodality is not democracy. There is often a tendency to associate the two and to interchange them. While both involve and promote greater participation and decision-making, they are entirely different in terms of their core principles and the processes involved.

¹¹ *Final Document*, XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission", No. 90

The goal of synodality is to discern the will of God and to find the best path forward for the Church through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It involves a structured process of listening, dialogue and discernment among all the members of the Church and yet the final authority rests with the Church leadership, guided by the Holy Spirit. Democracy is a system of government “of the people, by the people and for the people”¹² who exercise it directly or through elected representatives. Its decision-making process relies on voting and majority rule. Authority in a democracy is ultimately derived from the people and is exercised through their elected representatives.¹³ The synod is not parliament. Pope Francis insisted, “We must understand that the synod is more than a parliament (...)”¹⁴ His vision of the synod is not as a political process but as a spiritual journey. Synodality is first and foremost a spiritual disposition.

Synodal spirituality flows from the action of the Holy Spirit and requires listening to the Word of God, contemplation, silence and conversion of heart. It requires asceticism, humility, patience and a willingness to forgive and be forgiven. The fruits of a spirituality of synodality are manifested in the daily life of the Church marked by unity and harmony in pluriformity.¹⁵

Synodality offers “the most appropriate interpretive framework for understanding the hierarchical ministry itself” (Francis, Address in Commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops, 17 October 2015) and provides the correct context for understanding the mandate that Christ entrusts, in the Holy Spirit, to pastors. Synodality, therefore, invites the whole Church, including those who exercise authority, to conversion and

¹² Abraham Lincoln, *Gettysburg Address*; November 19, 1863

¹³ Robert A. Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics*, Yale University Press, 1991. The author while exhorting the values of democracy expressed some concerns about its effectiveness and downsides. One of these concerns is the possibility of the tyranny of the majority whereby democratic processes can lead to the suppression of the minority rights and interests as the majority can impose its will, potentially leading to unjust outcomes.

¹⁴ Pope Francis, during the Amazon Synod, published in *Civiltà Cattolica* (September 2020)

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, No. 43

reform.¹⁶ Synodality does not negate hierarchy but defines the role and function of each member in the light of the mission at the service of unity for harmony.¹⁷

Transparency, accountability and evaluation are integral to the synodal process. Transparency is defined as a fundamental attitude grounded in the Sacred Scriptures and not to a series of administrative or procedural requirements.¹⁸ A culture of accountability has to be created and nurtured and structures and spaces for evaluation need to be established and practiced.

The Document on Synodality and its Implications for Consecrated Life

In his apostolic letter to all consecrated people on the occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life, Pope Francis exhorted all religious men and women to "wake up" the world".¹⁹ In the Final Document of the Synod on Synodality, consecrated life is highlighted as having a prophetic role in interrogating Church and society, particularly in areas of justice, peace, and care for creation. It emphasized the vital role of consecrated life in the Church's synodal journey and mission. It acknowledges that consecrated life is a spiritual treasure that enriches the Church through its diverse charisms, vocations, and ministries. These charisms are seen as essential for the Church's mission and synodal renewal. Communities of consecrated life are described as "laboratories for inter-cultural living" and examples of synodal practices. Their experience in common discernment, harmonizing individual gifts, and pursuing mission together serves as a model for the broader Church. The document encourages stronger relationships between consecrated life communities and

¹⁶ *Final Document*, XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission", No. 33

¹⁷ The Role of the Ordained Ministers at the service of harmony is well defined as well as the role of the Laity as collaborators in the mission. The spirit of collaboration and differentiated co-responsibility are emphasized as well as increased participation in Church discernment processes and greater access to responsibilities in dioceses and ecclesial institutions. *Ibid.*, Nos. 68-78

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, No.96

¹⁹ *Apostolic Letter* of his Holiness Pope Francis to all Consecrated People on the occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life, November 21, 2014

local Church leadership, fostering mutual understanding and an exchange of gifts.

Consecrated persons are called to act in synergy with local Churches, participating in the dynamism of synodality and contributing to the Church's mission in diverse contexts. They are urged to engage in shared formation on Synodality with other members of the People of God, including laypeople and ordained ministers. This shared formation promotes collaboration and mutual esteem. They are encouraged to actively participate in ecclesial assemblies at regional, national, and continental levels, contributing their unique perspectives and experiences. They are affirmed and encouraged to continue their commitment to serving the marginalized, including in hospitals, prisons, schools, and other areas of need, while collaborating with the broader Church. Consecrated persons are encouraged to engage in dialogue with other Christian traditions and religions, fostering unity and collaboration in mission. Consecrated life communities are invited to share their spiritual, theological, and pastoral patrimony with the Church, contributing to the exchange of gifts that enriches the entire People of God.

These implications affirm the importance of consecrated life in the Church's synodal journey, highlighting its role in fostering unity, collaboration, and mission while serving as a prophetic witness to the Gospel.

Our Superior General, Sr. Rekha Chennattu, took these implications seriously in her message at the opening of the General Chapter when she invited the Chapter Delegates to be faithful in "living the special grace of our times."²⁰ She mapped out the mission of the Chapter Delegates, "Let us discern together what it means to be a synodal Congregation. What does a synodal community look like? What do we need to continue? What do we need to discontinue? How can we create space for the young, the middle-aged, and the elderly sisters in our community life? Can we think of new

²⁰ Saint Marie Eugenie, *Chapter instructions* on 3 December 1871 and 12 March 1876 quoted by Sr. Rekha Chennattu in her Opening Message to the 30th General Chapter of the Religious of the Assumption

structures of animation that are simpler yet more life-giving and appropriate to our contexts? How do we redefine the identity and mission of Assumption Together to make it a synodal journey in the Church? (...) We are called to make the sufferings of our world our own and to respond to them in a synodal way with both creativity and fidelity to our charism. I believe that this is our mission today as Religious of the Assumption and Assumption Laity."²¹

Synodality as a Path of Spiritual Renewal and Structural Reform in the Assumption

Every new step in the life of the Church is a return to the source. It is a renewed experience of the disciples' encounter with the Risen One,²² a new understanding of our identity and mission as well as renewed zeal for the Kingdom. The synodal journey of the Church these past three years as contained in the Final Documents and experienced by the People of God offers a path to spiritual renewal and structural reform. Perhaps for some who expected a "great revolution" at the heart of the Church, like the ordination of women priests or married men getting ordained into the priesthood, the Document of the Synod on Synodality might come as a disappointment but for the many who have reflected long and hard upon the Church and the challenges she faces in these our times, the Synod, is effecting a "silent revolution"²³ first and foremost at the internal dynamics and culture of the Church and to the understanding and living of her mission (ad intra, ad extra).

In the Assumption, we recognize that there is still a long way to go in our synodal journey as a Congregation. The call to personal and collective metanoia remains *a priori* in this synodal journey. As Sr. Rekha succinctly put it, "It implies a profound change of mindset – a change in our attitudes and our way of feeling, listening, and responding. It entails a transformative God experience, an experience of both dying and rising, an experience of rebirth. Let

²¹ Sr. Rekha Chennattu, Opening Message, General Chapter 2024

²² Final Document. P.1

²³ The Synod on Synodality is one of the final great acts of Pope Francis' Pontificate and the central point of his legacy to the Church. *ABC de la Synodalité*, sous la direction de Ludovic Danto, Les Editions du Cerf, 2024.

us be humble enough to allow ourselves to be challenged and transformed".²⁴ Our General Chapter 2024 Document invites us to "undertake a process of personal, community and institutional metanoia in order to live boldly all the dimensions of our life".

In sync with the movement of the Church, our General Chapter 2024 Document embodies our desire for spiritual renewal and structural change. Our desire to grow in synodality as a Congregation is explicitly mapped out in its vision²⁵ that states, ***In dialogue with our realities, and convinced of what our charism can offer, we desire to be 'pilgrims of hope' in our wounded world. More aware of the complementarity of our vocations as Assumption Together, of the richness and the challenges of our diversity, and as an international and synodal family, we commit ourselves to: Undertake a process of personal, community and institutional metanoia in order to live boldly all the dimensions of our life; Promote integral ecology and an authentic culture of care for more communion in our communities and apostolic works; and strengthen the prophetic dimension of our mission of transformative education, giving priority to the peripheries and young people, "placing the person at the center"***. Furthermore, this vision will be concretized through the different priority areas: Priority #1 *To keep alive the flame for a joyful consecrated life in fullness*. Our desire for a more unified and humane life implies a long process which requires multiple conversions, perseverance and personal responsibility²⁶; Priority #2 *Promote a formation which responds to the grace and needs of our times* which entails the renewal of formation so that synodality becomes an integral part of our spirituality and our way of living in daily life; Priority #3 *Continue the journey to become a more synodal Congregation* which impels us to develop a culture and spirituality of synodality and organize structures of animation and government to foster our sense of body-congregation; Priority #4 *Grow in a culture of communication*. We want to welcome each other in our cultural

²⁴ Sr. Rekha Chennattu, *Letter of Promulgation* of the texts of the General Chapter Documents 2024

²⁵ Chapter Document 2024

²⁶ One of the necessary means to live this priority area is to reread, deepen, appropriate and update the Rule of Life. Prayer, a meeting with God in mystery is fundamental in our daily life – the Eucharist, the Divine Office, spiritual reading, etc. Rule of Life, Nos. 62-73

diversity, in our creative ways of embodying the charism, in the multiplicity of projects of transformative education. We feel responsible for this life that circulates for us and for the world; Priority #5 *Respond with others, as educators, to the urgent realities of our time*; Priority #6 *Go forward with audacity and humility in co-responsibility, sisters / laity / young people*. The important thing is to advance together in co-responsibility, respecting our different rhythms and acknowledging the blessing of our diversity. Finally, the Assumption Together Document charts the synodal journey that Sisters and Lay Collaborators, founded in complementarity of vocation, will undertake in nurturing a dynamic and inclusive community, working together with mutual respect and shared responsibility to promote social justice, and transformative education, in the light of the Assumption charism, with a particular focus on youth.

In our synodal journey as a Congregation, it is good to revisit our Rule of Life and to reclaim our fundamental choice as Sisters. "All the sisters are responsible for creating in the community the climate of discernment which is essential for recognizing the action of the Spirit in the world, and together they study how best to discover God's plan for them. This constant effort to respond to the calls coming from God, the Church and the world is expressed in the Chapters of the Congregation at their different levels. The decisions of the Chapters are binding for each sister. The generosity with which each one gives up her own will and accepts what has been decided, strengthens communion and builds up the community. In this way the whole Congregation is formed in love, thanks to the fidelity of each of its members."²⁷

In addition to Scriptures and our Rule of Life, we have a beautiful and comprehensive General Chapter 2024 Document for our guide. May these words come alive in our hearts and in each of our communities all over the world. As we move forward in this synodal journey, we ask for the intercession of St. Marie Eugenie, our Mother. She walks with us. Like her, may we fix our gaze on Jesus Christ and the extension of His Kingdom.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my heart-felt gratitude to some persons who made this project possible: Sr. Rekha

²⁷ Rules of life n°32

and her Council for encouraging this initiative, Sr. Mercedes and her Team for their hard-work and perseverance in bringing this project to fruition and to all the translators who labored to translate this work to other languages. God walks with us.

Education

Presuppositions of Synodality in the Assumptionist School

Sister Kotryna Danguolė Gervytė

The question "Whether" and "How" an Assumptionist school can educate a synodally active and reflective student can only be answered if we answer the question of whether the Assumptionist school itself is synodal. After all, one cannot impart what one does not have oneself. There are two ways of examining the features of the synodality of the Assumptionist school in practice. Firstly, an empirical (quantitative/qualitative) study could assess to what extent the schools belonging to the Sisters of the Assumption in different countries are synodal, i.e. to what extent the practices used between the educators themselves, between the educators and the pupils, and among the pupils to promote synodal thinking and action. This would be a study of how school leaders, sisters, all staff, pupils, parents are involved in decision-making, how dialogue and listening are promoted, how shared leadership is fostered, etc. It would be a major empirical study and even an evaluation of the quality of schools. A limitation of such a study would be the different socio-cultural and educational policy contexts, which would make comparisons, as in all international studies, difficult.

Another possible approach to understanding of the synodality of an Assumptionist school is the reading and analysis of its

educational tradition and of the documents and sources common to all Assumptionist schools. Such an analysis may allow us to understand whether there are, and what are, preconditions for the development of synodality. **In this article, an analysis of the documents on Assumptionist education (common to the whole Congregation and its educational institutions) will be carried out in the light of Pope Francis' vision of synodality.** The documents analysed are only those that directly or indirectly underpin the activities of all the schools; they are not a description or strategy for an individual school, much less norms of an administrative nature: 1) Counsels on education (*Conseils sur l'éducation*) written by Marie Eugenie (1842), 2) Presentation of the First School (prospectus) (1843), 3) Assumption Education, reference text (*L'éducation à l'Assomption, Texte de référence*) (1997), 4) the document of the Manila International Gathering on Transformative education in the Assumption (2018). They can be distinguished as those belonging to the historical school and the contemporary ones (XX-XXI centuries). Reading these documents, we will seek to identify the preconditions for the realisation of synodality or how they can lead to more synodal thinking and action. These documents record the historical heritage of Assumptionist education, which is difficult to grasp in norms, but influences the ethos of the school.

As far as the modern Assumptionist school is concerned, it can refer not only to the tradition of the first Assumptionist schools, but also to the main documents relevant to all schools. For the purposes of this article, we limit ourselves to two documents: Assumption Education, reference text and the final documents of the Manila International Congress on Education. Only after answering what the possible features of the synodality of an Assumptionist school are, can the next question be raised: how can an Assumptionist school educate its students for synodal thinking and action.

Synodality in education

It is important to say that the school, as an institution, is neither synodal nor democratic in its nature and structure. Modern educational science is looking for alternative ways of organizing

education that would involve the whole school community in strategic decision-making, the construction of educational content and the organisation of daily life. The Catholic school, and especially the congregational school, is a very vertical, authoritarian organisation made up of opposites (binomial): teacher-pupil, knower-unknower, adult-child, older-younger, religious-layperson, and similar relationships. If school and synodality are contradictory concepts, the question can be asked whether synodality is even possible at school. The notion of synodality is a construct that has emerged in recent years with Pope Francis' call for a General Synod of the Church and, more importantly, for synodal thinking and synodal action. It is therefore important to find synonyms and/or other words that are acceptable in historical contexts. (Similarly with transformative education, which is now considered in some countries and cultures to be almost synonymous with assumptionist education, while in the time of Mary Eugenie herself the term was not even used).

The words "synod" and "synodality" are not new words, but we have "discovered" them as a new construct in preparation for, participation in and observation of the General Synod on Synodality (2021-2024). Synodality in this work means "going together" in the example of Jesus when he meets the rich young man on the road, listens to him, talks to him, and that encounter mutually helps to understand what he ought to be doing (Holy Mass for the inauguration of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, 10.10.2021). For the final document of the Synod, synodality is defined as:

*"Synodality" is the specific **modus vivendi et operandi of the Church, the People of God**, which reveals and gives substance to her being as communion when all her members journey together, gather in assembly and take an active part in her evangelizing mission" (Final document of the Synod, § 31)*

As part of the Church's mission, the Catholic school is also a place where synodality can/needs to be realised. The Synod document defines the specificity of the school as a special place where dialogue between faith and culture takes place. The school is therefore a privileged place to hear the language of the culture of

a new generation and to pour out the message of faith to them. Faith is not an "obligation" but an opportunity.

"Catholic schools and universities play an important role in the dialogue between faith and culture and in providing moral education in values, offering a formation oriented towards Christ, the icon of life in its fullness" (Final document of the Synod , § 146)

The Catholic school is the place (sometimes the **only** place) in the life of the pupil and teacher where they hear the message of faith. The school is therefore, despite its increasingly secular context, an important place for the transmission of the faith:

"In some contexts, they are the only settings where children and young people come into contact with the Church" (Final document of the Synod, § 146)

"Inspired by the practices of synodality, they can become fertile contexts for friendly and participative relationships." (Final document of the Synod, § 146)

The Synod's final document recognizes that the institutes of consecrated life are rooted locally, but at the same time they bring together people from different social backgrounds, cultures and languages, and they bring the message of the Gospel to these different environments (§ 118).

