

THE VOCATION AND MISSION OF THE FAMILY

The 14th Ordinary Synod of Bishops

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When he opened the 14th Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, Pope Francis recalled that the synodal fathers were about to “take up again the dialogue” that was launched with the 3rd Extraordinary Assembly (October 5-19, 2014).¹ He then said: “The Synod, as we know, is a ‘walking together’ in a spirit of *collegiality* and *synodality*, courageously adopting *parrhêsia*, pastoral and doctrinal zeal, wisdom, and frankness, and always having before our eyes the good of the Church and of the families, and the *suprema lex*, the *salus animarum*.”² 270 synodal fathers, 14 fraternal delegates, 51 men and women auditors (17 couples and 17 single persons) were involved in the work of the Ordinary Synod, which lasted for three weeks, from October 4 to 25, 2015. The speeches of the synodal fathers in the aula were subdivided into three stages, corresponding to the parts of the *Instrumentum laboris* that had been drafted on the basis of the conclusions of the preceding Synod, and was then completed by a synthesis of the replies to a second questionnaire that was published on December 9, 2014.³

1. For an analysis of the basic stages of this synodal process, see the volume containing the Acts of the Synod: A. Spadaro (ed.), *La famiglia è il futuro. Tutti i documenti del Sinodo straordinario 2014*, Milan, Ancora, 2014.

2. Pope Francis, Introductory discourse, Synod Aula, October 5, 2015.

3. The questions were sent to the Synods of the Oriental Churches *sui iuris*, to all the episcopal conferences, to the dicasteries of the Roman Curia, and to others who had a right to be involved. The insertions of the synthesis were added either before or after the 62 numbered sections of the *Relatio*, depending on the subject matter, which is thus “commented on” and amplified by the replies that were sent in.

“We must walk together”

The 14th Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops took place fifty years after the Synod was set up by Paul VI. The anniversary was marked on October 17 with a special event at which Cardinal Schönborn made a commemorative address and the Holy Father delivered a discourse. As the Pope sees it, the Synod is a “process” that ought increasingly to shape the life of the Church;⁴ indeed, this “is what God expects from the Church of the third millennium,”⁵ because “Church and Synod are synonymous.”⁶ Episcopal collegiality must live in a Church that is totally synodal. Pope Francis had already announced this clearly in the interview he gave to *Civiltà Cattolica*, only five months after his election, in these words: “We must walk together: the people, the bishops, and the Pope. Synodality must be lived on various levels. Perhaps the time has come to change the methodology of the Synod, because I find the present methodology static.”⁷

The fact that the synodal process began with a questionnaire shows us something of fundamental importance. As the Pope remarked, “the *sensus fidei* prevents us from making a rigid separation between the *Ecclesia docens* and the *Ecclesia discens*, since the Flock too possesses its own ‘sense of smell’ to discern the new paths that the Lord is opening up for the Church.” He went on to say that it was this conviction “that guided me when I wanted the People of God to be consulted in the preparation of the double synodal event on the family.” For “how could it be possible to speak of the family without consulting the family, listening to their joys and their hopes, their pains and their fears?”⁸

4. See *Evangelii gaudium* (EG), nn. 3; 242; 246.

5. Pope Francis, Discourse in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops, October 17, 2015.

6. Ibid. The last quotation is from St John Chrysostom, *Explicatio in Ps. 149*: PG 55, 493.

7. A. Spadaro, “Intervista a Papa Francesco,” *Civ. Catt.* 2013 III 466; also in the book: Papa Francesco, *La mia porta è sempre aperta. Una conversazione con Antonio Spadaro*, Milan, Rizzoli, 2013, 65.

8. Discourse (n. 5 above).

Synodality and diversity

Synodality implies diversity. This is truer today than ever before. When they entered the synodal aula, the fathers were given the impression of a living body, capable of reflecting in a genuine way, which is confronted with very diverse problems, languages, and ways of tackling reality. The human being in his or her concreteness is not an element that is extraneous to the preaching of the Gospel. This means that this dimension of relationship to reality, to real experience, is fundamental and can create divergences. In specific terms, a solution that is good for New Zealand is not good for Lithuania, and an approach that is valid in Germany is not valid for Guinea.

