

2. Principles of a Synodal Process

(taken from *Vademecum for the Synod on Synodality*)

2.1 Who can participate?

We see throughout the Gospels how Jesus reaches out to all. He does not only save people individually but as a people that he gathers together, as the one Shepherd of the entire flock (cf. John 10:16). The ministry of Jesus shows us that no one is excluded from God's plan of salvation.

The work of evangelization and the message of salvation cannot be understood without Jesus' constant openness to the widest possible audience. The Gospels refer to this as the crowd, composed of all the people who follow Jesus along the path and everyone that Jesus calls to follow him. The Second Vatican Council highlights that "all human beings are called to the new people of God" (LG, 13). God is truly at work in the entire people that he has gathered together. This is why "the entire body of the faithful, anointed as they are by the Holy One, cannot err in matters of belief. They manifest this special property by means of the whole people's supernatural discernment in matters of faith when from the Bishops down to the last of the lay faithful, they show universal agreement in matters of faith and morals" (LG, 12). The Council further points out that such discernment is animated by the Holy Spirit and proceeds through dialogue among all peoples, reading the signs of the times in faithfulness to the teachings of the Church.

In this light, the objective of this diocesan phase is to consult the People of God so that the Synodal Process is carried out through listening to all the baptized. By convoking this Synod, Pope Francis is inviting all the baptized to participate in this Synodal Process that begins at the diocesan level. Dioceses are called to keep in mind that the main subjects of this synodal experience are all the baptized. Special care should be taken to involve those persons who may risk being excluded: women, the handicapped, refugees, migrants, the elderly, people who live in poverty, Catholics who rarely or never practice their faith, etc. Creative means should also be found in order to involve children and youth.

Together, all the baptized are the subject of the *sensus fidelium*, the living voice of the People of God. At the same time, in order to participate fully in the act of discerning, it is important for the baptized to hear the voices of other people in their local context, including people who have left the practice of the faith, people of other faith traditions, people of no religious belief, etc. For as the Council declares: "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts" (GS, 1).

For this reason, while all the baptized are specifically called to take part in the Synodal Process, no one – no matter their religious affiliation – should be excluded from sharing their perspective and experiences, insofar as they want to help the Church on her synodal journey

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of seeking what is good and true. This is especially true of those who are most vulnerable or marginalized.

2.2A Process that is truly Synodal: Listening, Discernment, and Participation

The Synodal Process is first and foremost a spiritual process. It is not a mechanical data-gathering exercise or a series of meetings and debates. Synodal listening is oriented towards discernment. It requires us to learn and exercise the art of personal and communal discernment. We listen to each other, to our faith tradition, and to the signs of the times in order to discern what God is saying to all of us. Pope Francis characterizes the two interrelated goals of this process of listening: “to listen to God, so that with him we may hear the cry of his people; to listen to his people until we are in harmony with the will to which God calls us.” [5 FRANCIS, Address at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops (17 October 2015).]

This kind of discernment is not only a one-time exercise, but ultimately a way of life, grounded in Christ, following the lead of the Holy Spirit, living for the greater glory of God. Communal discernment helps to build flourishing and resilient communities for the mission of the Church today. Discernment is a grace from God, but it requires our human involvement in simple ways: praying, reflecting, paying attention to one’s inner disposition, listening and talking to one another in an authentic, meaningful, and welcoming way.

The Church offers us several keys to spiritual discernment. In a spiritual sense, discernment is the art of interpreting in what direction the desires of the heart lead us, without letting ourselves be seduced by what leads us to where we never wanted to go. Discernment involves reflection and engages both the heart and head in making decisions in our concrete lives to seek and find the will of God.

If listening is the method of the Synodal Process, and discerning is the aim, then participation is the path. Fostering participation leads us out of ourselves to involve others who hold different views than we do. Listening to those who have the same views as we do bears no fruit. Dialogue involves coming together across diverse opinions. Indeed, God often speaks through the voices of those that we can easily exclude, cast aside, or discount. We must make a special effort to listen to those we may be tempted to see as unimportant and those who force us to consider new points of view that may change our way of thinking.

2.3 Attitudes for Participating in the Synodal Process

On various occasions, Pope Francis has shared his vision for what the practice of synodality looks like concretely. The following are particular attitudes that enable genuine listening and dialogue as we participate in the Synodal Process.

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- **Being synodal requires time for sharing:** We are invited to speak with authentic courage and honesty (*parrhesia*) in order to integrate freedom, truth, and charity. Everyone can grow in understanding through dialogue.
- **Humility in listening must correspond to courage in speaking:** Everyone has the right to be heard, just as everyone has the right to speak. Synodal dialogue depends on courage both in speaking and in listening. It is not about engaging in a debate to convince others. Rather, it is welcoming what others say as a way by which the Holy Spirit can speak for the good of all (1 Corinthians 12:7).
- **Dialogue leads us to newness:** We must be willing to change our opinions based on what we have heard from others.
- **Openness to conversion and change:** We can often be resistant to what the Holy Spirit is trying to inspire us to undertake. We are called to abandon attitudes of complacency and comfort that lead us to make decisions purely on the basis of how things have been done in the past.
- **Synods are an ecclesial exercise in discernment:** Discernment is based on the conviction that God is at work in the world and we are called to listen to what the Spirit suggests to us.
- **We are signs of a Church that listens and journeys:** By listening, the Church follows the example of God himself, who listens to the cry of his people. The Synodal Process provides us with the opportunity to open ourselves to listen in an authentic way, without resorting to ready-made answers or pre-formulated judgments.
- **Leave behind prejudices and stereotypes:** We can be weighed down by our weaknesses and sinfulness. The first step towards listening is freeing our minds and hearts from prejudices and stereotypes that lead us on the wrong path, towards ignorance and division.
- **Overcome the scourge of clericalism:** The Church is the Body of Christ filled with different charisms in which each member has a unique role to play. We are all interdependent on one another and we all share an equal dignity amidst the holy People of God. In the image of Christ, true power is service. Synodality calls upon pastors to listen attentively to the flock entrusted to their care, just as it calls the laity to freely and honestly express their views. Everyone listens to one other out of love, in a spirit of communion and our common mission. Thus the power of the Holy Spirit is manifested in manifold ways in and through the entire People of God.
- **Cure the virus of self-sufficiency:** We are all in the same boat. Together we form the Body of Christ. Setting aside the mirage of self-sufficiency, we are able to learn from each other, journey together, and be at the service of one another. We can build bridges beyond the walls that sometimes threaten to separate us – age, gender, wealth, ability, education, etc.
- **Overcoming ideologies:** We must avoid the risk of giving greater importance to ideas than to the reality of the life of faith that people live in a concrete way.