"When inspired by intercultural and interreligious dialogue, their educational engagement is also valued by those of other religious traditions as a form of human development." (Final document of the Synod, § 118)

Studies on synodality in Catholic schools are few, but one in Canada, "Synodality and Its Implications for Catholic Schools: An Exploratory Study of System Leaders in western Canadian Schools" by Hoven et al, suggests the following criteria for analysing synodality in schools: (a) Encouraging participation, (b) Culture of dialogue, (c) Building community, (d) Listening to diverse Perspectives, (e) Culture of discernment, (f) Shared Responsibility.

Richard Rymarz, in his article on Religious Education and Synodality, stresses that the involvement of teachers in Catholic education is

changing today, and that synodality requires welcoming, listening and discerning together, and he proposes a reconceptualisation of religious teaching. This could be applied to Catholic education as a whole, because it needs to be based on a changing culture and the need for different support for teachers. To move from a vertical relationship to one that is as horizontal as possible.

Richard Gaillardetz, an American theologian, in his article "Synodality and Francis Pontificate" (2023), identifies **four commitments of synodal thinking and action (Commitments), or what** might also be called four perspectives (framework of commitments), which can provide a structure for further analysis of the selected Assumptionist documents: 1) Reshaping relationships (clerical vs. baptised). This transformation of relationships promotes the creation of a horizontal community, increasing the inclusiveness and participation of all members. 2) A missionary Church. In our case it would be a reflection of the missionary nature of the church in the school. A missionary school is revealed through the ability to "walk alongside" each person wherever they are, the attention to those at the margins and the acceptance of differences. 3) Focus on the essentials of Christian faith. It is a church and a school that promotes the search for authentic spirituality rather than the observance of rubrics, and at the same time it is a school that responsibly seeks to find out how it can communicate the faith to its pupils. 4) Attentive to local decision making (subsidiarity) It is often stressed that synodality is not democracy, but rather the ability to fully perform and listen to the insights of each person according to his/her role and responsibility, and then to make decisions at different levels. Bringing this into the school, one should look for shared responsibility between the different actors in education, a spirit of discernment, the promotion of a culture of dialogue, etc.

How can synodality be the "modus vivendi et operandi" of a school? How can it affect the inner life of the school? The following 4 selected documents will answer these questions. The "grid" (framework) of the reading is the four aspects of synodality identified by Richard Gaillardetz.

The historic Assumption school and synodality

The word synodality was not used in the 19th century to refer to school organisation or to Assumptionist education. One can retrospectively try to find how in the Assumptionist schools such a phenomenon could have been called by other names, what it might have looked like, what it manifested itself as. An often-emphasised feature of Assumptionist education is **family spirit**. Parents placing their children in a boarding school entrusted them entirely to the educational institution, but the prospectus presenting the school (HIIIb) describes the internal arrangements as "**motherly**" because of the small number of pupils and the sisters' devotion to the education of girls. The structure of the historical school itself was hierarchical, though. In her *Counsels on Education*, Marie Eugenie describes the relationship between the teacher (sisters) and the girls as filled with "*invincible douceur*" (gentleness). It is not a horizontal relationship, but by no means an authoritarian one.

The register of the first pupils (1841-1847, Manuscript 00VI2) shows that the pupils were not only from French families, but also had German, Polish and English surnames. It is therefore no coincidence that the presentation to parents (Informative prospectus 1843, HIIIb) promises a good foreign language education and an emphasis on learning the mother tongue (French). Also, in the Introduction to the Constitution of the Congregation of the Sisters of Assumption (1841)²⁸, Father Combalot speaks of families in England, America and northern Italy who want a French upbringing for their daughters who, on their return, will take an important place in the cultural and social life of the community. These records suggest that from the very beginning the Assumptionist school had an **intercultural and international** environment. In her *Counsels on Education*, Marie Eugénie "defends" girls from non-believing families ("*incrédule*"), saying that they are most in need of an Assumptionist education:

"But let us put aside such unbelieving families, although the attractiveness of your house may have led to the child I mention, being confided to you, for after all, these are the type of pupils I

²⁸ Introduction aux constitution 1839-1840, Texte Fondateur 1991

desire since they are the ones with the greatest need." (Counsels on Education, 1842, No 1511)

It is a kind of attempt to reach out to the "margins" of the Church at that time and evangelise them. The sisters are invited to transmit the faith to the girls, to imprint it on their souls, as mothers transmit the body. This is the missionary characteristic of the Church, which is lived out in the school.

"But when you, my dear daughters, assume the role of mother towards these children, who perhaps will only learn about Christian life from you, you will never become mothers of flesh and blood in reality. (...) It is its [the Church's] doctrine, its wisdom and truth alone that you must develop in them." (Counsels on Education, 1842, No 1511)

The unity and common understanding of educators was also very important to Marie Eugenie, and she offers to sacrifice even better methods for the sake of it, as long as educators are united. All those who work in education are familiar with the invitation from the *Counsels on Education* to have uniform methods:

"... It would be better for education to adopt a manner, perhaps not as good as all these, but which can be followed uniformly by all the mistresses." (Counsels on Education, 1842, No 1511)

What we would now call pedagogical agreements, cooperation, a common strategy, etc., was expressed as a call to keep the spirit of the house and to leave our own thoughts and our own style.

In summary, it would be wrong to say that the first or historical Assumptionist school tried to change relations from vertical to horizontal, but it was attentive to local decision-making and even to certain agreements between teachers, to the fostering of a spirit of family (as it was understood at that time). Meanwhile, the mission of the school, as transmitting the faith of and developing not just a moral but a spiritual life, was made very clear: to "imprint" Christian wisdom on souls and to transmit the faith to the daughters of families on the "margins" of the Church at that time.

The vision of the modern Assumptionist school in educational documents

Reading the Reference Guide of Education in the Assumption, one immediately sees a greater emphasis on collaboration, different relationships, a shift from clerical (or religious) to lay rule, and a theological rationale for this as God's plan for humanity. A spiritual basis for a united (not uniform) humanity is given.

"God became man, a member of our human family, in solidarity with our humanness, to reveal to us the value of all human life, so that every human being might attain full potential, and to fulfil God's plan: to make of humankind one people, thus destroying the walls of separation." (Reference guide, II chapter)

This is the basis for becoming a welcoming Church community. As an echo of the *Counsels on Education*, there is a call in Chapter V to work as a team in the best interests of the child.

"Ability to work in a team. "Do you know what it is that is the most important, the most difficult, acquired neither by study nor intelligence... ? It is a perfect unity in our way of treating the pupils." (Reference guide, Chapter V)

Meanwhile, the mission of the school as a place for the transmission of the faith is more poorly understood, and is more about building a welcoming Church community, as a way of creating a more beautiful and better society, but not about the transmission of the faith. The concept of the Kingdom of God is often used, which implies a refusal of violence and injustice and respect for the smallest persons. Listening to the cry of the world is a condition for building the Kingdom of God:

„We need to listen to and have feeling for the cries of our peoples and societies. We have to know and love our own history, our culture, our own times, and to make a preferential option for the poor and marginalized. “ (Reference guide Chapter IV)

Of course, the Kingdom of God is based on faith, and our understanding of the world is rooted in our faith in Jesus Christ. Chapter IV of the *Reference Guide* develops how Assumption education is inseparable from the proclamation of the Gospel, but

unlike the *Directory on Education*, it does not speak of the proclamation of Jesus Christ. The same line is maintained in the Manila documents: values and virtues are put first, but not evangelisation through the school itself. This resonates with the Synod's final document, where the school is seen as a privileged place for the transmission of the faith, especially to those who are not traditionally reached by the Church.

The Manila document, even more than the *Reference Guide*, highlights the changes in relationships. It says that the community is the place where insight and visioning take place.

*"For us, the **community is the place of birth, of rooting, of discernment of the vision which is proper to us.** This vision is not a static given, but the fruit of our common prayer, **of our effort to live together in love and the purification of our gaze,** which strengthens our inner liberty. **In fact, we believe that it is in the community that the transformation begins** which we are aiming for in our educational work." (p. 35)*

Collaboration with others is a source of strength, with an emphasis on encounter as the direction to be followed in all strategy and decision-making. The encounter also allows for the exchange of good experiences, learning together and reflecting on how God's plan can be embodied.

Summarising the two documents on Assumptionist education from the 20th to the 21st century in the context of synodality, we see a growing emphasis on local decisions, on the local community (distinctions are understood as assets), and a change in the relationship from clerical (or where sisters are at the top of the management chain of command) to collegial. Meanwhile, the mission of the Church in the school is more focused on social welfare, inclusivity and less on direct evangelisation and transmission of the faith. This may also be due to the socio-cultural context, where the social mission of the church is more accepted than the spreading of the faith.

What is the **practical usefulness or applicability of** this reading of the documents of Assumptionist education from the perspective of synodality? **The General Chapter (2025)** calls us to greater

synodality and to an honest evaluation of our educational institutions.

“Act within networks as an indispensable way of having a greater impact on our world, convinced that work as ‘inter’ enriches and energises our charism“ (General Chapter Final Document 5.2)

The Chapter also invites us to evaluate the transformative effect of our educational institutions:

*„Carry out **an honest evaluation of our apostolic works** at the provincial level to assess to what extent they are a force for social transformation in their respective contexts. (General Chapter Final Document 5.6)*

It is likely that some of the insights from this article may help to better understand the quality of schools or even contribute to the development of an evaluation document (grid).

Changing demographics, especially in the Global North, are forcing the management of Assumptionist schools to be handed over to lay people. The administrative role is only part of the management of the institution. The question remains unanswered to what extent the sisters allow the charism to continue to be interpreted and modelled by the laity, to be newly worded and to be adapted to the changed conditions. It would be a very important step forward to allow encounters with lay people from different cultures on the understanding and application of the charism. It would also be a practical implementation of synodality in the development of a modern concept of Assumptionist education.

Concluding remarks

This reading of the documents from the perspective of the synodality opened by Pope Francis is not a scholarly work, so it is more appropriate to make a few observations than to draw generalizing conclusions.

- 1) In the documents on Assumptionist education, there is a move away from vertical management, with sisters at the

top of the pyramid, towards more teamwork and shared visioning.

- 2) Historically, the emphasis on the transmission of the content of the faith has been decreasing, but the understanding of the kingdom of God and the building of a society based on values is expanding. There are more prerequisites for inclusiveness and diversity in school.
- 3) Synodality and the 4 components identified in this article can be criteria for making sense of the current situation in Assumption schools. This would be a step from theoretical descriptions and assumptions to a real evaluation of the quality of education.

Key words

Catholic education, Catholic schools, Assumption education, Pope Francis, Synod, Synodality, walking together, listening, discerning, authority.

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Archives

Mary Eugenie and synodality

Sister Véronique Thiébaud
Archivist of the Congregation

"Jesus Christ is the principle, the trunk of all. The more you love Him, the more you will love the other branches in Him. You will see and reverence the different degrees and expressions of his grace and his life in the priest, in the poor and in religious men and women of every kind, but beware not to seek participation in this communion in any way other than through the general communion of the faithful, for the sap that nourishes one must never be taken at the expense on another. Only the trunk can sustain all the branches. It is a dangerous illusion of our age to want to be the trunk or at least to make oneself universal. Be content to be a branch, if you wish to be anything at all, and believe that you will never be better disposed to charity towards all than by humbly remaining in your place, as you are called to be, in Jesus Christ."²⁹

In this letter, addressed to Father d'Alzon in 1844, Marie Eugénie de Jésus shares her vision of the Church as a tree made up of many branches, each equally vital. In the context of this exchange, the young foundress encourages Father d'Alzon to dare to be fully

²⁹ ME, Letters to Father d'Alzon, 1844, n°1630

himself, both personally and through the work he seeks to establish³⁰, while respecting others who, though different, belong to the same body... She expresses what remains one of the great synodal challenges of religious life: *"Nothing is more difficult... than to harmonise respect for the spirit of others with the energy of one's own spirit, and freedom with obedience."* Almost two centuries later, the final document of the Synod on Synodality echoes this same motif of harmony: *"It is the presence of the One who, by giving the Holy Spirit, continues to inspire in his people a unity that is the harmony of differences."*³¹

A broad vision

The image of the tree and its branches illustrates Marie Eugénie's openness. She believes that the Religious of the Assumption, *'rich in the spirit of the Church'*³² and heirs of Saint Augustine, are called to share in his expansive heart: *"This is another of the admirable things we find in Saint Augustine. This great Doctor has a heart as broad as the Church, a mind as broad as the Church. There is nothing particular or exclusive in him. This, my sisters, is another of the characteristics of our Congregation. We must have something Catholic, something universal."*³³ Elsewhere she wrote: *"Our character must be a very Catholic one; and, without having anything strange or extraordinary, we must make our life out of everything that is the life of the Church."*³⁴

This broad vision finds its strength in a baptismal theology that affirms the role of every baptised person in the life of the Church. Marie Eugénie asked her sisters: *"What is the Church, my sisters? It is the assembly of the faithful under legitimate pastors. The Church,*

³⁰ The Augustinians of the Assumption were founded in 1845.

³¹ For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission, Introduction to the Final Document of the Synod, October 2024

³² ME, Chapter Instructions, 3rd of March 1878

³³ ME, Chapter Instructions, 10th of March 1878

³⁴ ME, Chapter Instructions, 5th of May 1878

therefore, is the faithful souls: every baptised soul belongs to the Church." ³⁵

For her, the Church was never the work of clergy alone. It is shaped daily by the commitment of all its members: *"How is the Church formed? Through the work of people (...) The preparation of the members of the Church is not done by priests alone. All lay people, all those who lead an apostolic life, prepare or preserve the life of Jesus Christ in souls and thus contribute to forming that mystical body so dear to Jesus Christ. This is our consolation. (...) Work, and the work of people who love Jesus Christ, who are filled with his spirit, is the first element through which the Church is formed. (...) Let us therefore go with courage and generosity to a work that the Church of God declares so great and which is ours."* ³⁶

What she says about the Church, she also applies to each Church community. This is how she understands the Congregation of the Religious of the Assumption: as a body in which every sister, together with each person close to the Congregation, is welcomed with their gifts and contributes to the common work: *"All the members help each other, preserve each other, support each other, live in the most perfect unity (...) Through this bond of love and charity, you must attach yourselves to one another and regard yourselves as members of the same body."* ³⁷

Moreover, she sees herself as a cathedral builder: *"Like the workers of our old cathedrals, many work without being aware of what they are doing for the city in the future. We must accept this role if necessary; I have told myself this for a long time."* ³⁸

The interdependence and responsibility that characterise community life translate into duties for the members of a community: *"You also have duties to fulfil as part of a family, a religious congregation. Here on earth, we are all interdependent, we depend on one another (...) Every individual in this world must ask oneself whether, in the sphere where God has placed them,*

³⁵ ME, Chapter Instructions, 11th of July 1880

³⁶ ME, Chapter Instructions, 30th of September 1881

³⁷ ME, Chapter Instructions, 22nd of June 1884

³⁸ ME, Letters to Father d'Alzon, 1844, no. 1611

one conscientiously fulfils the duties of one's state, and to what extent one strives to extend the reign of God and the spirit of Our Lord Jesus Christ. We, who belong to a Congregation, to a religious body, how much more must we examine whether we are fulfilling the duties to which we are bound as members of that body."³⁹

Each sister, whatever her mission, participates in building up the Body: "One walks, it is for the service of religion. Another teaches; it is for the service of religion. One speaks, another is silent and suffers in illness, it is for the service of religion. Another cooks, or takes care of the house, another watches over the children: all this is for the service of the same religious body of which Jesus Christ is the head..."⁴⁰

The call to shared responsibility finds striking relevance in today's age of synodality. Marie Eugénie insisted: "We build when, in the religious edifice that must rise to heaven, each one brings that stone, that cement, that element that makes it rise. Such is a religious congregation."⁴¹ She reminds her sisters that "each of us has, to a certain extent, responsibility for the Institute, which is still in its infancy."⁴² And she stresses that this responsibility extends beyond the pioneers: "We must not believe that it is only the very first sisters who are responsible for building this city of the Assumption: you all have a responsibility to set an example for those who will follow you."⁴³

For her, every sister has a unique role to play, according to her particular grace: "Each of you has your own special gifts, in the measure that God has seen fit to bestow upon you: one has received more wisdom, another more talents, another more amiability of character, another more firmness of conduct (...) All these divine gifts, all these goods must be given to God and to the Congregation. (...) As St. Paul says: 'The stars have different degrees of brightness; not all have received the same brilliance, the same strength. As there are stars in the sky, so there are different

³⁹ ME, Chapter Instructions, 7th of May 1871

⁴⁰ ME, Chapter Instructions, 22nd of June 1884

⁴¹ ME, Chapter Instructions, 29th of July 1877

⁴² ME, Chapter Instructions, 12th of July 1874

⁴³ ME, Chapter Instructions, 13th of June 1884

*degrees of greatness and brightness. It is also said that each leaf, among the countless species of plants and trees on earth, has its own distinct and particular form. Similarly, souls shine in different ways; they have their own form; they have not received universal gifts from God, but each has the share that is sufficient for it to accomplish its mission and give God the glory He expects.”*⁴⁴

Such vivid images anticipate what the Synod document later described as the “*conviviality of differences*”, a harmony born from diversity, where each gift builds up the whole.