Accordingly, “quite apart from the dogmatic questions that have been well defined by the magisterium of the Church,” the Pope himself noted, in his concluding discourse at the Synod, “that what seems normal to a bishop from one continent can appear strange, almost a scandal – almost! – to a bishop from another continent. That which is regarded as the violation of a law in one society can be an obvious and inviolable precept in another society. That which is liberty of conscience in the eyes of some can be merely confusion in the eyes of others.” This shows us that catholicity is not in the least the same thing as “globalization.” And we grasp that the universality of the Church does not mean mass-production; nor does it signify uniformity.⁹

9. An emblematic case is the paragraph on homosexuality in n. 76 of the final *Relatio* of the Synod. In the eyes of some – for example, fathers who come from contexts in which polygamy is the topic that must be discussed with serenity and attention – it appeared excessively conciliatory. In the eyes of others, however, it appeared insufficient. In the third report of the German-language group, we find the affirmation that “in a falsely understood endeavor to uphold the Church’s teaching, harsh and unmerciful attitudes have cropped up again and again in pastoral situations, and these attitudes have inflicted suffering on persons.” These persons explicitly include “people with a homosexual orientation.” These fathers therefore conclude: “As bishops of our Church, we ask these persons for forgiveness.”

“Parrhêsia” and the primacy

The “dynamic of synodality”¹⁰ requires full freedom of speech and of expression even in the differences that have just been described. In his words of greeting at the beginning of the Extraordinary Synod, the Pope declared firmly: “I ask of you, please, this attitude of brothers in the Lord: to speak with *parrhêsia* and listen with humility.” He repeated the same appeal in his introductory remarks at the Ordinary Synod. This, then, is another challenge to internal mercy within the Church: we must speak clearly to one another, listen patiently to one another, and dialogue at length. In this sense, the *Relatio Synodi*, which is the fruit of this *encounter*, is not the result of a compromise. It is that which the synodal fathers have succeeded in writing together, across differences of every kind.

4

This dynamic of real debate is not in the least “confusion,” but “freedom” – two terms that must never be assimilated, for otherwise we shall not live with courage a full adult maturity. Besides this, “heated discussion, and indeed conflicts and intense arguments, are a natural part of the synodal path.”¹¹ The conflict can even become “a link in the chain of a new process” (EG 227). And we must recall, as Cardinal Schönborn did in his commemorative discourse on the fiftieth anniversary of the institution of the Synod, the climate of the so-called “Council of Jerusalem”: the Acts of the Apostles are not afraid to record “a vigorous discussion” (Acts 15:7) among the apostles and the elders of the Church of Jerusalem, which follows another “controversy” in which “Paul and Barnabas disagreed and engaged in a heated discussion” (Acts 15:2) about the question of circumcision with other brothers who had come from Jerusalem. And we should recall that Paul opposed Cephas “face to face” (Gal 2:11).

Francis has identified precisely in his own Petrine ministry the foundation that permits serenity of conscience when one says

10. Pope Francis, Greeting to the Synodal Fathers during the 1st General Congregation of the 3rd General Extraordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, October 6, 2014.

11. C. Schönborn, “Relazione commemorativa del 50° anniversario del Sinodo dei Vescovi,” October 17, 2015.

what one thinks. As he had noted at the conclusion of the 3rd Extraordinary Assembly, “the Synod always takes place *cum Petro et sub Petro*, and the presence of the Pope is, for everyone, the guarantee and the safeguarding of the faith.” His ministry is the guarantee of communion: “The fact that the Synod always acts *cum Petro et sub Petro* – that is to say, not only *cum Petro*, but always *sub Petro* – is not a limitation on its freedom, but a guarantee of its unity.”¹² In this way, Peter cannot be understood restrictively as a “dam” against speech and thinking within the Church; on the contrary, he must be understood as the solid “rock” that makes expression possible, because it is he (and no one else) who is the “guarantee of the conformity of the Church to the will of God, to the Gospel of Christ, and to the Tradition of the Church.”

