



TAIZÉ COMMUNITY

BRIEF VADEMECUM

FOR IMPLEMENTING THE SYNOD
IN LOCAL CHURCHES



**"Synodality is a path
of spiritual renewal and structural reform
to make the Church more participatory and missionary"
(Final Document 28).**

The Synod of Bishops "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission" came to an end in Rome in late October 2024. But the synodal process is far from over. On the one hand, the ten study groups convened by the Pope have to present their work. On the other hand, the ball is now in the court of dioceses, parishes, religious communities, and local groups of all kinds to try out and experience the proposals gathered in the Final Document. In connection with a small group of synod participants, I have undertaken to write this Vademecum, hoping that it will encourage people to read the Final Document and to start putting it into action.

At Colón (Cuba), February 26, 2025, Brother Alois of Taizé

The Final Document (FD, available at www.synod.va) is not much more than about fifty pages long. Following the lead of Vatican II, it moves resolutely away from a pyramidal conception of the Church towards the image of a community of all the baptized. It so opens up possibilities for reform that make the Church more faithful to the Gospel. To discover more deeply what it means in practice to live as a Church which is Communion, a time of education and training is going to be essential.

Some people have emphasized the document's weak points or shortcomings. Young people are mentioned only once, reflecting their absence from the assembly... The ordination of women to the diaconate or of married men to the priesthood was not discussed. Questions of gender and sexual orientation are not explored in depth. This should not prevent us from setting out with others to enable the Church let the Good News shine out more fully.

It is important to realize that this is a long-term process. Ripening takes time, and the synodal process is called to keep going ahead and to evolve continually. The synod has initiated deep changes in ecclesial culture; this is a long-term undertaking, but there are already initiatives that can be taken now to help it move forward.

The Final Document is more than a simple text: it is the fruit of an experience. The synodal process began in 2021, with meetings at various levels: local, regional, and continental. Even if these consultations did not take place everywhere with equal intensity, they were a first in the history of the Church and they provided a solid basis for the global assemblies of 2023 and 2024.

During these assemblies, two ecumenical times of prayer showed that synodality and commitment to Christian unity are inseparable. A penitential prayer named the sins of the Church in quite a stark way. The Pope wanted the bishops to be joined by other representatives of the people of God as well as a larger number of fraternal delegates from other Churches. He wished to begin the synod with a retreat, to introduce a simple method for listening to one another¹, and to provide moments for

¹"Conversation in the Spirit" takes place in small groups of 8 to 12 people. A facilitator explains the theme to be addressed and proposes a moment of bible reading and prayer. After this time of personal preparation, the

prayer and silence. All of this bore fruit. The fraternal climate made it possible not only to accept the diversity of the participants and their opinions but to view it positively. In a world where views are becoming more and more harshly polarized, Christians could bear witness to the fact that unity in a great diversity is possible.

The experience of the global assemblies can provide an inspiration for local initiatives: penitential prayer, prayers for Christian unity, "conversations in the Spirit." The following six areas have been selected with the aim of helping people enter more deeply into the synodality that the Final Document proposes.

1. Nourishing ourselves through prayer

The retreats held before each of the sessions in Rome invited the assembly to enter into a spiritual journey. And at the beginning of the last week of the second assembly, Timothy Radcliffe encouraged the participants to exercise a triple freedom. Freedom of speech: not being afraid to express one's point of view. Interior freedom: inwardly maintaining a certain distance from one's own convictions, which makes genuine listening to others possible. And the freedom given by the Gospel: entrusting ourselves to God who is there, to Christ who goes before us, to the Holy Spirit who guides us.

Such an interior attitude of conversion and faith, strengthened by prayer, can allow us to journey together in our communities. And for the trusting of faith to grow in us, it can be of great help to be listened to, to be accompanied, and not only in the context of preparation for the sacraments.

A deepening of personal and community prayer is essential if we are to implement reforms in the Church. The Eucharist and common prayer unite us in Christ while allowing us to recognize the diversity within our communities.

How can we renew the prayer life of our communities? Who can be the animators of this? What can we adapt in our liturgies to promote the participation of all and allow for greater interiority? Elements from local cultures could enrich our liturgical experience and encourage participation. Can we prepare men and women who listen to and accompany others in their journey of faith?