Seeking together

In the early days of the Congregation, Marie Eugénie captured the spirit of its mission with a striking phrase: “*we seek together the means...*”⁴⁵ By these words, she revealed a leadership style grounded not in authority alone, but in collaboration and shared vision. Though she was the foundress and superior general, she never claimed to hold the Assumption's destiny by herself. Instead, she embraced a collective journey, embodying the very essence of synodality. Nonetheless, this path was far from easy. The first community was shaped by strong and diverse personalities, making the pursuit of unity both a challenge and a profound source of growth.

Discernment regarding the practice of the night office is an example of a difficult synodal reflection. It took place in 1846, when the monastic character of the Congregation was becoming clearer. Reading Marie Eugénie's letters from that year, we see that the idea arose from the community as a whole, the fruit of a climate of free exchange: “*Our long recreation periods lead to such enthusiastic conversations about the traditions and magnificence of the great religious customs that our sisters asked me today, in their enthusiasm, to try to say the Office at midnight, while going to bed at 8h15.*”⁴⁶ She recalled: “*It was the feast day of St. Catherine of Siena, and it was while discussing the beauty of traditional*

⁴⁴ ME, Chapter Instructions, 26th of June 1870

⁴⁵ ME, Chapter Instructions, 24th of September 1867

⁴⁶ ME, Letters to Father d'Alzon, 1st of May 1846, no. 1718

*monastic customs that our sisters asked me to try this. I no longer remember who first suggested it, but Sr. Thérèse Emmanuel, Sr. Marie Thérèse, Marie Gertrude, Claire Emmanuel and all the postulants, all of them in fact, strongly supported it, with the exception of Sr. Marie Augustine. She raised some objections which I took so seriously that, while sympathising with the majority, I did not immediately agree that it was a good idea to try it."*⁴⁷

Marie Eugénie created space for every sister's voice to be heard, even Marie Augustine's anger. She welcomed her into personal dialogue, encouraging her to express the full weight of her objections.⁴⁸ Aware of her own uncertainty, the young superior chose to pause: "*I find that night office is not a big deal, but I don't know if God wants it, and I see that it can frighten many people. I am leaving this question aside.*"⁴⁹ In time, Marie Augustine's stance softened: "*...she came to tell me that, although it was still not her opinion, she would not oppose trying it for the whole summer, for example, or adopting this rule.*"⁵⁰ The community, led by Thérèse Emmanuel, first proposed an eight-day trial. But her own fatigue delayed the start. Marie Augustine's renewed resistance, combined with Marie Eugénie's exhaustion, led to further postponements. Throughout, Marie Eugénie made it clear that she had neither initiated nor pressed for the practice: she had simply yielded to the sisters' collective desire, not wishing to stand in the way of what might prove to be God's will. She also insisted that every sister should be consulted. In her report to Father d'Alzon, what shines through is her determination to seek God's will, not in her own preferences, but in the interplay of her sisters' voices. At the close of the experiment, she judged that keeping the night office year-round would be too demanding, particularly in the winter. A new proposal emerged: "*Perhaps we could rise only on certain feast days, which we would make more or less numerous, depending on how well we could bear it. We could take a whole octave especially in the summer. Sr. Thérèse Emmanuel proposed*

⁴⁷ ME, Letters to Father d'Alzon, 16th of May 1846, no. 1724

⁴⁸ Cf. ME, Letters to Father d'Alzon, 8th of May 1846, no. 1721

⁴⁹ ME, Letters to Father d'Alzon, 8th of May 1846, no. 1721

⁵⁰ ME, Letters to Father d'Alzon, 26th of May 1846, no. 1731

adding the 25th of each month in honour of the Nativity.”⁵¹ Though most sisters, apart from Marie Augustine, were ready to adopt the practice daily, the community ultimately chose a middle path, limiting the night office to major feast days.

This very concrete example shows that, from the very beginning of the Congregation, the common search was nourished by informal exchanges that allowed for creative proposals. While respecting each person’s pace and resistance, they drew on experience to envision a third way that took greater account of reality. Marie Eugénie also emphasised the importance of experience elsewhere, particularly when she asked Abbé Combalot to write the introduction to the Constitutions: *“This first seed is important. Once it has been completed and modified by experience, the Constitutions can emerge.”*

Pope Francis, for his part, speaks of a synodal discernment that leads to *“the creative implementation of new forms of ministry and missionary action, experimenting and evaluating experiences.”*⁵²

Unity as harmony⁵³

For Marie Eugénie, the sense of responsibility at the heart of synodality rests on the full use of the gifts God has given us, intelligence, heart, and memory⁵⁴, in a movement of adoration that embraces every action, word and choice of our lives. The guarantee of this responsibility is that it is not exercised for oneself: *“You must do what is in the order of your Institute, and do it with great zeal. You must not do it out of personal search and views.”*⁵⁵ Each sister is therefore invited to serve the common good, sharing the foundress's dream of *“complete harmony for the good.”*⁵⁶

⁵¹ Cf. ME, Letters to Father d'Alzon, 13-14th of May 1846, no. 1724

⁵² *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission*, Accompanying Note by Pope Francis, 24th of October 2024

⁵³ Cf. *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission*, Introduction to the Final Document of the Synod, October 2024, nos. 34-42

⁵⁴ Cf. ME, Chapter Instructions, 17th, 24th and 31st of October 1880

⁵⁵ ME, Chapter Instructions, 17th of November 1878

⁵⁶ ME, Letters to Father d'Alzon, No. 1810, 23rd of January 1847

In a spirit that anticipates the Synod of 2024, Marie Eugénie weaves together Pauline and Augustinian visions of the body of Christ, moving from harmony to unity: "...our God, who is Jesus Christ, has brought us all together in one body, his own. He is the head, and we are the members. We must help and love one another as members of the same body. Does the right hand tear the left hand, or does the hand cut off the foot to hurt it? No. All the members help, preserve and support one another, living in the most perfect unity. Saint Augustine, in his doctrine, repeats over and over again: You are the body of Christ; you must love one another, depend on Jesus Christ, and let the influence of that adorable head, which is Christ, flow through the whole body, which is the Church. Above all else, love God, and then your neighbour..."⁵⁷

In exercising co-responsibility according to each person's particular grace, certain elements safeguard unity—the "unity of spirit which must be the strength of our Assumption," the "perfect unity of mind and heart which has been the strength and foundation of the Church."⁵⁸

This unity draws its source above all from mutual affection and esteem: "Thanks be to God, we have always preserved in the Congregation this true, sincere affection for one another, which makes for an intimate union of hearts."⁵⁹ Marie Eugénie considered this unity of hearts, which she fought to preserve throughout her life, a precious gift: "I urge you again, my sisters, to maintain among yourselves this powerful fraternal bond, this closeness of hearts in unity, which means that as sisters we must love one another more than we love others. Soon we will part, some of us going very far away, but our Lord is a gentle and strong bond to keep us united if we pray to him."⁶⁰

Such unity also requires deep respect for each person: "Always maintain respect for everything and everyone in their proper place in homes and boarding schools; this is the mark of the spirit of Jesus

⁵⁷ ME, Chapter Instructions, 20th of August 1886

⁵⁸ ME, Chapter Instructions, 4th of June 1876

⁵⁹ ME, Chapter Instructions, 26th of June 1870

⁶⁰ ME, Chapter Instructions, 13th of August 1891

*Christ. With regard to children, respect their teachers. Also show esteem for those who are charged with helping to do good, such as the Children of Mary, considering more the good they can do than the faults we find in them..."*⁶¹

Unity through Respect for Roles

Marie Eugénie's vision of unity is not that of a confused organisation where responsibilities are blurred or diluted. Rather, it is grounded in respect for the role of each sister, a respect that sometimes requires renunciation. She illustrated this with the example of a boarding school: *"Remember that there is more good for all the children where there is not the slightest disagreement. Everything doesn't need to be perfectly arranged and conducted. Still, it is essential that, in the eyes of the children, the teachers have only relations of unity and perfect charity among themselves. All this requires patience and generosity in giving of oneself, in sacrificing one's own point of view, in always being gentle and even-tempered."*⁶²

Marie Eugénie frequently returned to this point: *"...that there be great unity among the teachers, each renouncing her own views and ideas in order to try to understand exactly the ideas of those who are in charge of each class, and to faithfully enforce the rules adopted by the head teacher and the boarding school teacher responsible for student discipline. Without this unity, no good can be done, and this unity is based on a spirit of humility."*⁶³

For her, true unity meant subordination freely practiced by all, with respect for the responsibility of each, whether she was superior, cook, bursar, nurse, or boarding school mistress.⁶⁴

Limits within Responsibility

Even if zeal in responsibility is a valuable quality, Marie Eugénie advised the sisters to recognise the limits set by their mission: *"Know how to defer to the opinion of the sisters who are in charge of the*

⁶¹ ME, Chapter Instructions, 13th of June 1884

⁶² ME, Chapter Instructions, 1st of April 1881

⁶³ ME, Chapter Instructions, 11 October 1874

⁶⁴ Cf. ME, Chapter Instructions, 1 October 1886

children, whether it be the boarding school mistress, the class mistress, or the study mistress, in what she tells you to do, so that there may be unity and harmony in the organisation of the boarding school. Thus, let the sisters in charge of lessons confine themselves to the framework that has been outlined for them, let them take the trouble to see things through to the end and, out of misguided zeal, let them not go any further.”⁶⁵

The Art of Seeking Advice

Accepting limits does not contradict the ongoing effort to expand shared responsibility. A rereading of the first General Chapters of the Congregation reveals a recurring motif: the creation of councils designed precisely to broaden participation in common reflection.

By 1864, Marie Eugénie was preparing to seek Rome’s approval of the Institute. She recognised that such a step required the wisdom of the entire Congregation, not just her own insight. This is why, *“she asked to be assisted in this work by a Council chosen for this purpose by the General Chapter and charged with representing it.”*

The General Chapter confirmed this approach, envisioning what it called a *Permanent Chapter*: *“If it is deemed appropriate to establish it, this Council may be called a Permanent Chapter and serve as a support and control for the Superiors General, who will then be assisted not only by the advice of their Council, whose members should reside at the Mother House as far as possible, but also by the advice of this Chapter, whose members will be able to perform duties everywhere that will keep them informed of the various affairs and needs of the Congregation.”*

For Marie Eugénie, such a structure was not just administrative but deeply synodal: a way of *“acting in agreement with the entire Congregation”* while bearing the responsibility for necessary

⁶⁵ ME, Chapter Instructions, 24 September 1871

corrections. The decision to appoint ten members ensured that the circle of discernment was wide enough to be truly representative.⁶⁶

Broadening Consultation

In 1870, during the 3rd General Chapter, Marie Eugénie noted that *“in the Observations appended to the Approval, the plurality of advice given to the Superior General is disapproved of.”* Should this be seen as evidence of a habit of consultation far broader than what the Church envisaged at the time?

Marie Eugénie, however, valued the possibility of extending discussion to sisters beyond the General Council, since *“it is useful to have as much insight as possible,”* particularly when receiving novices and young professed sisters. She therefore proposed the election of two Examiners, in addition to the General Council, who would join in the reception votes. These Examiners would also serve as Supplementary Councillors in the absence of regular Councillors. The proposal was adopted unanimously.

She further suggested the appointment of a six-year commission to oversee *“everything concerning the Rules, their final drafting and any modifications that might result either from the Observations already received, from the Acts of the Council, or from our own experience.”*

Sustaining Unity after Crisis

In 1886, after the storm that caused Marie Eugénie deep suffering and threatened the unity of the Congregation, the General Chapter, encouraged by its president, accepted *“the composition of an interim Chapter that the Superior General may convene with the advice of her Council in the interval of six years. This Chapter shall be composed only of the Central Council, the former Superiors General, all the Superiors of the Congregation, the General Treasurer, and the Novice Mistresses.”*⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Cf. Cahier des Actes des Chapitres, reference 004_A in the Archives of the Religious of the Assumption

⁶⁷ 004_A in the Archives of the Religious of the Assumption Cf. Cahier des Actes des Chapitres, reference

The Necessity of Seeking Advice

The experience of the first General Chapters helps explain why Marie Eugénie insisted on the need to seek advice, regardless of one's responsibility: *"Does this mean that the Superior General herself can rely on her own wisdom? The Congregation would be very unfortunate if the Superior General relied on her own mind. The Rule has ensured to surround her with more precautions than the others: she has assistants, advisers. It is her duty, in matters of some importance, to seek advice, to set aside her own opinion and take a more general view from among those presented to her and which seem to be more in accordance with God's plans."*⁶⁸

In other words, Marie Eugénie did not absolutise the role of the foundress or of the superior. She did not believe that the success of the foundation should depend on a single person *"who has the spirit of God."* Rather, she favoured a shared vision.

Humility, a Condition for Synodality

Humility, a condition for synodality Basically, Marie Eugénie often insists, using several examples, on this 'synodal style', 'practised with humility'⁶⁹, which is present in the Synod document. In one of her chapters, Marie Eugénie speaks of 'the spirit of unity based on the spirit of humility'.⁷⁰ A first expression of this humility is simply to do what God gives us to do: *"Sometimes we are tempted to want to know and judge the work of others, what God would want the bursar to do when we are not the bursar, or the boarding school teacher when we are not the boarding school teacher. This is neither in the order nor in the will of God. God's will places each of us in a circle that must be filled perfectly, leaving our own minds behind and doing, with obedience, fervour and love, what God gives us to do."*⁷¹

⁶⁸ ME, Chapter Instructions, 12th of August 1881

⁶⁹Cf. *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission*, Introduction to the Final Document of the Synod, October 2024, no. 47 & ME, Chapter Instructions, 20th of August 1886

⁷⁰ ME, Chapter Instructions, 11th of October 1874

⁷¹ ME, Chapter Instructions, 12th of August 1881

Humility as Dispossession

Humility also rests on an inner capacity for dispossession, another condition of synodality: *"...the first of all qualities is to know that we are only hired workers to work in the vineyard and that the owner of the vineyard is Jesus Christ. It is therefore up to him to watch over it. It is on him that all our concerns must fall (...) Our house is not ours. Our boarding schools are not ours, our works are not ours (...) We are like bees in a hive. The hive belongs to the owner, and the bees do not take it with them when they leave. In the same way, our boarding schools and our works belong to the Church."* ⁷² This call to dispossession also resounds as a warning not to think of oneself more highly than one ought: *"While being solicitous because we are charged with part of the work, we must have the greatest confidence, because the field entrusted to us belongs to God and he will take care of it. That is the first principle I will lay down for the work. The second is this: Do not look at what you are doing, but at whom you are doing it for."* ⁷³ Although Marie Eugénie counted the responsibility of a religious toward her Congregation among her duties of state, she insisted that relying on God rather than oneself allows responsibility to be lived more peacefully and frees one from *"the eagerness and agitation that make us seem to want to carry the whole house."* ⁷⁴

Humility as Guardian of Talents

Marie Eugénie exhorted the sisters to humility: *"Humility is the true guardian of the talents God entrusts to us. Humility knows how to use what we have, without anxiously seeking what we do not have. And we will have done enough for God if, without wasting time looking at what we have not been given, we peacefully and humbly use the little we have received (...) Never lose this affection, this union of hearts that makes you so happy to be together, this charity that gives so much freedom to the heart."* ⁷⁵

⁷² ME, Chapter Instructions, 18th of August 1878

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ ME, Chapter Instructions, 15th of March 1874

⁷⁵ ME, Chapter Instructions, 26 June 1870

Building Together

Marie Eugénie's thought and experience show that she deeply believed in the virtue of reflecting together. She was firmly convinced that the Assumption could come into being and endure only if it was built collectively, just as the Constitutions themselves were written by several hands. The common goal made it possible to search, to experiment, and to create as a community: *"When a cathedral is being built and the plan calls for perfectly round shapes, what would happen if a worker took it into his head to make a pointed arch in the middle of these circles? This ogive might be executed with great talent, but it would disfigure a Romanesque building. Similarly, your own design may be good, admirable, on the day you are asked to propose it and create a whole."*⁷⁶

⁷⁶ ME, Chapter Instructions, 24 March 1878

Theology

Synodality, New Developments and contributions to the development of the present- day Church

Sister Ana Senties

An essential theme

Synodality is a topic that has been much talked and written about in recent years, so much so that it might seem familiar and trite. But what is new about the Synod on Synodality 2021-24 for the Church's journey?