It is interesting to note how Francis speaks of the importance of the Petrine primacy precisely in the context of synodality, expressing the conviction that “in a synodal Church, greater light can be shed on the exercise of the Petrine primacy too. The Pope does not stand on his own above the Church, but within it as a baptized person among the baptized, and within the episcopal college as a bishop among the bishops, who is at the same time called – as the successor of the apostle Peter – to guide the Church of Rome which presides over all the Churches in love.”¹³ His constant presence in the aula was not in the least a simple matter of symbolism. It was also the most evident expression of the synodality of the Church.

Dialogue and discernment

Pope Francis renewed the methodology of the Synod because he wanted a Synod that was more dynamic in its “debate.” The objective was to make the conduct of its work quicker, more dynamic, and more effective, above all by attaching importance to the language-groups (*circuli minores*), where the limited number of participants and the linguistic homogeneity made it possible to have a long and frank dialogue, to share ideas with one another,

12. Pope Francis, Discourse (n. 5 above).

13. Ibid.

and to let consensus ripen. This is why there were 54 hours of work in the Assembly in the eighteen “congregations,” and 36 hours of work in the thirteen sessions of the language-groups.¹⁴

Another important element in the methodology was the confirmation that the speeches in the aula would not be published, either by official sources or by others.¹⁵ This way of doing things allowed the individual fathers the freedom to express themselves without the idea that they would be presented to the “public” by means of summaries of their speeches. This rule was broken by members of the synod, but it was interesting to see how this action was perceived by the majority of the fathers as an undue and incorrect violation.

But the fundamental reason for the decision to protect the speeches from external interferences was the desire to create “a protected space where the Church experiences the action of the Holy Spirit,” as the Holy Father said in his opening remarks: “I should like to remind you that the Synod is not a conference or a ‘talking shop.’ It is not a parliament or a senate, where agreement has to be reached. Nor does the correctness of the synodal procedure envisage a total convergence that would be the fruit of a balancing act that would be quietist and moderate – but false.” Accordingly, as the Pope had already said in 2014, “the synodal Assemblies are not meant for the discussion or beautiful or original ideas, or for finding out who is more intelligent than the others ... They serve to cultivate and protect better the vineyard of the Lord, to cooperate in his dream, in his project of love for his people.”¹⁶

14. The language-groups were provided with summaries of the speeches in the aula. The groups in turn produced collective *modi* (“emendations”) that were approved by an absolute majority and were submitted to the General Secretariat, as well as a final report that was read aloud in the aula and then published. A total of 328 speeches were made by fathers (70 of which were free addresses, for which space of one hour was created *ad hoc* at the end of the day). To these we must add 51 speeches with reference to the final report.

15. However, the synodal fathers were left free (and in fact, they were encouraged) to give interviews and to communicate the contents of their speeches also via Twitter or personal or diocesan blogs, newspapers, and video messages.

16. Pope Francis, Homily at the Mass for the opening of the Extraordinary Synod on the family, October 5, 2014.

The Synod is an *ecclesial expression* – not something belonging to the world of politics or of the media. The reservation here was the same reservation that is proper to every spiritual exercise of communitarian discernment. The objective was to live an event of a high spiritual value without “being afraid of the discussions, and to live the discussions as that ‘movement of the spirits’ that allows the discernment of spirits to come to maturity, and that prepares the hearts to recognize what the Lord himself shows us, that which he has already decided (see Acts 15:7) – and that which we must discern by means of prayer and the labors of our discussions.”¹⁷

Let us recall that at the close of the Extraordinary Synod, the Pope had clearly declared that he would be “highly disturbed and grieved if there had not been these temptations and these animated discussions,” that is to say, “if everyone had agreed or had kept silent in a false and quietist peace.”¹⁸

Eight critical nodal points

The open discussion has brought out some critical nodal points that will indubitably aid the Church to ask itself about its future path.

One interesting nodal point has been a kind of overlapping between “doctrine” and “theology.”

Some theological positions have been interpreted in a number of situations as points of doctrine. But doctrine cannot be reduced to a theological position. More generally, it has been noted that recent theological reflection did not play any great part in the debate. It is clear that the Synod does not intend to be an arena for theological debate; nevertheless, it has become obvious that the meditation of the pastors could be better shaped by a theological reflection. The distance between the academic world and the pastoral world must be bridged, in order to prevent the two dimensions from going about their business independently of each other.