2. Rediscovering the joy of being the people of God, in solidarity with all humanity

"conversation" is organized in three rounds. In a first round, each person expresses what they have prepared in a maximum of 3 minutes. The others listen carefully to hear what seems important to them. Each person's contribution is followed by a few seconds of silence. This first round ends with one to two minutes of silence to let what has been heard "sink in" and to let each participant choose what they want to retain. In the second round, each person speaks again – for 2 minutes – to approve, question, or simply allow to resonate in themselves what has been shared and what they would like to retain. This second round also concludes with a time of silence that allows each person to ask themselves what they have heard and what touches them. In a third round, each person shares what they feel is worth retaining from the convictions that the group shared in the second round. This is no longer just a personal word but what the group has said and heard. How is the Spirit inviting us, in what we have heard, to move forward? This is still a time of active listening. A secretary takes notes and proposes to the group a first summary of up to two pages. If several groups have been talking about the same theme, these summaries are then pooled with a view to drafting a synthesis that will be discussed and voted on by all (according to needs and context).

Baptism constitutes us as the people of God on the march, in solidarity with all humanity. The purpose that animates our journey is the Kingdom proclaimed and inaugurated by Christ. Through acts of love, small or large, the Kingdom is already coming into the world, like yeast in the dough.

To announce the Gospel, we need to be constantly listening: listening to Scripture, to members of our communities, to Christians of other Churches, to people who are poor and marginalized, to diverse cultures, to victims or survivors of abuse, to theologians, to believers or seekers for meaning in life whose points of reference are other than the Gospel, to social networks, to the arts, to science... The truth revealed by Christ opens us to the world, to all humans, for each one carries a word from God.²

How can we establish or strengthen such dialogues? Who can take charge of them? How can we encourage young people to engage in them? What specific ways of listening to, understanding, and announcing the Gospel are given to us by the culture of our society?

3. Bringing out the fact that baptism gives equal dignity to all Christians

Baptism is the source that confers on all the same dignity as children of God. The mission of bishops and priests, received through their ordination, is to recognize charisms, to foster the participation of everyone in the life of the community, and to open communities to the broader fellowship of the universal Church. Their ministry does not give them additional dignity; all clericalism is banished.

Since his first Apostolic Exhortation "The Joy of the Gospel," Pope Francis has called for a "healthy decentralization" of the Catholic Church. The proclamation of the Gospel requires attention to contexts, cultures, social strata, etc. To promote inculturation, the synod requests more competencies for bishops' conferences in the areas of pastoral work, liturgy, and doctrine. The synod encourages holding local councils and synods, regional and continental ecclesial assemblies; it asks for acceptance that reforms in the Church are accomplished at different speeds.

The Final Document requests the participation of the entire community – men and women³, young people, poor and marginalized people – in the preparation and making of decisions. It is up to the bishop or priest in charge to make the final decision, but they must take into account the opinion of established councils, and they are obliged to justify a decision that deviates from them. Bishops are

² "It is not fitting to state in an exclusive way: 'I possess the truth'. The truth is not possessed by anyone; it is always a gift which calls us to undertake a journey of ever closer assimilation to truth. Truth can only be known and experienced in freedom; for this reason we cannot impose truth on others; truth is disclosed only in an encounter of love." (Benedict XVI, Exhortation *Ecclesia in Medio Oriente*, September 14, 2012.)

³ The necessity of giving women their rightful place in the Church is a cross-cutting theme of the final document. Paragraph 60 states: "By virtue of Baptism, women and men have equal dignity as members of the People of God. However, women continue to encounter obstacles in obtaining a fuller recognition of their charisms, vocation and place in all the various areas of the Church's life. This is to the detriment of serving the Church's shared mission. Scripture attests to the prominent role of many women in the history of salvation. (...) This Assembly asks for full implementation of all the opportunities already provided for in Canon Law with regard to the role of women, particularly in those places where they remain under-utilised. There is no reason or impediment that should prevent women from carrying out leadership roles in the Church: what comes from the Holy Spirit cannot be stopped. Additionally, the question of women's access to diaconal ministry remains open...." It must be said that this was the paragraph that encountered the most resistance in the assembly; it was voted with 258 votes in favor and 97 against. The final document also says that lay people, men and women, can already be ministers of baptism and marriage in certain circumstances and that these ministerial acts, still exceptional, should be extended and stabilized (FD 76), which could ensure that they are accompanied better. There is also mention of a ministry of listening.

called regularly to account for financial management, sexual abuse and the protection of persons, but also for pastoral care and even their personal lifestyle. Fraternal visits to bishops will be instituted. All of this requires ongoing formation for lay people, deacons, priests, and bishops. The formation of seminarians should be reviewed.