Recently Don Jaime Calderón, our Archbishop of León (Guanajuato, Mexico) shared his experience with us. He was one of the members for Latin America, appointed in 2018 by Pope Francis to the Council which, at the end of the Synod of Youth, was entrusted to carry out a consultation in view of the next Synod.

The most voted theme -says Don Jaime- was precisely, Synodality. He recalls:

"The Holy Father insisted: synod means mission, as opposed to individualism and the growing competitive spirit in our societies".

The synod would have a dimension of participation, of communion, based on respect for differences, in a horizon of unity, not of primacy of one group over another. These years of synodal process have led each participant to live a dynamic of conversion, especially in the learning of “conversation in the Spirit”, which is a process of community discernment. The starting point is personal reflection, which involves listening to each participant, attentive to where “our heart burns”. Intertwining thoughts and feelings in a vital harmony, we welcome that “we” to which the Spirit leads us to continue renewing our mission in the world”.¹

In his pastoral letter 2024, Don Jaime proposes that we do the same process in our diocese, in view of the new Pastoral Project.

A Bit of History

The Synod's Final Document “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission” begins by describing the experience as a *return to the source*² to the ecclesial community gathered in the Upper Room on Easter evening.

Throughout these 2000 years, communities and ecclesial groups have listened to their realities and contexts in order to reinvent new apostolic, liturgical and spiritual responses.

The early Church was characterised by this attitude: the Acts of the Apostles refers, for example, to the discernment that led to the first Council, the Council of Jerusalem³. There were differences between the disciples of Jewish origin and those of other cultures, who did not practise circumcision and the rites of the Jewish tradition. After discussion and confrontation, after reading the action of the Spirit in their encounters and experiences, they are led to a new way of situating themselves, which shows the maturing of a discernment about the way the Gospel is called to come alive in the new stage: “the Holy Spirit and we have decided...”.⁴

This phrase, which introduces the decision taken, makes clear the disciples' awareness of God's action which has made them move towards a new milestone in communion and unity.

When St. Paul writes to the Romans, through the pen of Tertius, he expresses a great synodal spirit: he sends the deaconess Phoebe, asking for support in whatever she needs; he sends greetings to more than twenty collaborators with whom he has shared the mission, the prison and the care of the churches. On the other hand, Tertius, the writer of the letter, allows himself to send fraternal greetings to several with whom he surely shared friendship and pastoral solicitude.

The first councils (Nicaea in 325, Constantinople in 381) express this spirit of collaboration, giving equal status to the different sees (Rome, Alexandria, Antioch, Constantinople, Jerusalem), gradually giving rise to diocesan and presbyterial synods.

Gradually, however, authority and decision-making power were concentrated in the hands of the clergy, thus reinforcing the hierarchical order. The Council of Trent (1545-1563), which had an enormous participation of bishops and theologians, gave a great impetus to provincial councils and diocesan synods, but the aim was top-down: to bring the Catholic reform down to the grassroots, seeking to control that the same elements of doctrine and practice of the faith were lived. Thus, synodal dynamics and healthy diversity were diminished in favour of uniformity and submission.

However, the emergence of religious life emphasised the synodal: Benedictine monks were in the habit of meeting daily to discuss the affairs of the monastery. Dominican religious were born with more horizontal structures, for example, all participating in the election of the prior of the convent. In Religious Life, decisions are a shared responsibility, through a collegial body, the Chapter, which meets regularly to reach consensual decisions. In the words of Nathalie Becquart, under-secretary of the Synod, synodality is like the DNA of Religious Life.⁵

On the other hand, Liliana Franco, president of CLAR, who also participated in the synod, in a panel offered by this organism of Religious Life in Latin America⁶ takes up the conviction that Synodality is a constitutive and defining dimension of the mission of the Church, already present in the early Church, even when it was

lost in favour of a more hierarchical Church, and that it continues to be a call from God, since Vatican II, as the way to live our mission in the world today, which would lead the Church to be more participative and missionary.

In the same panel, Prof. Piero Coda, secretary of the International Theological Commission, insists that spiritual renewal and structural reform are essential for the Church to be more participative and to radiate the light of Christ. The Synod,- he says,- calls us to a relational conversion, to better reflect Trinitarian harmony. This conversion transforms our way of being. It is a cultural transformation that implies a process of shared learning: ecclesial discernment, decision-making processes, transparency, and above all the practice of conversation in the Spirit, which is the necessary attitude to listen to what God is saying to the Church through you, through me, through us... This will allow us to generate a culture of critical prophecy, in line with *Gaudium et Spes*, the Church in today's world.⁷

In Latin America

On the Latin American continent, the Church has had - from its origins - glimpses of synodality, seeking to discern and take the most relevant decisions through participation in assemblies. Between the 16th and 18th centuries, more than twenty provincial councils and innumerable diocesan synods were held. Many of these assemblies were oriented towards pastoral unity, the defence of indigenous peoples and the inculturated celebration of the faith.

On the other hand, in the years leading up to the Second Vatican Council, many lay movements were in full swing: Catholic Action, a lay apostolate movement, quickly found an echo in many Latin American environments. Its "see-judge-act" method was already a way of remaining attentive and listening to the signs of the times, through the participation of each person, seeking to incarnate the Gospel in reality.

On the American continent, other groups emerged, such as the Christian Family Movement (CFM), a form of lay leadership involving the whole family. Likewise, mothers of families promoted

family catechesis, giving rise to new forms of evangelisation by and for the family⁸ Christian youth leadership movements also had a strong impulse⁹ These models of lay participation preceded and drove the changes of the Second Vatican Council and continued to impact the Church in the following decades, even in the face of resistance from rigid, clerical positions.

At this time, in Brazil and other countries of the Southern Cone, the Basic Ecclesial Communities (CEBs) emerged as a new model of “being Church”. They were groups of people who met in neighbourhoods or rural villages to read the Bible and celebrate the liturgy. Together they analysed the social reality in order to contextualise ecclesial commitments and socio-political changes, especially in disadvantaged regions. This model was taken up by subsequent Latin American Bishops’ Conferences¹⁰ and spread to other continents and regions of the world.

Gradually a historical and cultural self-awareness grew in the churches, which were encouraged to express the faith in an original and inculturated way. Regional and continental conferences were organised. Each of them gained in autonomy, identity and richness of its own. The universal Church thus became a multicentric, decentralised, polyhedral reality¹¹ It is rich and varied. This new ecclesial awareness has continued to grow and spread thanks to the development of the media and networks.

Pope Francis takes up this observation and this appeal in his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*:

“Life is the art of encounter, even if there is so much misunderstanding in life... that polyhedron which has many facets, many sides, but all forming a unity full of nuances, since ‘the whole is greater than the part’. The polyhedron represents a society where differences coexist, complementing, enriching and illuminating each other, even if this implies discussions and precautions. Because we can learn something from everyone, no one is useless, no one is dispensable. This means including the peripheries. Those who are there have another point of view, they see aspects of reality that are not recognised from the centres of power where the most defining decisions are taken.”¹²

In this regard, the Synod's Final Document reminds us:

“The whole Church has always been a plurality of peoples and languages, of Churches with their particular rites, disciplines and theological and spiritual heritages, of vocations, charisms and ministries at the service of the common good”¹³

This plurality is called to diversity in communion:

“The unity of the Church is not uniformity, but the organic integration of legitimate diversities”. The variety of expressions of the salvific message avoids reducing it to a single understanding of the life of the Church and of the theological, liturgical, pastoral and disciplinary forms in which it is expressed¹⁴.

The impulse of the Second Vatican Council, which involved not only the clergy but also a large number of lay people as well as people of other confessions, was followed by the institution by Pope Paul VI of Synods of Bishops in 1965. Since then, fifteen Ordinary, three Extraordinary and eleven Special Assemblies have been held, of which seven have been continental.

This vitality, stirred by the Spirit at various moments of history—especially during Vatican II—has often been counterbalanced by the weight of a Church where a vertical and clerical structure prevails, where many baptized persons perceive themselves as consumers of grace rather than as active agents in ecclesial life. In this regard, Cristina Inogés, lay theologian and participant in the Synod, shared at the theological week of the CIE in Burgos, Spain¹⁵ that an essential call is to move away from a “theology of comfort”—being obedient to the parish priest and avoiding problems—to taking responsibility for, bearing, and taking charge of the ecclesial community.

The reform movements seen throughout the Church's history can be interpreted as forms of critical, prophetic, and committed participation, aimed at an ecclesial conversion to the spirit of the Gospel. Today we are also witnessing a reforming dynamism stirred by the Spirit through Pope Francis and many committed people throughout the world who, in fidelity to the path opened by the

Second Vatican Council, inspire us to move forward while remaining faithful to our origins. This “return to the source”¹⁶ is an invitation to receive anew the gift that the Spirit gave us at the Council, “extending its inspiration and renewing its prophetic force for the world today.”¹⁷

What is Synodality?

“Synodality expresses the status of subject that belongs to all in the Church. Believers are brothers and sisters on the same journey, called to be active participants through their sharing in the one priesthood of Christ.”¹⁸

This definition by the International Theological Commission affirms that we are all responsible for actively contributing—through our life and experience—to the reflection, discernment, and commitment of the ecclesial communities to which we belong, so that we may continue to be a *Church that goes forth*¹⁹, responding to the cries of humanity in every context and moment in history.

The Synod on Synodality strongly reminds us that:

“God speaks through the living Tradition of the Church, its Magisterium, the personal and communal meditation on Scripture, and the practices of popular piety. God continues to reveal Himself through the cry of the poor and the events of human history. Moreover, God communicates with His People through the elements of creation, whose very existence signals the action of the Creator and is filled with the presence of the life-giving Spirit. Lastly, God also speaks in each person’s conscience, which is ‘the most secret core and sanctuary of a person, where one is alone with God whose voice echoes in their depths.’ Ecclesial discernment requires the ongoing formation and care of conscience and the maturing of the **sensus fidei**, so that none of the places where God speaks and comes to meet His people may be neglected.”²⁰

If God speaks through everyone and everything, then synodality invites us to a conversion of vision and attitude: to move away from self-referentiality²¹ and control, and to open ourselves to the brother or sister beside us as a you through whom God speaks to me, moves me, unsettles me. It is a humble attitude that makes

room for the other, listens to them in order to be led to another way of seeing, thinking, feeling, and engaging.

"...humility comes from humus, 'earth.' In agricultural terms, humus is the most fertile part of the soil. To be humble is to become fertile ground, to nurture the life of others by making space for them, giving them room, creating new territories where each one can become who they are.²²"

Conversation in the Spirit and Synodality

Synodality is not merely the awareness that we are all part of one Body, contributing our gifts and talents in complementarity. It is an invitation to adopt a different posture toward others, with them, regardless of the role we have been entrusted with in the ecclesial or religious community—and especially beyond that role or function. Everyone's words, thoughts, and feelings are of equal value. Therefore, this attitude invites us to leave behind our personal or cultural references, our security in knowledge or lived experience, in order to seek with others, discern together, and arrive at a new understanding of our life and mission. This emerges from deep listening and mutual exchange—from the "we" that the Spirit gives us.

This attitude requires a disposition of the heart, a willingness to dialogue with others who are always different—different groups, cultures, and religions—in a fruitful "inter-relationship." The Synod emphasizes that this attitude and method require repentance and conversion of heart, asceticism, patience, and openness²³. At every level, we need to change our relationship with power and control, beginning with the belief that the other has something to say and holds part of the truth.

Sister Claire Jonard, consecrated virgin, expert and facilitator during the Synod, reminds us of the indispensable steps²⁴ in ecclesial discernment, which can be adapted to various settings and traditions:

- 1) A clear presentation of the object of discernment, along with adequate information and tools to ensure all participants understand.

- 2) Time to prepare through prayer, listening to the Word of God, and reflection on the topic.
- 3) An inner disposition of freedom from personal and group interests, with a commitment to seek the common good.
- 4) Respectful and deep listening to the words of others.
- 5) A search for the broadest possible consensus, which will arise through what most sets hearts on fire (cf. Lk 24:32), without hiding conflicts or seeking compromises that water down the truth.

Participants in the Synod, who have contributed to various conferences and panels on the topic, agree that “conversation in the Spirit” is at the heart of their experience. It is a methodology that challenges us—beyond roles, functions, or responsibilities—in how we position ourselves before others. This is why we speak of a relational and cultural conversion: a transformation of vision and attitude that is rooted in the Gospel and leads back to it. It is a gift of the Spirit to the contemporary Church that can guide us toward a humbler spirituality and practice of our ecclesial mission, to journey toward the Kingdom alongside many of our contemporaries—believers and non-believers alike—who seek to build a more just and human society.

This is what Pope Francis has taught us by inaugurating this new way of being Church and by sealing this synodal journey with his signature:

“Acknowledging the value of the synodal path undertaken, I now hand over to the whole Church the indications contained in the Final Document, as the fruit of what has matured over these years through listening and discernment, and as an authoritative guide for its life and mission.”²⁵

Expected Fruits of Synodality

According to the Final Document of the Synod, living synodality in our various ecclesial spheres, at all levels, will help us to:

Develop a critical and prophetic attitude towards the dominant culture, offering possible responses to the challenges of our societies in building the common good.²⁶

Discover new areas of commitment and new ways of carrying out our mission, whether in family life or other states of life, in the professional, civic, and political realms, fostering a culture inspired by the Gospel²⁷.

Foster in ordained ministers an attitude that, overcoming clericalism, facilitates co-responsibility and collaboration with other members of the People of God, a more coordinated distribution of tasks and responsibilities, and bolder discernment²⁸.

Promote accountability: a culture of transparency, responsibility, and evaluation²⁹, linked to values such as clarity, honesty, and integrity, and rejecting opacity, hypocrisy, ambiguity, and hidden agendas³⁰.

Encourage the sharing of resources among different churches in a spirit of solidarity, without paternalism or assistentialism, respecting diverse identities and promoting healthy reciprocity³¹.

Ensure that Catholic-inspired schools and universities uphold the connection between faith and culture, as well as value-based formation oriented toward Christ, fostering intercultural and interreligious dialogue.³²

The Role of Women

One of the essential characteristics of the Synod has been the role given to women. Since the beginning of his pontificate in 2013, Pope Francis has made significant decisions in this regard. For example, the appointment of an art historian as Director of the Vatican Museums in 2016. In 2017, he appointed two undersecretaries to the Dicastery for the Laity, Family, and Life—both are mothers.

He also appointed a religious sister as undersecretary of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life. In 2020, he appointed another woman as Undersecretary of the Section for Relations with States, a newly created role.

In the Vatican Dicastery for Communications, two women now hold leadership positions: one as head of the Theological-Pastoral

Department, and the other as deputy director of the Vatican Press Office.

In 2025, a religious sister was appointed prefect of the Dicastery for Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life.

In total, five of the twenty two most important offices of the Curia now have women in leadership teams.

These appointments respond to the signs of the times and Pope Francis' conviction of the unique contribution women bring to the Church and the world:

“The feminine genius is needed in all expressions of social life; therefore, the presence of women must also be guaranteed in the workplace and in the various places where important decisions are made, both in the Church and in social structures.”³³

“Women are raising profound questions that we must address. The Church cannot be herself without the woman and the role she plays. Women are indispensable to the Church.”³⁴

Indeed, many women participate in the daily life of communities as members of pastoral teams in social ministry, catechesis, youth ministry, liturgy, etc., or simply through their active presence in the celebrations of the Word and the Eucharist.

