

SYNOD: it's US, all of us!

A word we are hearing – that we may not be familiar with: SYNOD.

Simply put, a SYNOD is a governing body of the church. **THE SYNOD HELPS THE CHURCH TO WALK FORWARD TOGETHER IN THE SAME DIRECTION.**

Synodality" means "discerning together." It supposes spirituality, dialogue and listening. Synods in recent centuries have been principally gatherings of bishops. This was not the case in the early Church.

What is new in our era is that members from ALL sectors of the Church are again called to be part of this discernment and planning. It makes visible the fact that all members of the Church have experience and insights concerning the mission and activities of the Church. Women and men; married and single persons; lay, religious and ordained individuals: the participation of all is important for the benefit of all who are touched by the ministries of the Church.

Everybody is invited to participate in the preparation of this event. The church is very diverse and decentralized. It is not possible to be sure that everybody will join in, but the Church wants to encourage parishes, dioceses, bishops' conferences, all the different Church bodies to embrace a synodal style. The fact that "the pope says something" is not enough for the whole world to follow. The challenge is to promote synodality- a change in the way the church operates. This, obviously, will take time.

In the First Vatican Council (1869-1870) what was emphasized was the primacy of the pope, with the view that the bishops received their authority from the pope and would have power to approve what the pontiff decided. The church was conceived very hierarchical. The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) debated a lot this question of collegiality and concluded that the pope was not separate from the college of apostles and that power could be exercised together by the pope and the bishops.

Synodality, in today's sense as emphasized by Pope Francis, who is calling for a synodal church, means that the whole people of God, who, by their baptism, are called to be actors, are to participate in the discernment.

Yes, the challenge is now to see pastors not separated from their people. Vatican II has made things move, has rediscovered the vision of Christians from the first centuries, when the governance of the church was synodal and collegial.

Synodality is a fruit of the Second Vatican Council, a kind of rediscovery of a way of seeing the church first as people of God, people journeying together as pilgrims. What is complicated in the present situation is that we are in a transition phase, with two visions of church that are colliding.

On one hand, we inherit from more than 1,500 years a hierarchical, clerical church where the clerics are separated from the laity. On the other hand, we can imagine a synodal church as described by the Second Vatican Council but which has not yet been received and implemented.

The situation of the church in the world is very varied, very contrasted. It is necessary to look beyond one's own parish. Several currents and sensitivities coexist within the Catholic Church. A majority of laypeople, including women, aspire to see a synodal church, but there is also some resistance from others.

We will see how this plays out as it evolves.

What is new is the emphasis given today in the new apostolic constitution *Episcopalis Communio*, promulgated before the 2018 synod for young people. This text insists that the synod is not only the monthlong meeting with the bishops, but a whole process: There is an important preparatory phase at the local level, and then, after the synod, implementing the decisions is also a decisive phase.

We hope that the preparation of the synod encourages the people of God to take part in preparatory meetings, to discuss, to listen. This really is what the text says and what the pope would like to encourage.

Religious communities and people from all parts of the Church should be very involved in preparations of this synod. It is important to listen to women, to young people, to poor people who do not always have a say.

Is the implementation of a synodal church the great project of Pope Francis' pontificate?

Yes, we can say that. Pope Francis was elected to advance the reform of the church. In a major speech to mark the 50th anniversary of synods, in October 2015, Pope Francis said, "It is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the church of the third millennium." The synod could help us turn a clerical church into a synodal church.

In this time of crisis within the church, with all sorts of abuses and challenges, it is necessary to involve the laity in this vision of the synodal church.

It is important to realize that the conversion of the church to the mission is a very important issue. We'll find a way out of current crises only if laypeople are involved. In addition, if we want to implement the ecological conversion that Laudato Si' calls for and the fraternal world described in Fratelli Tutti, the church has to be synodal.

The challenge is to work as a team. Nobody can solve a crisis alone. It is true that the church is structured with a hierarchical principle that means the bishops take the final responsibility after discussion with others. Of course, someone should be in charge, and often, it is the priest. But if the discussion has been serious and real, the opinion of the priest is not necessarily the one that will prevail.

The crisis of the Covid Pandemic that erupted in a world that was changing fast has increased our feeling of interdependence. We realize that in a situation that is constantly changing, with safety measures evolving all the time, we have to become a church in movement, a marching church, listening to the Holy Spirit to discern every day how we can accomplish our mission.

Many members of the church would like to be part of the process of decision-making in the church. This is something young people and

women, in particular, demand now. They feel their voice is not heard enough.

The word "synod" comes from a Greek expression and means "to be together on the road." A synodal church is a place where everyone — laypeople, clergy, religious men and women, and the bishop of Rome — walk together.

The reform of the church is even more necessary because of the religious and sexual abuses that have been uncovered recently. The church must be a safe place for all. It has now to admit it is fragile and to change the way power is exercised in order to get back some credibility.

For the first time, the International Union of Superiors General is named in the new constitution on the synod, *Episcopalis Communio*, as the actor for the consultation process through female religious orders. **Everyone should be involved in this event and contribute to turn a clerical church into a synodal church.**

NOTES taken from an interview with Sister Nathalie Becquart, a member of the [Xavière Sisters](#)