17. C. Schönborn, “Relazione commemorativa” (n. 11 above).

18. Pope Francis, Discourse at the conclusion of the 3rd Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, October 18, 2014.

The example of Pope Francis is paradigmatic here, because his theological subtlety is expressed in such a way that it appears as a candid pastoral sensitivity. We have had ample proof of this in his discourses to the Synod. This is not a case of dissimulation, but of the form of theological discourse that is most appropriate to mission and to reform. It is therefore above all necessary to recognize that the pastoral principle is the criterion of one's understanding of the Gospel. And the intense theological debate must be understood as a gain for the "organic development" of the doctrine of the Church and of the truth of the Gospel."¹⁹

A second critical nodal point concerns the significance of doctrine.

Already at the close of the 2014 Synod, the Pope had spoken of the temptation to "transform bread into a stone and to throw it against the sinners, the weak, and the sick (see John 8:7), that is to say, to transform bread into 'insupportable burdens' (Luke 11:46)." Doctrine is bread, not a stone. At the close of the Extraordinary Synod, the Pope repeated this image, saying that the Synod has "borne witness to everyone that the Gospel remains for the Church the living fountain of eternal newness, against anyone who wants to 'indoctrinate' the Gospel in dead stones that can be thrown against the others."

As the language-groups repeatedly affirmed, doctrine is the teaching of Christ. It is the Gospel itself. This is why it has nothing to do with "closed hearts that often hide even behind the teachings of the Church, or behind good intentions, to take their seat on the chair of Moses and to pronounce judgment, sometimes with superiority and superficiality, in difficult cases and wounded families" (to quote Francis once again). Obedience to the tradition cannot and must not be confused with obedience to the letter. And this obedience always grows in the deepest understanding of the doctrine of the Gospel, which is always oriented to salvation.

A third critical nodal point is the idea that an ecclesial event like the Synod could serve only to repeat what has already been said.

Accordingly, the words of Saint John XXIII have echoed again here and there. In *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*, he said: "Therefore, we

19. See C. Schönborn, "Relazione commemorativa" (n. 11 above).

must not only conserve this precious treasure, as if all that concerned us was its antiquity. We must continue eagerly and without fear the work that our epoch demands, continuing along the path that the Church has taken for nearly twenty centuries.” The spirit of the Synod, in its own mode – which is consultative – has been the same spirit of the Council. Let me quote the words of the Pope who convoked the Second Vatican Council: “At present, the need in our own times is for Christian teaching in its entirety to be submitted by everyone to a new examination, with a serene and peaceful mind, without taking anything away from this teaching.”

The key to reading the work of the Synod was given by the Pope at the very moment in which he introduced its work: “It is the Church that asks itself about its fidelity to the *deposit of faith*, which represents for the Church, not a museum to be guarded, nor merely something to be safeguarded, but is a living fountain from which the Church quenches its own thirst in order to quench people’s thirst and to shed light on the *deposit of life*.”²⁰ In his morning homily in Santa Marta on October 23 – that is to say, on the day before the voting on the *Relatio Synodi* in the aula – the Pope stated: “The times change, and we Christians must change continuously. We must walk firmly in the faith in Jesus Christ, firm in the truth of the Gospel, but our attitude must move continuously in accordance with the signs of the times.” This mention, at the beginning and the close of the Synod, of the dynamism in accordance with the times, through which the deposit of the faith quenches people’s thirst and sheds light on the deposit of life, is an important aid to understanding the process that the Pope has launched.

It is clear that a key nodal point of the discussion has been the model of the relationship between the Church and the world.

It is interesting to note the quotations from *Gaudium et spes* in the *Relatio Synodi*. This finishing point was not reached without a lengthy process. For some fathers, the Church is surrounded by a hostile and demonic world against which it must defend itself, and which must be attacked through the proclamation of Church doctrine. But others have affirmed that the Church’s task is to

20. Pope Francis, Introductory discourse (n. 2 above).

discern how God is present in the world and pursues his work. We cannot spend our lives dreaming of a world that no longer exists – nor can we spend our lives falling into the “Masada complex,” that is to say, circling the wagons. That risks being a lack of faith in the God who acts in history. This led to the fascinating question that all the fathers asked (even if they gave differing answers): “How can we face these open challenges in a manner suited to the Gospel?”