Sister Nathalie Becquart, Undersecretary of the Synod, reminded during a conference of the UMOFC³⁵ that the role of women is a priority for the Pope, so that they may be more involved in the governance of the Church. In fact, he says, many women already serve in positions of authority around the world—in ecclesial communities, episcopal councils, seminary formation teams, and so on.

Synodality in the Assumption

As recognised above, synodality is a characteristic of Religious Life:

“Religious Life has matured over time in practices of synodal living and discernment, learning to harmonize individual gifts with the common mission. The Final Document of the Synod also affirms that many communities of consecrated life are laboratories of

interculturality that serve as a prophecy for the Church and the world."³⁶

We Religious of the Assumption are at ease with this expression, because the experience of having international, intercultural and intergenerational communities challenges us to live diversity and to celebrate it, discovering the richness of the different contexts in which we are present in order to continue to discern how to inculturate the Gospel and our charism in the local realities where we are sent.

Marie Eugenie constantly invites us to be aware that each one, from her own mission and talents, has a unique and important contribution to make to God's plan. This is what we read in many of her writings, for example, in the beginning, in a letter to Father Lacordaire, she expresses the conviction that:

"the Gospel frees us from all the bonds of the past to freely seek our place and mission in God's plan".³⁷

In a letter to Fr. d'Alzon, she insisted that God created us just as we are to occupy:

"a special place in his plan, to be a special mechanism... I believe we must humbly and simply remain as we are, without hastily assuming the roles of other gears... concerned only with removing from ourselves all the rust, all that comes from evil, all that prevents us from sharing our abilities and making them useful to God's cause."³⁸

We can imagine the first sisters in synodal dialogue when Marie Eugenie wrote to Father d'Alzon in 1842 and shared with him the fruit of their exchanges:

"...we had experienced that what women ordinarily acquire is entirely superficial, of no use to our pupils and without connection with the faith...".³⁹

These exchanges about the reality that concerned them, and their desire to respond to it, allowed the first sisters to discern our way of life and education, shaping the first Constitutions and Congregational Projects. These continue to evolve today thanks to

the contributions of all sisters in local, provincial, and general chapters. The most recent General Chapter in 2024 invited us to become a more synodal Congregation and to live deep processes of conversion:

“to a contemplative experience of God marked by metanoia; relationships of quality and deep communion that empower us for more participatory processes of discernment; the urgent contemporary challenges and realities of the peripheries that urge us to be disciples and prophets of the Lord for our time.⁴⁰

Learning ‘conversation in the Spirit’ offers us a path and pushes us toward constant metanoia to continue moving forward with a refounding spirit, to live more of the ‘inter’ that we are and celebrate. This means stepping out of our own individual references and cultural coordinates to listen to the other—sister or layperson with whom we live and collaborate. In this way, we seek together how the Gospel and the charism can continue responding to the questions and longings of our contemporaries.”

The learning of ‘the conversation in the Spirit’ offers us a way, it impels us to that constant metanoia to continue advancing in a refounding impulse, to live more the ‘inter’⁴¹ that we are and that we celebrate. This implies going out of our own individual references and cultural coordinates, to listen to the other: sister or lay people with whom we live and collaborate. In this way, we seek together the ways in which the Gospel and the charism can continue to respond to the questions and the searches of our contemporaries.⁴²

Final Word

This March Pope Francis announced from Gemelli Hospital that the implementation phase of the Final Document will be carried out over the next three years, and that in October 2028 the progress made will be evaluated. Now that he precedes us in heaven, let us be inspired by his example and his spiritual legacy, so that this new style of being disciples sent may transform us into a more synodal Church and Congregation.

May the Lord grant us the grace to be challenged, converted, and inspired by this new way of living—spirituality and relationships, responsibility and commitment—so that we may remain attentive to his voice speaking to us through everything and everyone.

This new attitude will allow us to continue to find the ways that the Spirit inspires the churches in different contexts, so that our history is transfigured into Kingdom.

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Religious life

Synodality in religious life: theological, spiritual and charismatic keys to community conversion

Sister Mercedes Méndez

This article examines the concept of synodality in the context of religious life, and of our Rule of Life, in light of the documents from the 2024 General Chapter. It offers a theological and spiritual reading that invites personal and communal reflection on this topical theme within the Church and our Congregation. We hope it will lead to the discovery of new ways of living synodality with creative fidelity to our charism.

Key words: synodality, religious life, listening, discernment, participation.

Introduction: Why talk about synodality in religious life today?

Synodality has become a key word in the life and mission of the Church, and therefore also in religious life. Since the Synod convened by Pope Francis, *"For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission"*, the Catholic Church has been engaging in

a global process of listening, discernment, pastoral and missionary conversion.

This process is not simply organisational or methodological, but spiritual and theological: it is the very way of understanding and being the Church that is at stake, of living Trinitarian communion in history, of proclaiming the Gospel with credibility :

"The path of synodality is the path that God expects of the Church in the third millennium".⁷⁷

In this ecclesial context, religious life is challenged in a very special way. Not only because of its structural and vital belonging to the ecclesial community, but also because its form of life inherently embodies a communal experience that could – and should – exemplify lived synodality.

At the heart of religious life, we see this reality: fraternal life in communion and shared mission, a climate of discernment, the exercise of leadership as service, participative structures, among others. All this stems from the very essence of religious life, inspired by the way Jesus lived with his disciples:

Consecrated life is called to be, in the Church and the world, a living memory of the way Jesus existed and acted.⁷⁸

Consequently, to speak of synodality in religious life today is not a decorative addition, but an imperative of fidelity to the Gospel and to the vocation received.

Consecrated life is offered the opportunity to rediscover its place as a *"laboratory of the Spirit"*,⁷⁹ where the dimension of community isn't just a structure, but a pascal experience that bears witness,

⁷⁷ Papa Francisco, *Carta al Pueblo de Dios: La sinodalidad es el camino de la Iglesia del tercer milenio* (Letter to the People of God: Synodality is the Path of the Church of the Third Millennium) (Rome, LEV, 25th of October 2023).

⁷⁸ "Through the profession of the counsels, the consecrated person is not content to make Christ the meaning of his life, but seeks to reproduce in himself, as far as possible, "the form of life which the Son of God took on entering the world", *Vita Consecrata*, 22.

⁷⁹ Congregación CIVCSVA, *Para vino nuevo, odres nuevos* (New wine in new wineskins), 2017, n. 3.

with simplicity and boldness, that the Kingdom is already in our midst.

Conceptual framework: What do we mean by synodality?

It's essential for this question to be addressed before proceeding, both at a personal and community level.

As is the case with many words that resonate strongly at a given moment, everyone understands and defines synodality based on what they read, the social networks they are part of and the people with whom they interact, who often share the same opinions.

The same applies to the concept of synodality as to other fundamental values of religious life: they could be real beacons for the Church and the world, if they were lived authentically in community.⁸⁰ However, the lack of consensus on its deep and practical meaning makes it difficult to find real, concrete ways forward.

Often, diplomatic respect for the opinions of others, without a genuine openness to being challenged or to reconsider one's own convictions, undermines any attempt to live these values in community.

Personalism, power politics and resistance to change often creep into this process, and end up adapting new words to old habits, draining them of their transformative power. In this way, synodality runs the risk of being absorbed by rigid mental and organisational structures, which perpetuate a clerical or functional *modus*

⁸⁰ This is the case, for example, with the vow of poverty, which gives rise to lively debate in our communities and often ends with the statement: "it's something personal". However, moments of reform in religious life have been marked by a new impetus towards evangelical poverty. From the Cistercians, who sought a more austere and fraternal life, to the mendicants, who renounced all forms of property to live among people experiencing poverty, history shows that poverty, when lived in community and a spirit of conversion, has an incomparable reforming force. See Jesús Álvarez Gómez, *Historia de la vida religiosa. 2. Desde los canónigos regulares hasta las reformas del siglo XV (History of religious life. From the Regular Canons to the Reforms of the Century XV)* (Madrid: Publicaciones Claretianas, 1989), 65-92; 153-177; 255-354; 423-465.

operandi, instead of being open to the community conversion that it requires.

Synodality risks remaining a buzzword if it does not become an ecclesial praxis rooted in listening, discerning and converting all the members of the People of God.

Without authentic processes of community transformation, synodal concepts are absorbed by pre-existing logics. Therefore, it is very important to collectively identify the objective elements in the content that we give to the word 'synodality' in the Church in general, and in religious life in particular, both in its historical evolution and in the doctrine and practice that are currently emerging.

1. Theological foundation⁸¹

Synodality is a constitutive dimension of the Church. It can't be reduced to a one-off event or a functional method. It is a way of being and acting that expresses the identity of the Church as the People of God in motion.⁸² This understanding is based on the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council, in particular the second Chapter of *Lumen Gentium* (LG), which defines the Church as the People of God, in which all the faithful - lay people, clerics and religious - participate in a co-responsible way in the evangelising mission of the Church.

⁸¹ Cf. Rafael Luciani, *Synodality: A New Way of Proceeding in the Church* (Paulist Press, 2022). This book is a profound theological and pastoral reflection on synodality as a constitutive model for the Church of the third millennium. Rafael Luciani, a Venezuelan theologian and member of the Synod's Theological Commission on Synodality, proposes that synodality is not simply a method or an ecclesial event, but a way of being Church: a Church that listens, discerns and decides in communion. It is briefly reviewed in Luciani, Rafael, "Hacia una eclesialidad sinodal ¿Una nueva comprensión de la Iglesia Pueblo de Dios?" *Horizonte: revista de Estudos de Teologia e Ciências da Religião* 19.59 (2021): 547-581.

⁸² "Synod": from the Greek *synodos* (σὺνοδος), composed of *syn* (σύν, "with") and *hodós* (ὁδός, "way"), literally "to go together". Cf. Xavier Léon-Dufour, *Vocabulario de teología bíblica*, Herder, Barcelona, 2002, p. 960.

Sensus fidei and *sensus fidelium*⁸³ outlined in this Dogmatic Constitution, constitute the key theological foundation on which synodality is based. It is about acknowledging that all the baptised possess a spiritual capacity to discern the truth of the Gospel.

When this sense of faith is experienced communally as *sensus fidelium*, it gives rise to the *consensus omnium fidelium*, the binding expression of ecclesial discernment (cf. LG 12). This dynamic requires overcoming the dichotomy between the teaching Church and the Church taught, by recognising that all the faithful are *Christifideles*, and that the ordained ministry must be understood as a service within the people of God, alongside other services and charisms, each contributing with its specific vocation to the life and mission of the Church.

In this context, synodality implies a conversion. Rather than a simple organisational transformation, a change motivated and driven by the Spirit to implement God's plan more effectively. A prerequisite to conversion supposes a shift in mentality and structures that enable us to move beyond the clerical, pyramidal and self-referential model. It must be embodied in a methodological conversion that introduces a new way of acting ecclesiastically, based on listening, community discernment and shared decision-making.

In this ecclesial context, as part of their theological role, local Churches become places of incarnation of Catholicism. This promotes an ecclesial communion of the Churches (*communio*

⁸³ *The sensus fidei, or supernatural sense of faith that every baptised person possesses, thanks to the Holy Spirit, instinctively discerns what conforms with the Gospel and the teaching of the Church. The sensus fidelium, or sense of faith of the People of God as a whole, when it manifests, in communion with its pastors and guided by the Holy Spirit, a living and authentic consensus on the truths of faith and Christian life. The consensus omnium fidelium is a concrete manifestation of the sensus fidelium: when all the People of God, in different times and places, unanimously believe in a truth of faith, this consensus is considered to be a reliable witness to the action of the Holy Spirit in the Church. For more on these concepts: Famerée, Joseph. "Sensus fidei, sensus fidelium." *Recherches de science religieuse* 104.2 (2016): 167-185.*

ecclesiarum) in which cultural and territorial diversity enriches the universality of the Church (cf. LG 23).

The Latin American model, which has been implemented in experiences such as Medellín, Aparecida and CEAMA⁸⁴ offers a concrete example of lived synodality. There, processes of listening, community discernment and shared decision-making are articulated and shape a Church that understands itself as the People of God in the midst of peoples.

In conclusion, synodality is an *ecclesio genesis*, meaning that it is not a functional or methodological addition, but a constitutive and dynamic way of generating the Church continually from the communion and active participation of all the faithful.

In this context, clericalism distorts the communitarian identity of the Church. It blocks the full participation of the People of God. In order to overcome this, a profound structural reform is needed to institutionalise synodality as an organising principle of Church life. Only in this way will the synodal Church be able to live itself out from the bottom up, through community processes, participative structures and a theology that is incarnated in the reality of the people. Only then, will it enter into a process of ongoing reform that will make it more faithful to the Gospel in its way of being and acting.

⁸⁴ *Documento Conclusivo de Medellín* (1968). This was the Second General Conference of the Latin American Episcopate, marking a significant milestone in the development of the preferential option for people experiencing poverty and liberating pastoral care. See https://www.celam.org/documentos/Documento_Conclusivo_Medellin.pdf (última consulta 03.06.2025). *Documento Conclusivo de Aparecida* (2007). Fifth General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Episcopate, which promoted continental mission and the spirituality of missionary discipleship. Cf: <https://www.celam.org/aparecida/Espanol.pdf> (última consulta 03.06.2025). *Documentos de la CEAMA (Conferencia Eclesial de la Amazonía)*. Ecclesial body created after the Synod for Amazonia, which articulates pastoral action with an Amazonian face: <https://ceama.org/> (última consulta 03.06.2025).

Essential dimensions of synodality: listening, discernment, participation

At the heart of the synodal process, as expressed in the Final Document of the Synod "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission", are three profoundly interdependent dimensions: listening, discernment and participation. These are not successive stages or watertight compartments, but expressions of a single spiritual and ecclesial dynamic that shapes the being and action of a synodal Church.

Listening is much more than a consultation technique or a collection of opinions. It is a spiritual attitude born of faith, directed towards recognising the voice of the Holy Spirit, who speaks in the Word, in living Tradition, in the signs of the times, and the conscience of every baptised person. According to the document, "listening is the starting point and criterion for all ecclesial discernment", and communicating about God also passes "through the cry of the poor and the events of human history" (n. 83). Listening is an act of humility and openness, requiring time, inner silence and a willingness to be challenged.

Discernment is at the heart of the synodal process. It is not a matter of reaching a consensus when human decisions are taken. It is about seeking God's will together. Ecclesial discernment "is not an organisational technique, but a spiritual practice to be lived out in faith" (n. 82). It requires inner freedom, prayer, mutual trust and openness to the newness of the Spirit. It is a community exercise that takes place through listening to the Word, fraternal dialogue and attention to the signs of the Spirit in the life of the Church and the world. As the document says, "discernment is all the richer for listening to everyone" (n. 82), especially those on the margins.

Finally, participation is the concrete expression of the co-responsibility of all the baptised in the life and mission of the Church. It is not limited to the organs of governance, but implies the real and effective inclusion of all voices, especially those that have traditionally been excluded. The document emphasises that "fostering the widest possible participation of all the People of God in decision-making processes is the most effective way of

promoting a synodal Church" (n. 87). This participation is articulated in processes of consultation, deliberation and evaluation, and is supported by structures such as pastoral and economic councils, which must function effectively and not merely formally (cf. n. 104).

These three dimensions are interrelated: only a community that listens can discern, and only a community that discerns can truly participate. This circular logic transforms the culture of the Church, bringing it closer to a truly synodal Church where each member feels as an active part of a common mission.

As the business world has clearly understood, involving everyone in decision-making generates greater commitment, efficiency and a sense of belonging.⁸⁵ When a task becomes a shared mission, it becomes a fulfilled vocation.

Without confusion or distinction

In the processes of listening, discernment and decision-making within ecclesial or religious communities, four fundamental modalities can be identified: executive, consultative, participative and synodal.⁸⁶ On a conceptual level, these methods differ, as they respond to distinct rationales and purposes. Nonetheless, they are all too often used interchangeably to refer to synodality, which in many cases conceals the persistence of traditional methods perpetuating rigid hierarchical structures. Although each of these processes may have its rightful place in the life and mission of the Church, particularly for agile and effective management, it is essential to clearly identify them. This is the only way to avoid confusion, which, far from fostering communion, obscures it under

⁸⁵ Recommended reading for understanding this reality: Quinn, Robert E. *Building the bridge as you walk on it: A guide for leading change*. John Wiley & Sons, 2004.