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- **Give rise to hope:** Doing what is right and true does not seek to attract attention or make headlines, but rather aims at being faithful to God and serving His People. We are called to be beacons of hope, not prophets of doom.
- **Synods are a time to dream and “spend time with the future”:** We are encouraged to create a local process that inspires people, with no one excluded to create a vision of the future filled with the joy of the Gospel.
- The following dispositions will help participants (cf. *Christus Vivit*):
 - *An innovative outlook:* To develop new approaches, with creativity and a certain audacity.
 - *Being inclusive:* A participatory and co-responsible Church, capable of appreciating its own rich variety, embraces all those we often forget or ignore.
 - *An open mind:* Let us avoid ideological labels and make use of all methodologies that have borne fruit.
 - *Listening to each and every one:* By learning from one another, we can better reflect the wonderful multi-faceted reality that Christ’s Church is meant to be.
 - *An understanding of “journeying together”:* To walk the path that God calls the Church to undertake for the third millennium.
 - *Understanding the concept of a co-responsible Church:* To value and involve the unique role and vocation of each member of the Body of Christ, for the renewal and building up of the whole Church.
 - *Reaching out through ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue:* To dream together and journey with one another throughout the entire human family.

2.4 Avoiding Pitfalls

As on any journey, we need to be aware of possible pitfalls that could hamper our progress during this time of synodality. The following are several pitfalls that must be avoided in order to promote the vitality and fruitfulness of the Synodal Process.

1. *The temptation of wanting to lead ourselves instead of being led by God.* Synodality is not a corporate strategic exercise. Rather it is a spiritual process that is led by the Holy Spirit. We can be tempted to forget that we are pilgrims and servants on the path marked out for us by God. Our humble efforts of organization and coordination are at the service of God who guides us on our way. We are clay in the hands of the divine Potter (Isaiah 64:8).
2. *The temptation to focus on ourselves and our immediate concerns.* The Synodal Process is an opportunity to open up, to look around us, to see things from other points of view, and to move out in missionary outreach to the peripheries. This requires us to think long-term. This also means broadening our perspectives to the dimensions of the entire Church and asking questions, such as: What is God’s plan for the Church here and now? How can we implement God’s dream for the Church on the local level?

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3. *The temptation to only see “problems.”* The challenges, difficulties, and hardships facing our world and our Church are many. Nevertheless, fixating on the problems will only lead us to be overwhelmed, discouraged, and cynical. We can miss the light if we focus only on the darkness. Instead of focusing only on what is not going well, let us appreciate where the Holy Spirit is generating life and see how we can let God work more fully.
4. *The temptation of focusing only on structures.* The Synodal Process will naturally call for a renewal of structures at various levels of the Church, in order to foster deeper communion, fuller participation, and more fruitful mission. At the same time, the experience of synodality should not focus first and foremost on structures, but on the experience of journeying together to discerning the path forward, inspired by the Holy Spirit. The conversion and renewal of structures will come about only through the on-going conversion and renewal of all the members of the Body of Christ.
5. *The temptation not to look beyond the visible confines of the Church.* In expressing the Gospel in our lives, lay women and men act as a leaven in the world in which we live and work. A Synodal Process is a time to dialogue with people from the worlds of economics and science, politics and culture, arts and sport, the media and social initiatives. It will be a time to reflect on ecology and peace, life issues and migration. We must keep the bigger picture in view to fulfil our mission in the world. It is also an opportunity to deepen the ecumenical journey with other Christian denominations and to deepen our understanding with other faith traditions.
6. *The temptation to lose focus of the objectives of the Synodal Process.* As we proceed along the journey of the Synod, we need to be careful that, while our discussions might be wide-ranging, the Synodal Process maintains the goal of discerning how God calls us to walk forward together. No one Synodal Process is going to resolve all our concerns and problems. Synodality is an attitude and an approach of moving forward in a co-responsible way that is open to welcoming God’s fruits together over time.
7. *The temptation of conflict and division.* “That they may all be one” (John 17:21). This is the ardent prayer of Jesus to the Father, asking for unity among his disciples. The Holy Spirit leads us deeper into communion with God and one another. The seeds of division bear no fruit. It is vain to try to impose one’s ideas on the whole Body through pressure or to discredit those who feel differently.
8. *The temptation to treat the Synod as a kind of a parliament.* This confuses synodality with a ‘political battle’ in which in order to govern one side must defeat the other. It is contrary to the spirit of synodality to antagonize others or to encourage divisive conflicts that threaten the unity and communion of the Church.
9. *The temptation to listen only to those who are already involved in Church activities.* This approach may be easier to manage, but it ultimately ignores a significant proportion of the People of God.