A fifth critical nodal point that stands out is linked directly to the theme of the Synod: the theme of the family has too often been reduced to the theme of marriage.

This led one father to point out that there are families with only one parent, families without parents, families that include the grandparents, families of grandchildren without parents, families separated by migrations – as well as the “religious families” and other forms of living together, including communitarian forms, that must also be taken into consideration.

A sixth critical nodal point is the desire to achieve a kind of exhaustiveness both in expounding doctrine and in tackling the problems.

In his discourse at the conclusion of the Synod’s labors, the Pope declared that it has not “concluded the study of all the topics that belong to the family,” but has “sought to illuminate them with the light of the Gospel, of the tradition, and of the two-thousand-year history of the Church, infusing these problems with the joy of hope, without falling into the trap of an easy repetition of what is indisputable or has already been said.” Similarly, the Synod has not “found exhaustive solutions to all the difficulties and the doubts,” but at least it has “tackled them without fear and without hiding our heads in the sand.”

A seventh critical nodal point that can be useful concerns frankness or “parrhêsia” and its application to the labors and the climate of the Synod.

Pope Francis twice requested that the fathers “overcome every hermeneutic of conspiracy, which is sociologically weak and does not help spiritually.” This is because, as he himself noted, “the opinions are expressed freely,” but “sometimes with methods that are not entirely well-meaning.” The German group too displayed “great dismay and sadness about the public utterances of some

Synodal fathers about the persons in the Synod, about its contents, and about the way it is proceeding. This contradicts the spirit of ‘going together along the way’; it contradicts the spirit of the Synod and its elementary rules. The images and comparisons that have been used are not only undifferentiated and false. They are also hurtful.” The members of the group (and many other fathers along with them) unanimously distanced themselves from this. The Synod was therefore not entirely lacking in lapses in style, nor in attempts from both inside and outside the aula to put on pressure – both before the Synod began and during its work. Some of these attempts found a place in the media where they could make themselves known.

One final critical nodal point that I propose here is the strong desire not to limit oneself to a normative or condemnatory language, but to use a propositive and open language

This language was typical of the Council. The Synod attached importance to a pastoral approach in the light of the style of Pope Francis. The German-language group stated clearly in the aula: “We think too statically, and too little in biographical-historical terms.” Language is not something merely external. It communicates the beating heart of a Church that is evangelizing and pastoral, a Church that is capable of doing more than speaking to its own self and about its own self. In his closing discourse at the Synod, the Pope spoke of “transmitting the beauty of the Christian newness, which is sometimes covered over by the rust of a language that is archaic or simply incomprehensible.”

The train, the door, the torch, and the GPS navigation device

It is not easy to make a synthesis of the richness of the Synod’s work, both because the speeches in the aula were very numerous and diverse, and because the language-groups touched on every aspect of the *Instrumentum laboris*. It is not my intention to construct precarious syntheses here; but it may be useful to note the fact that images were not lacking in the synodal debate. We can mention at least four metaphors here: the train, the closed door, the torch, and

the GPS navigation device. All of these were taken up, at least in what they mean, by the Pope in his discourses.

The *train* was evoked in order to say that the Church must not be like a convoy in motion, which travels through the world with the speed of an arrow, but from which it is impossible to pay any attention to the panorama that surrounds us. We note that the Pope took up the profound meaning of this image in his homily at the concluding Mass of the Synod. “None of the disciples” stops in front of the blind Bartimaeus, “but Jesus does so. They keep on walking, they go on ahead as if there was nothing unusual happening. Bartimaeus may be blind, but they are deaf: his problem is not their problem. This can be our risk too: in the face of continuous problems, it is better to go ahead and not let oneself be disturbed. In this way, like those disciples, we are with Jesus, but we are not thinking like Jesus. We are in his group, but we fail to experience the opening of the heart, we dispense ourselves from the marvel, the gratitude, and the enthusiasm, and we risk becoming ‘habituated to grace.’ We can speak of him and work for him while we live far from his heart, which reaches out to those who are wounded. This is the temptation: a ‘spirituality of the mirage.’ We can walk across the deserts of the human race without seeing what really exists, while seeing what we ourselves want to see; we are capable of constructing visions of the world, but we do not accept what the Lord places in front of our eyes. A faith that does not know how to put down roots into people’s lives remains arid, and instead of creating oases, it creates other deserts.”