⁸⁶ Cf. Traüffer, Hazel C. V., Corné Bekker, Mihai Bocârnea, and Bruce E. Winston. "Towards an Understanding of Discernment: A Conceptual Paper." *Leadership & Organization Development Journal* 31 (2010): 176-184; Miller, Kent D. "Discernment in Management and Organizations." *Journal of Management, Spirituality & Religion* 17 (2020): 373-402.; Okoye, Agnes. "Synodality, the Exercise of Authority, and Decision-Making Processes: Who Gets to Make the Decisions?" *The Catholic Voyage: African Journal of Consecrated Life* 20 (2023): 22-35.

a veneer of renewed language that is void of transformative practice.

Before addressing each modality, it is worth warning of another frequent mistake: reducing synodality or community discernment to minor or aesthetic decisions, such as choosing the colour of the curtains. This trivialisation generates a false perception that we are responding to the call for a synodal conversion, when in reality, there is no transformation of heart or change in the way we relate to the common mission. It is only a superficial change, a decoration that masks the absence of a genuine spiritual and community process.

The executive model is characterised by centralised analysis, discernment and decision-making by the governing bodies. The people who compose the organisation, as well as those involved as collaborating institutions or beneficiaries of a service, only execute the decisions or projects. The scope for analysis, research and decision-making is limited to the project they are in charge of.

In the consultative model, although the members of the governing committee remain the decision-makers, listening is extended to all team members. The contributions are taken into account in the deliberative processes. This includes the analysis of the reality or the formulation of proposals. This consultative process, which can be long and rich in participation and emotional involvement, culminates in a final decision taken by the superior and her council, who assume ultimate responsibility for discernment. There are many processes, under the name of Synod, that are in reality mere consultations. This practice often leaves a bitter taste in one's mouth, especially when the final decision clearly contradicts the opinion expressed by the majority. It also doesn't provide any opportunity for dialogue to clarify the criteria that guided this resolution. The lack of transparency and genuine participation in these crucial moments weakens community trust and generates disaffection. As a result, synodality as a path of shared discernment loses its credibility.

The participatory model involves joint research and decision-making between the governing committee and the community.

Options are collectively evaluated. In light of the Spirit, discernment is used to understand God's will in the current context to which we are sent. Decisions are made by consensus or majority. Many of the processes we call synodal are, in fact, participatory, as they only involve the members of the community, without including collaborating individuals or institutions, or the beneficiaries of the services.

An intermediate model between the consultative and the participative makes it possible to achieve genuine community discernment that goes beyond simple consultation on potential options. However, the final decision always rests with the governance team. This reflects a fruitful tension between co-responsibility and authority, but also reveals the limits of a structure that has not yet taken the step towards a fully synodal praxis.

Finally, the synodal model, as fostered by Pope Francis, is characterised by the integration of all those involved in the mission - the community, priests, salaried or voluntary staff, families, etc. It encourages deep listening in order to collectively analyse reality, discern possible options and make decisions that are genuinely inclusive and community-based. Many people are involved in the life and mission of the Church, and although they are not part of the institutional governing committee, they can offer a lucid and prophetic view of the process. Their inclusion is not only an act of ecclesial justice, but also a source of wisdom and communion. However, this model requires a significant investment in human resources, time and structures; its wealth more than compensates for the effort by anchoring decisions in a genuinely shared experience. As Saint Benedict reminds us in his Rule: "Let all be called to the council, for the Lord often reveals to the younger what is best".⁸⁷

⁸⁷ Benito de Nursia. *Regla de los monjes (Rule of the Monks)*. Translated by Francisco Javier Molina de la Torre. Salamanca: Sígueme, 2006, Cap. 3.

Synodality as an ecclesial and charismatic style of religious life

Religious life, as a form of evangelical life in the Church, is called to live this style profoundly, not only as a form of governance, but also as a spirituality, an attitude, and a mission. Among the many readings carried out for the writing of this article, in our opinion, the document that best concretises this "synodal style" in religious life is the one published in May 2024 by the Latin American Confederation of Religious (CLAR), entitled "*Religious Life: Towards a Synodal and Missionary Life*."⁸⁸ , which answered the question:

How can we live a synodal religious life on mission?

In this section, we present the primary keys of this document in dialogue with our Rule of Life and the orientations of the 2024 General Chapter, in an attempt to identify "new paths of synodality for our time", since our Congregation is "in need of metanoia and of learning about participative processes, in order to move towards structures that are more consistent with a new synodal sensibility".⁸⁹

In our Rule of Life (RL), we can recognise elements of this synodal lifestyle: the community as a theological place, community discernment as a way of seeking God's will and actively listening to the Spirit in the signs of the times (cf. RL nn. 32, 53 and 95), among others.

1. *The ecclesiology of the People of God is also the theological foundation of synodality in the life of the Church.*

The CLAR document reminds us that "walking together" means listening to the voice of the Spirit through all of us. In harmony with this, the Rule of Life of the Assumption underlines that each sister, by her consecration, is responsible for the common edification and is called to participate in community discernment.

⁸⁸ Confederación Latinoamericana de Religiosos (CLAR) "La vida religiosa, hacia una vida sinodal y misionera" <https://adn.celam.org/clar-en-marcha-sinodal-emite-documento-y-lo-envia-a-secretaria-general-del-sinodo/>.

⁸⁹ Religiosas de la Asunción. *Documento Capitular 2024*. Paris: Religiosas de la Asunción, 2024. Introducción.

"In the image of the Church of which it is a part, the Congregation forms a single Body in Christ [...] The sisters participate in the governing committee's prayer and collaboration, by their reflection and discernment, by their involvement in consultations and votes, by their information and suggestions, by their implementation of decisions and their readiness to accept office"—RL 95.

2. *Personal and community conversion: the road to a synodal life*

As previously emphasised, synodality is not simply an ecclesial methodology, but a profound spirituality that demands an integral transformation of our persons, communities and structures. It is a call that we were able to identify in the Document of Chapter 2024, which states that "the call to METANOIA [...] implies a profound change of mentality - a change in our attitudes and in the way we feel, listen and respond". This conversion is the foundation of authentic synodal life.

a. *Personal conversion: listening, humility, self-denial*

It's an invitation to live a "spirituality of decentring", which prompts us to step away from the centre to make room for the Other. It involves the following:

1. It's an attitude of radical openness to the Spirit, to the Word, to the cries of the world and the voices of our sisters.
2. Humility, which allows us to recognise our resistance, prejudices, unhealed wounds and attitudes that hinder communion.
3. Detachment is an evangelical attitude that frees us from control, perfectionism, internalised clericalism and the need to be right all the time.
4. Overcoming a certain laziness, which is sometimes disguised as prudence, faithfulness or exhaustion, but which is in reality a subtle way of staying within what is known, avoiding getting involved for fear of failing or because of

the effort involved in changing and converting our mental and community structures.

- b. Community conversion: welcoming diversity, renouncing power, living out horizontal relationships

Community conversion involves :

1. Welcoming diversity as a gift, not as a threat. Interculturality and intergenerationality offering opportunities for growth in polyhedral communion (cf. EG 236).
 2. Renouncing power understood as domination, to embrace a leadership of service, inspired by Jesus, who no longer calls us servants, but friends (cf. Jn 15:15).
 3. Living horizontal relationships, where authority is exercised as care, and obedience as mutual listening.
 4. Overcoming the fear that paralyses and prevents you from taking steps towards new things, the fear of losing control, of being exposed, of making mistakes, of not being understood.
 5. Overcoming suspicion of innovation, which often manifests itself as mistrust of those who propose new paths. This defensive attitude locks communities into a sterile repetition of what is already known, preventing the Gospel from being fruitful and effective. Creative fidelity, on the other hand, invites us to re-read the charism with fresh eyes and an attentive heart, breaking the moulds to safeguard communion.
- c. Structural conversion: reviewing forms of governing and mission

Synodality also requires a courageous review of our structures:

1. Softening community and pastoral styles that no longer respond to the signs of the times.

2. Revisiting training models, moving beyond prescriptive and pyramid-based approaches, to train people who are free, creative, mature and co-responsible.
3. Exploring new models of governance proposed in the Chapter Document that promote participation, subsidiarity, and shared discernment and decision-making.
3. *Jesus-style leadership: authority at the service of discernment*

Synodality profoundly transforms the understanding and exercise of authority in religious life. If at one time it could be conceived as a vertical power, it can now only be understood as a service that animates the community body, in harmony with the style of Jesus. As the Rule of Life (RL 33) reminds us, superiors "represent the authority of Christ", not to impose, but to accompany processes of discernment, encourage co-responsibility and care for communion.

This vision aligns with that expressed by CLAR, which proposes an authority exercised in proximity, through active listening, and the promotion of fraternal relationships, thereby overcoming hierarchical and pyramidal models that hinder the realisation of the charism and the full participation of all members.

Although in women's religious life we cannot speak of clericalism in the strict sense, we can identify structures and dynamics that imitate or reproduce it. These invisible structures can take the form of centralised government, a lack of real opportunities for participation, the infantilisation of relationships, or resistance to sharing information, research, and decision-making processes. Often justified by difficulties that can be overcome with appropriate methodologies, longer processes and, above all, member training.

We need to take a critical look at our forms of governance, and move towards more horizontal, participative and co-responsible models of leadership. In this respect, it would be very relevant to re-read the Chapter on Governance in Rule of Life (nn. 92-112), to

identify whether in its wording or application these hierarchical structures are perpetuated or whether, on the contrary, they open up paths towards a synodal authority, which favours communion, shared mission and evangelical co-responsibility.

4. *Synodal formation: forging creative people capable of communion and discernment*

To live this synodal style, a profound transformation of the formative processes in religious life is urgently needed. It's not just a question of adding content, but of rethinking the formative paradigm on the basis of an ecclesiology of the People of God.

Training in the synodal key involves educating people in active listening, community discernment, integrated affectivity, intercultural and intergenerational dialogue, and co-responsibility. It is vital to train in freedom, to encourage creativity and personal initiative, as well as in the processes and methodologies of discernment, and openness to new social, cultural and technological realities, in order to identify together the will of God in the signs of the times.

Synodal formation is built with a community and with horizontal formation teams. It is fed by daily life, missionary experience and contact with the reality of suffering. The aim is to form individuals who can walk with others, collaborate, dialogue and make decisions together.

This also requires a critical review of training styles, incorporating a culture of care, prevention of abuse and recognition of personal gifts. We need to move beyond models centred on vertical authority, prescriptiveness and discipline, which give rise to infantilisation and dependency. We need to pave the way for processes that encourage referenced autonomy, the promotion of the individual and the community as well as the integration of diversity.

To achieve this, training must be integral, encompassing the human, spiritual, emotional, pastoral and professional dimensions. It must aim to identify and develop the vocational talents of each member in service to the mission, not just for institutional benefit.

Synodal formation is ultimately a process of ongoing conversion. This is why we are not just referring to initial formation but also to ongoing formation. Following the footsteps of Jesus, we are seeking to form people capable of living and leading inclusive, co-responsible, and outward-looking communities.

5. *Shared mission and prophetic presence*

The apostolate is no longer conceived as an individual task or as an extension of institutional power, but as a fraternal and co-responsible collaboration with the laity and with various ecclesial and social institutions. Mission is understood as a community response to the world's calls, rooted in listening to the Spirit and living the Gospel.

CLAR insists on a "Samaritan presence", a "pneumatological presence". It is a presence that recognises the signs of the times and allows itself to be guided by the Spirit to act with compassion, justice and hope. This mission is primarily deployed in the peripheries, where Religious Life, particularly feminine, stands in solidarity with the most vulnerable, weaving networks that broaden the horizon of the Kingdom.

Our charism, centred on the Incarnation and transformative education, offers a decisive contribution to the synodal mission of the Church. As stated in the Chapter Document 2024, the Religious of the Assumption see themselves as "pilgrims of hope" in a wounded world, called to "strengthen the prophetic dimension of our mission of transformative education, giving priority to the peripheries and young people, putting the person at the centre".

From this perspective, the synodal mission becomes a journey of communal conversion, in which each person and each community recognises itself as being sent, not by itself but by the Spirit, to the service of the Kingdom. Education, understood as the proclamation of Jesus Christ and a commitment to social transformation, is the privileged means of incarnating this vocation "by working for the integral development of individuals and peoples, according to the Gospel" (RL 76).

But to carry out this mission in a synodal manner, it is necessary:

- To value the diversity of vocations as a richness for the common mission, overcoming clerical or self-referential visions.
- To delegate with confidence: to recognise and value the gifts of lay people, entrusting them with real responsibilities in pastoral, educational and social work.
- To include lay people from the outset in the discernment processes, not just as executors, but as active subjects in the evaluation of the mission, reflection and decision-making.
- To create structured spaces for listening, such as assemblies, forums, or mixed discernment groups (comprising both religious and lay people), where experiences, intuitions, and proposals can be shared.
- To design flexible structures that allow for the effective participation of lay people in mission councils, planning and evaluation.
- Forming ourselves together: offering joint formation processes in spirituality, leadership, reading reality and synodality, which strengthen communion and co-responsibility.

Many of these calls can be found in the Chapter Document and are undoubtedly reflected in the provincial and local projects inspired by it. It would be interesting to dedicate some time to identifying them and putting them into practice.

Conclusion

Religious life can and must be a genuine laboratory for synodality in the Church. Today, through its form of community life, its prophetic consecration, and its experience of discernment, it is called to anticipate and embody the model of the Church that the Spirit is raising: a Church of communion, participation, and mission.

Our Rule of Life expresses this profoundly: "The sisters, by living together around Christ in the charity they receive from Him, manifest the strength of love. Despite their fragility, communities can be an epiphany of God's love for those around them. The future Kingdom, where we will all be one, has already arrived" (RL 61). This vision is not a distant utopia, but a concrete call to live out fraternal relationships, participative structures and processes of community discernment that reflect the face of a synodal Church.

Religious life, when lived authentically, becomes a space where new forms of authority, such as service, obedience, mutual listening, poverty as communion of goods, and mission as co-responsible collaboration, are experienced. In this sense, religious communities can be "a source of hope for people who, in the night, long for a reconciled world" (RL 61).

But this testimony will only be possible if we seek and take new and daring paths together. In this way, religious life not only accompanies the synodal journey of the Church but also anticipates and models it, serving as a sign and leaven of the Kingdom that is already among us.

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Pastoral with young people and vocations

Youth ministry to help
everyone find their place in
society: a synodal and
inclusive approach

Sister Astrid Mbula Mokanga

This article explores a synodal and inclusive approach to youth ministry, based on the experience of Kinshasa (DRC) and informed by Church documents, in particular *Christus Vivit* and the 2018 Synod of Youth. It highlights the importance of a Church that listens to young people and sees them as full players in the Church's mission.

Pastoral care is adapted to the realities of life, encompassing both young people from structured Christian families and those living on the streets. Its aim is to accompany each young person on their

journey, fostering listening, vocational discernment, long-term commitment and engagement in social transformation.

The article also emphasises the importance of a Church "on the move", missionary and prophetic, reaching out to the human peripheries. It draws inspiration from the Chapter Document 2024 of the Religious of the Assumption, which calls for *metanoia*, a culture of care and a prophetic mission, especially among young people.

Key words: Synodality, Metanoia, Commitment, Listening, Social transformation

Introduction

In a constantly changing world, where traditional points of reference are disappearing and young people are facing unprecedented challenges, including precariousness, isolation, ecological crisis, political instability, and digital hyper connection, the Church is called to renew its commitment to young people. This is not a new mission, but it takes on a particular urgency today. Pope Francis, in *Christus Vivit*, forcefully states:

"The Church needs your drive, your insights, your faith. We need you" (Christus Vivit, no. 299).

Young people are not only the future of the Church; they are its present. They carry within them a thirst for truth, justice and beauty, along with a unique capacity to dream and transform the world. Yet, for this energy not to be lost, they need attentive support, as well as a space where they can listen, discern, and grow. **This is where youth ministry truly comes alive.**

The experience of Kinshasa, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, is a concrete illustration of this pastoral mission. It demonstrates how a synodal approach — i.e., a Church that walks with young people, listens to them, and involves them — can enable each of them to find their place in society and within the Church. This tailored pastoral care, attentive to diverse realities (including young people from structured families, those living on the

streets, and those experiencing family breakdown), is a living witness to the Gospel in action.

In this article, we examine this experience in the light of major Church texts, including *Christus Vivit*, the documents of the Synod of Youth (2018), and current pastoral guidelines. We examine how a synodal, missionary and inclusive Church can become a true home for young people, helping them to grow rooted in the faith and fully engaged in society.