In our communities, what tasks can be taken on more by lay members, both men and women (this would help to lighten the load on priests, though such lightening of their tasks should not be the primary motivation)? Could the method of "conversation in the Spirit" help with the making of important decisions together? Is there sharing between generations in our community?

4. Participatory bodies: a way of ensuring that synodality is swiftly put into practice

"The way to promote a synodal Church" is undoubtedly "to foster as great a participation of all the People of God as possible" (FD 87). The most important institutional means for fostering this are the various Church Councils at all levels of the life of the people of God (cf. FD 103). Hence the urgency of the "renewal of participatory bodies" so that processes of missionary transformation may be set in motion (cf. FD 108). This means that their purpose is not first of all organizational.

How can we relaunch at different levels of diocesan life, beginning in our parish communities, these places of listening, community discernment, and decision-making undertaken together with pastors? Could the first step be to take the time to listen patiently to each other in the confidence that the Spirit of the Risen One is at work to seek and discern what the Lord expects from the witness of our communities? A time of Bible reading and prayer in our meetings could help with this.

5. Deepening Christian unity

The emphasis on baptism common to all Christians naturally opens onto ecumenism, one of the themes that runs right through the Final Document.

The Eastern Churches united with Rome emphasized their autonomy and equal dignity as sister Churches of the Latin Church, with their liturgical, theological, and canonical heritage. In this way they highlighted that there is already great diversity in the Catholic Church. This is reflected in the way the final document speaks of the Church as a "communion of Churches" (FD 18).

In the global assemblies of the synod, "fraternal delegates" from other Churches participated fully in everything except voting, having an equal right to speak in small groups and plenary meetings.

The working document "The Bishop of Rome," published last summer by the dicastery for Christian unity, came at the right time⁴. It reinforced the ecumenical dynamic of the synod. The synod explicitly welcomed this document (FD 137)

What links with other Churches already exist among us? How can we deepen and broaden them? Who will (re)start fraternal visits, not to convert others, but to discover how they live the Gospel and to explore possibilities for common prayers and collaboration? How can we better take into

⁴In his encyclical "Ut unum sint," Pope John Paul II asked how the Petrine ministry could and should be transformed so as to have a significance for all the baptized beyond the Catholic Church. The dicastery for unity has gathered and synthesized in this document the numerous responses from various Churches and commissions.

account the fact that our decisions and initiatives affect other Churches? Can we invite representatives from other Churches to our bodies and councils (as was the case for the synod sessions in Rome), and report to other Churches on our decisions and orientations?

6. With religious communities, new communities, and other "places of Church life"

In their age-long experience, religious communities have matured practices of synodal life and discernment in common, learning to harmonize the gifts of individuals with the common mission of their community (FD 65). Institutes of consecrated life and new communities often manage to take root in a locality and to connect different places and milieus (FD 118). They are laboratories where people from different cultures live and work together.

The synod noted that more and more Christians are living their faith in a community that is not the parish. They are connected among themselves through networks, sometimes social networks.

How can religious communities and new communities contribute to the common mission of a synodal Church in dialogue with today's world? Can they rethink their own ways of organizing their governance to make it more inclusive and participatory? If we know Christians who experience communion in faith outside the parish, can we maintain contact with them to understand their approach?

"This is what corresponds to the synodal style which applies as well to the exercise of the Petrine ministry: listening, convening, discerning, deciding, and evaluating. And in these stages, pauses, silences, and prayer are necessary. It is a style that we learn together, little by little. The Holy Spirit calls us and supports us in this process of learning, which we must understand as a process of conversion."

(Pope Francis, after the vote on the Final Document)