A Church that listens to young people: the call of the 2018 Synod

The Synod of Bishops on "*Young people, faith and vocational discernment*" (2018) marked a turning point in the Church's approach to the relationship with new generations. This Synod highlighted a twofold urgency: on the one hand, the pressing need for the Church to regain the trust of young people, who are often disappointed by its inconsistencies or its language that is too far removed from their real lives; and on the other hand, the need to recognise that young people are not merely "recipients" of pastoral care, but "active participants" in the proclamation of the Gospel.

The final document clearly states:

"The Church must adopt a synodal style, that is, a style of communion, participation and mission" (no. 119).

This synodality entails a paradigm shift in pastoral care: it is no longer simply a matter of offering activities to young people, but of integrating them into a communal process where their voices are heard, their presence recognised, and their potential nurtured. It also means embracing their wounds, their search, their creativity, and their unique way of living in the digital, cultural and spiritual world.

In practical terms, this means:

- **Active, respectful listening that** takes their questions, criticisms and deepest aspirations seriously.

- **Shared formation**, where young people, consecrated persons, priests, lay people and families learn together to discern God's will.
- **Spaces of co-responsibility**, where young people participate in pastoral decisions, in the planning of activities and even in the review of missionary action.

In Kinshasa, this dynamic comes alive in a vibrant local Church, marked by **fruitful collaboration between religious leaders, committed laypeople, families, and young people themselves**. Each brings a unique richness: the consecrated offer a prophetic and spiritual dimension, the laity embody a Church in the world, families transmit a faith rooted in daily life, and young people bring boldness, new language, and openness to God's unexpected.

In this sense, listening is not simply a prerequisite: it becomes a **concrete expression of love**, a form of ecclesial presence that reveals that the journey of faith is shared. The Church is transformed when it accepts to be evangelised by young people as much as it seeks to evangelise them.

A pastoral approach tailored to the realities of life

The pastoral experience in Kinshasa highlights an inescapable reality: Young people are not a homogenous group. Their backgrounds, as well as their family, social, and spiritual contexts are profoundly diverse. To be relevant and fruitful, youth ministry must therefore be differentiated, i.e. adapted to the concrete realities of each individual. This approach is perfectly consistent with the call of the Synod on Youth (2018) for a Church "capable of recognising the diversity of situations and responding to them with creativity and fidelity to the Gospel" (Final Document, no. 68).

2.1. Young people from families with Christian roots

These young people grow up in a relatively stable environment, where the faith is passed on within the family and the church community. They benefit from structured guidance, often provided by consecrated persons and committed lay people. Consecrated persons introduce them to the various vocations available:

Consecrated life, priesthood, marriage. They help them to discern their personal calling. Christian couples, for their part, embody fidelity in both their family and professional commitments, offering concrete models of Christian living.

The family plays a fundamental role here. As *Christus Vivit* points out "*The family must remain the place where we learn to live together in diversity, to respect and love one another*" (*Christus Vivit*, no. 242).

In this context, pastoral care seeks to deepen faith, foster ecclesial and social commitment, and support vocational discernment. It is based on youth groups, retreats, training courses and times of service. It also promotes intergenerational relations, building bridges between young people and adults, as well as between families and religious communities.

2.2. Young people living precariously on the streets or in situations of family breakdown

On the other hand, many young people live in conditions of significant vulnerability: street children, young people without families, victims of violence or abandonment. These young people have often lost their bearings, self-confidence, and links with family and society. They feel excluded, rejected and invisible. For them, the Church is frequently the last refuge, the only place where they can still hope to be welcomed without judgment.

Pope Francis emphasises this mission of welcome:

"The Church must be an open house, especially for young people living in precarious conditions, marginalisation or exclusion" (*Christus Vivit*, no. 234).

Pastoral care for these young people is, above all, about being present, attentive listening, and rebuilding. It begins with simple gestures: a look, a meal, a kind word. It continues with patient support aimed at restoring dignity, rebuilding self-esteem and re-establishing family and social ties. This mission is often carried out by dedicated individuals, specialised educators and foster families,

but also by former street youths who have themselves become witnesses and agents of change.

This pastoral work is demanding, yet it bears fruit. In Kinshasa, many young people who once lived on the streets are now integrated into society, with some even participating in public institutions to defend the rights of marginalised children. Many have become fathers and mothers. In this way, they stand as living witnesses to the transforming power of Christian love.

2.3. A Church that adapts without compromising

This pastoral differentiation does not mean relativism or a dilution of the Gospel message. On the contrary, it expresses a creative fidelity to the Gospel, embodied in concrete realities. As Pope Francis reminds us

"The Gospel always invites us to run the risk of encountering the face of the other" (Evangelii Gaudium, 88).

The Church is called to be close, to accompany on the journey, to listen before speaking, and to understand before judging. It is in this synodal attitude that youth ministry can truly bear fruit, helping each young person discover their own vocation and find their place in society.

A pastoral approach that encourages commitment

One of the major challenges of youth ministry today is helping young people make free, conscious and lasting commitments. In a world dominated by instability, fear of failure and a culture of the temporary, many young people hesitate to make definitive choices, whether in the consecrated life, marriage, or social and political engagement. Pope Francis highlights this lucidly:

"Today, in many countries, young people live in a climate of emergency, precariousness and instability. This makes it difficult for them to put down roots in life and make a long-term commitment" (Christus Vivit, no. 72).

In response to this reality, youth ministry cannot rely on one-off activities or moralising speeches. It must offer a genuine path of

growth, discernment and maturation. This entails personalised support, a pedagogy of freedom, and above all, the presence of credible witnesses.

3.1. The role of witnesses in vocational discernment

The Synod for Young People stresses the importance of authentic role models:

"Young people need credible role models, witnesses who live what they preach" (Final Document, no. 79).

In Kinshasa, this responsibility is taken seriously. Laypeople engaged in family, professional, and church life play an essential role. Their faithfulness in their daily commitments, and their ability to integrate faith into their concrete lives, provide young people solid points of reference. Likewise, consecrated persons, through their lives dedicated to God and others, embody an evangelical radicalism that both challenges and inspires.

This synergy among vocations, lay people, religious, and priests creates a spiritual ecosystem in which young people can discern their own call. They come to understand that commitment is not a constraint, but a free response to a primary love, that of God, who calls each person by name. And Saint Marie Eugénie reminds us that, *"Each of us has a mission on earth. We must look for ways in which God can use us to build up His Kingdom"*.

3.2. A Church that trusts young people

For young people to get involved, they also need to feel welcomed, listened to and valued. Pope Francis insists:

"The Church must not be a customs officer, but a fatherly house where there is room for everyone with their difficult lives" (Christus Vivit, no. 217).

In Kinshasa, young people are not only supported but also given responsibility. They are involved in leading groups, organising activities, and partaking in missions to the poorest. This trust encourages them to surpass themselves, take initiatives, and become pastoral workers themselves.

3.3. Commitment as a path to social transformation

Finally, young people's commitment is not limited to the Church. It extends to society as a whole. Authentic pastoral care encourages them to become responsible citizens, peacemakers and defenders of justice. In Kinshasa, many young people, supported by the Church, are now engaged in public institutions, NGOs or community projects. They bear witness to the fact that the Christian faith is not an escape from the world, but a transformative force.

As *Christus Vivit* says:

"Young people are called to be protagonists of change. Don't be afraid to go against the tide, to be revolutionaries with Jesus" (Christus Vivit, no. 174).

A Church on the move, missionary and prophetic

Supporting young people living on the streets is one of the most potent and prophetic aspects of the Church's mission today. It is not simply a charitable or social action, but a genuine evangelical act, embodying Christ's call to reach out to the least of these, the forgotten, the wounded of life. Pope Francis consistently reminds us that the Church must be a "Church on the move", that is to say, a Church that does not remain confined within its structures, but goes out to meet those on the peripheries of life.

"A Church that goes out is a Church with open doors. Going out to others to reach the human peripheries does not mean running towards the world without direction or meaning" (Evangelii Gaudium, no. 46).

In Kinshasa, this missionary dynamic is shaped by the accompaniment of young people living on the streets. Often marked by abandonment, violence and extreme poverty, these young people find in the Church a place of welcome, reconstruction and hope. Far from a mere logic of assistance, this pastoral work seeks to restore their dignity, help them regain their footing, rediscover their identity and human value, and ultimately discern their vocation.

4.1. A prophetic mission at the heart of the peripheries

The Church's work with these young people is prophetic because it defies the logic of exclusion. Through concrete actions, it proclaims that every human life has inestimable value, that no one is beyond redemption, and that God's love extends to all, even in the most desperate situations.

"The Church must be an open house, especially for young people living in precarious conditions, marginalisation or exclusion" (Christus Vivit, no. 234).

This prophetic mission is carried out by consecrated persons, educators, families, and young people themselves. Those who have been accompanied often become the most effective witnesses and companions for others. They understand firsthand the wounds, suffering, fears, and hopes of those still living on the streets.

4.2. Young people transformed into agents of change

One of the most visible fruits of this pastoral work is the transformation of the young people themselves. Once reintegrated, trained and supported, many become community leaders, advocates for children's rights, street educators, or public officials committed to defending the most vulnerable. Many are those who, after receiving vocational training, go on to create jobs for the most vulnerable, helping them leave the streets and take control of their own destiny.

This is a living illustration of what *Christus Vivit* calls:

"Youth as protagonists, capable of transforming the world" (Christus Vivit, no. 174).

These young people are no longer merely the beneficiaries of pastoral action: they become its active participants. They bear witness to the fact that the Gospel is a force for resurrection, capable of bringing life where all seemed lost.

4.3. A Church faithful to its mission

By accompanying young people living on the streets or in broken homes, the Church remains faithful to its fundamental mission: to proclaim the Good News to the poor, to heal the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom to the captives (cf. Lk 4:18). In this way, the Church becomes a sign of the Kingdom of God, a place of mercy, justice and brotherhood.

Applications based on the General Chapter 2024 document

A reading of Chapter Document 2024 of the Religious of the Assumption offers concrete and inspiring avenues for renewing youth ministry from a profoundly synodal, prophetic, and reality-rooted perspective. Three principal axes emerge as particularly relevant for the mission to young people: **metanoia**, the **culture of care**, and the **prophetic mission**.

The call to *metanoia*, a profound change in mentality, outlook and posture, invites those involved in pastoral work to allow themselves to be transformed by listening to young people, their wounds, their dreams and their spiritual quests. This requires personal and community conversion, a willingness to leave comfort zones and to reach out to young people where they are, in their own languages, cultures, and realities. We are called to see young people and their situations with new eyes, reflecting God's love and mercy.

The *culture of care*, for its part, calls for a pastoral approach that considers each person in all their dimensions: spiritual, psychological, social, and ecological. Its aim is to create safe, caring, and inclusive spaces where every young person feels welcomed, valued, and heard. This approach reaches out especially to young people in vulnerable situations, particularly those living on the streets, while fostering an eco-spirituality that is attentive to our common home.

Finally, the *prophetic mission* highlighted in the Chapter document resonates with the call of *Christus Vivit* to empower young people as protagonists of change. The Church is invited to trust them, train them, accompany them, but also to give them room to innovate, challenge and transform structures. This means strengthening their

leadership, involving them in decision-making, and supporting them in their social, educational and spiritual commitments.

In this way, the document of the General Chapter 2024 not only proposes internal guidelines for the Congregation but also offers a genuine roadmap for a daring youth ministry, rooted in the Gospel and resolutely turned towards the future.

Conclusion

The call of the 2018 Synod resonates today as a true prophecy for the whole Church: **Welcoming young people is not simply a pastoral programme, but a journey of ecclesial conversion.** Listening to young people means not just paying attention to them, but **recognising in them a voice through which the Holy Spirit speaks to the Church, renewing it from within.**

Synodality, in this context, is not a management method or an administrative reform, but **an evangelical style of being community**, where all young people and adults, lay people and consecrated persons walk together as the People of God. Where this communion becomes a reality, **the Church ceases to appear as a distant institution. It becomes a home, a school of humanity and holiness, a place of shared discernment and transformative mission.**

Hence, a Church that listens to young people does not merely make room for them: **it allows itself to be challenged by them and, together with them, opens itself to the newness that God wishes to bring about.**

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JPIC

Synodality, a way of being and acting to promote justice, peace and the integrity of creation

Sister Marie Rose Cherche

The account of creation, as presented in the book of Genesis, is not limited to a simple explanation of the world's origins; it reveals a divine plan of great spiritual and anthropological depth. God does not merely create matter, living beings or the visible universe. He shapes an orderly, harmonious world woven together by relationships. God reveals Himself as a relational being, and human beings, created in the 'image of God', are called to live this relationship in communion with God, with one another and with the whole of creation. This relational vocation, inscribed at the heart of humanity, finds particular resonance today in the concept of synodality, which the Church is rediscovering as a way of life within the Church and a path for the transformation of the world.

Indeed, synodality, walking together, listening to the Spirit, to one another, and even to the cry of the Earth, becomes a concrete, collective and prophetic means of responding to the fractures introduced by sin: injustice, violence, exclusion and the destruction

of creation. It invites believers to reconnect with God's original plan by building relationships founded on justice, peace, and respect for our shared home. Therefore, synodality is not only a matter of ecclesial functioning, but a profound commitment to living the Christian mission at the heart of the world, in accordance with the biblical vision of humanity and creation. The Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation Commission (JPIC), which is the concrete expression of this mission, is part of this order wanted by God. It was founded in 1982 by the Union of Superiors General (USG) and the International Union of Superiors General (IUSG) to promote greater awareness, deeper analysis and more concrete action in favour of justice, peace and respect for creation, with particular emphasis on the most disadvantaged.

I. For a world inhabited in justice and peace

The texts of Genesis do not merely recount what God created; they also include how God organised His work. By saying, "Let us make man in our image" (Gen 1:26), God reveals that he acts in relationship, not alone. Man, created in this divine image, is fundamentally relational. His vocation is to enter into a living relationship with God, with others and with creation. Indeed, "the more the human person grows, the more they mature and sanctify themselves as they enter into relationships, when they come out of themselves to live in communion with God, with others and with all creatures. In this way, they take up in their own existence the Trinitarian dynamism that God has imprinted in them since creation."⁹⁰

At the same time, God did not want a uniform, static or monotonous world. He wanted a living world, varied and rich in forms, colours and rhythms. Every element has its place, its vocation and its own beauty. And to quote *Laudato si*, "God has written a beautiful book, whose letters are represented by the multitude of creatures present in the universe."⁹¹ The Catechism of the Catholic Church puts it this way, "God wills the interdependence of

⁹⁰ Francis. (2015). *Laudato Si: On Care for the Common Home* (No. 240). Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana.

⁹¹ *Ibid.* No. 85

creatures. The sun and the moon, the cedar and the little flower, the eagle and the sparrow; the spectacle of their countless diversities and inequalities means that none of the creatures are self-sufficient. They exist only in dependence on one another, to complement one another, to serve one another".⁹² In this heavenly logic, uniformity is not the ideal; it is the harmony of opposites that reveals the splendour of the divine plan.

God not only creates things but also **communion because He is communion**. He makes a world of relationships because, in himself, He is a relationship.

God creates, organises and finds 'good' what he has made. This goodness is not the result of luck, but the result of a free, intentional and benevolent act of God, who does everything out of love. It reflects the very nature of God, who is **infinite goodness**. St Thomas Aquinas wisely pointed out that multiplicity and variety come from the intention of the first agent, who wanted "what each thing lacks in order to represent divine goodness to be supplied by others, because 'one creature cannot suffice to represent His goodness as it should be represented'".⁹³ The world is therefore the fruit of God's gratuitous gift, an extension of His being, which is infinite goodness. Created in God's image, we share in this goodness and participate in His work of creation by safeguarding what He has made through our commitment to justice, peace and the integrity of creation.

1. Justice: Respecting God's rights and the order He has established

"Justice", according to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, "is a moral virtue which consists in giving God and neighbour their due by respecting their rights."⁹⁴ This virtue is based on an order willed by God, in which everything has its rightful place. Saint Mary Eugénie reminds us that "Adam and Eve were created in a state of original holiness and justice, which they lost through their sin"⁹⁵, and Saint Augustine affirms that justice is "giving everyone their due".

⁹² *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (No. 337). Vatican City.

⁹³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Prima Pars, Question 47, Article 2.

⁹⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (no. 1807). Vatican City.

⁹⁵ Chapter Instruction, by Saint Marie Eugénie de Jésus, 25 October 1874.

Justice is both a personal disposition and a relational reality that commits the entire creation to safeguarding the order of God and to living devotedly according to His will. For Saint John Paul II, “According to the testimony of the Poor Man of Assisi, by being at peace with God, we devote ourselves better to building peace with all creation, which is inseparable from peace among peoples.”

2. Peace: A commitment to human dignity

In the second account of creation, God draws Eve from Adam's body. The woman, created at that moment, is immediately identified by the man as “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Gen 2:23). Adam recognises in her an equal, a familiar and close presence, which awakens admiration and affection. This account does not establish a power relationship. It emphasises the profound unity between man and woman, their complementary difference, and the origin of their bond in love, kindness and mutual respect. This does not contradict what is said about human rights in several founding texts, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948), which begins with, “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights” (Article 1). The two sources do not contradict this assertion that “not only has God entrusted the world to human beings, but also that human life is a gift that must be protected from various forms of degradation”⁹⁶ And that “The sense of profound communion with the rest of nature cannot be real if our hearts lack tenderness, compassion and concern for our fellow human beings.”⁹⁷

3. Respecting the rights of creation

The beginning of the Bible presents creation as a voluntary, orderly and meaningful act, accomplished by the living Word of God. Everything that exists is willed, loved and has its own value. The repetition of “And God saw that it was very good” shows that every element, from the smallest to the greatest, is identified as good. This vision establishes an ethic of respect for all creation, viewed as rich

⁹⁶ Francis, (2015). *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* (no. 7). Vatican City.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.* No. 91.

in beauty and meaning. Human beings are given the task of managing it with care: "The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it." Genesis 2:15, while "to cultivate" means to plough or work the land, "to keep" means to protect, care for, preserve, maintain, watch over.⁹⁸ Human beings, therefore, have a responsibility to protect nature, rejecting all destructive exploitation

4. From contemplation to praise

Becoming aware of God's presence in all creation awakens in us a desire to worship, for and with all creatures. This invites us to adopt a gaze of wonder, gratitude, praise, contemplation and responsibility. Recognising that everything comes from God allows us to see in the world a reflection of His wisdom and love. "We can better understand the importance and meaning of each creature if we contemplate it within the entirety of God's plan."⁹⁹ Honouring nature then becomes an act of faith in the Creator, because "the entire material universe is a language of God's love, of His boundless affection us"¹⁰⁰ and "even the smallest part of nature becomes a source of wonder and awe."¹⁰¹ It is, following the example of Saint Mary Eugenia of Jesus, "to see the earth as a place of glory for our God."

II. The rupture caused by sin

Man has not always respected the order willed by God and has abused his freedom. Adam and Eve disobeyed the divine Word, "You may eat freely from every tree of the garden, but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (Genesis 2:16-17). They forgot that "authentic freedom is freedom ordered to truth, to the good, to God".¹⁰² Thus, sin is a free act of man against truth, against love, and therefore against God. Sin caused a rupture in fundamental relationships. "According to the Bible, the three vital relationships were broken, not only externally, but also

⁹⁸ Ibid. No. 66.

⁹⁹ Ibid. no. 86

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. No. 84.

¹⁰¹ Ibid. No. 85.

¹⁰² John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendour* (1993), § 84 et seq.

within us".¹⁰³ These ruptures have led to spiritual, social and ecological fractures, disrupting the original unity.

1. With God, the spiritual divide

Adam's sin represents a radical fracture in man's relationship with God, a loss of spiritual communion: "They heard the voice of the Lord God... and hid themselves" (Genesis 3:8). In place of the original healthy relationship, fear and shame are introduced. Their intimate relationship with God is altered, and the awareness of their nakedness becomes a source of shame. Man, in his search for meaning, finds himself disoriented. The human soul, in search of God, is marked by emptiness, isolation, and the pain of sin.

2. Social division in human relationships

After sin, the relationship between man and woman becomes fraught with conflict. The initial love gives way to mistrust and accusation: "The union of man and woman is subject to tension"¹⁰⁴ This marks the beginning of conflict, inequality and individualism. Sin disrupts human relationships and "today it manifests itself in all its destructive power in wars, the various forms of violence and abuse, the abandonment of the most vulnerable, and attacks on nature".¹⁰⁵

3. Ecological fractures in our relationship with nature

After sin, the earth becomes hostile, forcing man to struggle for survival: "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil, you will eat food from it." (Genesis 3:17-19). The relationship with nature deteriorates, leading to its excessive exploitation. Its consequences are : pollution, deforestation and overexploitation. "The violence present in the human heart, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness found in the soil, in water, in the air and in living beings".¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Francis. (2015). *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* (No. 66). Vatican City.

¹⁰⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. (1992). *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (No. 400). Vatican City.

¹⁰⁵ Francis. (2015). *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* (No. 66). Vatican City.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.* No. 2.

Faced with the imbalances caused by sin, it is essential to realise that the consequences of these crises are not distributed equitably. As the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace reminds us, “the current environmental crisis particularly affects the poorest, either because they live on land prone to erosion and desertification, or because they are involved in armed conflicts or forced migration, or because they lack the economic and technological means to protect themselves from disasters.”¹⁰⁷ Some victims are painfully visible, while others suffer in the shadows, far from the collective gaze and concerns.

The visible victims

These are the people we encounter in contexts of extreme poverty, violence, or overt marginalisation. They include women who are victims of violence, children subjected to labour or abuse, and indigenous peoples dispossessed of their land. Among them are refugees, the homeless, persons with disabilities who are neglected, isolated older adults, street children, undocumented migrants, and others. They embody the direct suffering caused by human injustice and structural sin.

The invisible victims

Less well-known and less covered by the media, these victims suffer in silence. They do not always appear in official statistics, but their distress is just as real. They include young people searching for meaning, spiritually isolated individuals, communities excluded from public life, but also non-human beings, such as animals and ecosystems, which suffer the destructive effects of exploitation and pollution. Unbreathable air, polluted oceans and endangered species are all silent cries that our current way of life struggles to hear. As *Laudato Si* states, “The most extraordinary scientific advances, the most amazing technical abilities, the most astonishing economic growth, unless they are accompanied by

¹⁰⁷ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. (2004). *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (No. 482). Vatican City.

authentic social and moral progress, will definitively turn against man."¹⁰⁸

4. Towards a complete conversion: justice, peace and the integrity of creation

The earth and the entire universe do not belong to us; they are a gift from God that we enjoy today, while having a duty to preserve them and pass them on to future generations. Let us dare to ask ourselves what kind of world we want to leave to future generations? This is the question that should concern us. We must realise that "Due to an ill-considered exploitation of nature, humanity runs the risk of destroying it and becoming in turn a victim of this degradation" and that "a crime against the natural world is a sin against ourselves and a sin against God".¹⁰⁹

To embark on this journey of conversion, each of us can acknowledge our wrongdoing and consider making amends, as the members of the Synod did: "We asked for forgiveness for the sins of which we are ashamed, while interceding for the victims of evil. We called our sins by their name: against peace, against creation, against indigenous peoples, against migrants, against children, against women, against the poor, against listening and against communion."¹¹⁰

Confessing our sins will lead us to adopt new lifestyles "in which the elements that determine consumption, savings and investment choices are the search for truth, beauty and goodness, as well as communion with other people for mutual growth."¹¹¹ It is "learning to give, not simply to renounce. It is a way of loving, of gradually moving from what I want to what God's world needs. It is liberation from fear, greed and dependence."¹¹²

It is daring to speak out when necessary: "There is too much discourse and too many actions driven by selfishness and hatred,

¹⁰⁸ Francis. (2015). *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* (No. 4). Vatican City.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid. (No. 4).

¹¹¹ Benedict XVI. (2006). *Caritas in Veritate* (No. 51). Vatican City.

¹¹² Francis. (2015). *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* (No. 9). Vatican City.

threatening the unity and peace within human communities. We therefore appeal to all those entrusted with responsibilities of governance in this country, at every level, to listen to the voice of their hearts and consciences, and to take courageous action to foster national unity and social peace."¹¹³

III. Synodality and the JPIC mission - good news for our times

Synodality, in the Church's vision today, is the way of being and acting as the People of God, where all walk together in mutual listening, communal discernment, and shared missionary responsibility. "It is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium."¹¹⁴

1. Synodality becomes a collective force

Synodality mobilises the whole Church in common commitment for justice, peace and the integrity of creation. The Church recognises that "it is together that we live salvation and bear witness to it."¹¹⁵ "Walk with all humanity, committing yourself with all your strength to human dignity, the common good, justice and peace."¹¹⁶

This is how, "the universal fraternity that embraces the earth and all beings is realised and implemented."¹¹⁷ Justice that liberates, peace that unites, and care for creation that ensures a sustainable future are the fruits of the synodal journey.

During her presentation entitled "The Roots of JPICS in the Charism and Spirituality of the Assumption according to the Writings of Mother Marie Eugénie",¹¹⁸ Sr. Véronique Thiébaud, Archivist of the Congregation, recalled visits to the poor and charitable associations as the concrete ways in which our first sisters initially expressed their concern for those in need. These associations

¹¹³ Mgr Edmond Jitangar, *Archbishop of Ndjamena, Address on the celebration of the Jubilee of Catechists in the Diocese of Ndjamena*, 25 May 2025.

¹¹⁴ Francis, *Address on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops*, 17 October 2015.

¹¹⁵ Synod on Synodality, *Final Document of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly*, 26th of October 2024, no. 154.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 20

¹¹⁷ Francis, (2015). *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* (no. 20). Vatican City.

¹¹⁸ A speech at the JPICS RA international session in Pune, India, from 26th of November to 7th of December 2023.

clearly demonstrate the transformative power that grows stronger when we unite our energies. Among them, we know well the *Association Notre Dame de Salut* (Association of Our Lady of Salvation), which has been influential from the time of Saint Marie Eugénie to the present day. For the Assumption sisters, as the General Chapter 2024 calls us to do, “working in networks is an essential way to have more impact on our world, convinced that working together enriches and energises our charism.”

We find remarkable examples in some of our churches, such as the *Social Pact for Peace and Living Together* in the DRC, jointly drafted by the National Episcopal Conference of the Congo and the Church of Christ in the Congo on the 15th of January 2025. This initiative illustrates an interfaith approach rooted in dialogue and listening with a particular focus on social justice in the eastern region of the country.

2. Synodality becomes a process of empowerment for the marginalised: shifting from a logic of ‘doing for’ to one of ‘doing with’

Synodality as a process of empowerment, transforms our relationship with marginalised people, shifting from a top-down model of charity (doing for), to an approach of communion and participatory justice (doing with). As the members of the Synod emphasised, “Valuing contexts, cultures, and diversity, and the relationships between them, is a key element in the growth of a synodal missionary Church.”¹¹⁹

By giving a voice to the excluded, synodality makes their dignity and their capacity to contribute to the life of the Church and society visible. It actively engages the most vulnerable by elevating them to the status of agents in their own transformation.

Some inspiring examples:

During the **Synod on the Amazon (2019)**, indigenous peoples were consulted and shared their realities. Their participation resulted in

¹¹⁹ Synod on Synodality, *Final Document of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly*, 26th of October 2024, no. 40.

concrete proposals on integral ecology, indigenous ministries and the recognition of their cultures.

In **Rwanda**, a training centre for single mothers in various trades, such as sewing, cooking, and hairdressing, accompanied by entrepreneurship courses, enables these young women to realise that they can transform their own lives. Through prayer and ongoing support, they rebuild their dignity and self-esteem.

3. Thanks to synodality, the JPIC mission becomes fully ecclesial

Synodality, which invites the Church to "be open to listening to everyone, especially the poor, stands in contrast to a world where the concentration of power excludes the poor, the marginalised, minorities and the earth, our shared home.¹²⁰ It enables the Church to be truly outgoing, inclusive, attentive to the most vulnerable, and collectively committed to a just, peaceful, and creation-friendly world. The synodal journey is closely linked to the JPIC mission, which now more than ever finds a spiritual and ecclesial foundation, a moral authority to denounce injustices, a prophetic voice in social and ecological debates, and credibility conferred by the Church.

IV. The JPIC mission embodies synodality

Synodality takes concrete form through the initiatives of JPIC, which mobilises communities around projects dedicated to social justice, sustainable peace and the protection of our common home:

1. Justice: Listening to the excluded, transforming structures

Sin creates social, ecological and political injustices that perpetuate oppression. Synodality calls the Church to denounce these injustices and to act together to address them, challenge abuses of power, and defend human rights.

In **Kenya**, the Diocese of Kisumu works for peace and justice. It helps people to understand each other better, trains leaders to

¹²⁰ Ibid. 48

resolve conflicts without violence, supports those affected by violence, and calls on the authorities to be just to everyone.¹²¹

2. Peace: Promoting dialogue and healing wounds

In a synodal Church, peace, a gift from God and the mission of every baptised person, is built through mutual listening, respect for differences, and the search for unity. The synodal approach recognises that “authentic and lasting peace is possible, and we can build it together”.¹²²

In **Rwanda**, through a synodal approach of listening and dialogue, the Justice and Peace Commissions continue to accompany the post-genocide reconciliation process. Through training, inter-ethnic dialogue, and a participatory approach, they have enabled mutual forgiveness and the rehabilitation of the Church as a place of peace.

3. Integrity of creation: Listening to the Earth, changing our habits

Faced with the ecological emergency, the mission of the synodal Church is to listen to the cry of the earth and of the most vulnerable, calling for a personal and collective ecological conversion. Through education, awareness-raising and concrete action, the Church encourages a responsible commitment to the protection of our shared home, in a spirit of communion and solidarity with all creation.

In Chad, at the Lady of the Assumption Secondary School (*Lycée Notre Dame de l'Assomption*) in N'djamena, members of the school's environmental club participate in community clean-ups, collecting plastics and other non-biodegradable waste to preserve the environment, in line with Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'*. This initiative had a significant impact on the region when the group expanded to include young people from the

¹²¹ Diocese of Kisumu. “Actions for Peace and Justice: Training, Support and Advocacy.” Official website of the diocese, accessed 2nd of May 2025.

¹²² Synod on Synodality, *Final Document of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly*, 26th of October 2024, no. 2.

neighbourhood and parish, engaging them in actions aimed at environmental protection.

God created the world to be beautiful and united, and we are made to participate in this harmony. Yet, because of sin, divisions have arisen: between God and humanity, among people, and between humans and nature. Synodality calls us to walk together, to listen and to act in communion, rediscovering this unity. It urges us to pursue justice, peace, and respect for creation. Through concrete actions and a living faith, the Church and the world can become a sign of God's love. Everyone is invited to build reconciliation and fraternity, so that all creation may celebrate God. "Biblical history begins with God's creation of 'the heaven and the earth' (Gen 1:1) and ends with the appearance of "a new heaven and a new earth"¹²³ (Rev 21:1). The mission of humankind is to safeguard, protect and bring God's creation to completion. The Church recognises this mission and supports us in it.

Let us conclude this reflection with two quotations from Pope Leo XIV: " For my part, I will make every effort so that this peace may prevail. The Holy See is always ready to help bring enemies together, face to face, to talk to one another, so that peoples everywhere may once more find hope and recover the dignity they deserve, the dignity of peace. The peoples of our world desire peace, and to their leaders I appeal with all my heart: Let us meet, let us talk, let us negotiate! War is never inevitable. Weapons can and must be silenced, for they do not resolve problems but only increase them. Those who make history are the peacemakers, not those who sow seeds of suffering. Our neighbours are not first our enemies, but our fellow human beings; not criminals to be hated, but other men and women with whom we can speak. Let us reject the Manichean notions so typical of that mindset of violence that divides the world into those who are good and those who are evil.¹²⁴ "... If you want to help someone, you cannot think of keeping your distance; you have to get involved, get dirty, perhaps be

¹²³ Rekha M. Chennattu, speech at the JPICS International Session "A Project of God: Biblical Perspectives Biblical Foundations of JPICS Mission RA," 28 November 2023.

¹²⁴ Pope Leo XIV, message to participants in the Jubilee of the Eastern Churches, 14th of May 2025.

contaminated... one truly helps if one is willing to heal the weight of the other's pain."¹²⁵

¹²⁵ Pope Leo XIV, during the second general audience of his pontificate, held on 28th of May 2025.