The *door* was evoked by some fathers, either as already “closed” or to be closed definitively, as in the case of giving communion to divorced persons who had remarried in a registry office. Others evoked the door as “open” or to be opened, for the opposite reasons; some spoke in general terms, evoking a fundamental pastoral attitude. One father spoke of a “front door” and a “back door” (the first half-closed, and the second to be closed). Others expressed a profound sadness when they heard people speaking, even if only metaphorically, of a Church “with closed doors.” The Pope had employed the image of the door in the opening Mass of the Synod, urging the Church to “be a *field hospital*, with its doors open to

welcome everyone who knocks and seeks help and support; even more, to go out from its own precincts towards the others with a true love, to walk alongside wounded humanity, to include it and to lead it to the fountain of salvation.”

The *torch*, taken up by the Extraordinary Synod, is the image of the Gospel borne “into the midst of people in order to give light to those who have lost their way” (*Relatio synodi*, nr. 55). This image translates the meaning of accompanying (walking together) and of discerning (the light) of the Church. Pope Francis used the image of the flame in his final discourse, where he affirmed that the Synod has “sought to look at today’s reality and to read it – or better, to look at today’s realities and to read them with the eyes of God, in order to kindle and to enlighten with the flame of faith the hearts of humankind.”

The *GPS navigational device* tells us which road to take in order to arrive at our goal. If we go astray, or an unforeseen interruption takes place, the GPS does not demand that we return to the starting point and undertake the whole journey again from its beginning. It proposes an alternative route. By analogy, every time we go astray because of our sin, God does not demand that we return to our starting point. He gives us a new orientation towards himself, drawing a new route for us. The Pope too, in the homily of the concluding Mass, spoke of “an accessible road, a road of consolation” that God has opened up. God is the Father who “takes care of his children and accompanies them on the way,” sustaining even the one who is lame.

It is interesting that these images evoke a path, a route, a possibility of entering (or of not entering). With regard to the path, the Pope warned the pastors in his homily at the concluding Mass of the Synod against the temptation of succumbing to a “faith like a guidebook”: “We can be walking with the people God, but we already have our own guidebook, which contains all the information. We know where we are going, and how long the journey will take; everyone must respect our rhythms, and anything that does not fit into this pattern disturbs us.”

The Church listening to the family

The final report of the 14th Ordinary Assembly of the Synod approved with a clear majority (i.e., with two-thirds of the votes positive) all the points proposed in the draft that had been approved unanimously by the commission that produced it.²¹ It is made up of three parts.

The first part concerns “The Church listening to the family,” and is the fruit of a reflection with open eyes on the “real” family in its anthropological, cultural, social, and economic context. The document also opens its eyes on the members of a family, taking into account also the critical phases of life (infancy, old age, disabled persons, migrants ...), the affective and emotional dynamics, and the topics connected to life. Although the Church faces situations that are complex and that present challenges, it is aware that it is necessary “to know and understand the world in which we live, its expectations, its aspirations, and its character, which is often dramatic (GS 4)” (nr. 5).

The text recognizes that today’s culture has opened up “new spaces, new freedoms, and new depths.” On the other hand, one can observe a dangerous tendency to individualism (nr. 8), and the text laments the inactivity of the institutions of society (nr. 10) in relation to the family, understood as a resource for society. The reader is positively struck by the decision to speak specifically of migrant and refugee families (nr. 23); the same is true of the paragraph that speaks of unmarried persons (nr. 22) who often perform great services in their relational, professional, and ecclesial lives.

21. The commission that drew up the final report, nominated by the Holy Father, had the following members: Cardinal Péter Erdő, archbishop of Esztergom-Budapest (Hungary), the general reporter; Cardinal Lorenzo Baldisseri, general secretary; Archbishop Bruno Forte of Chieti-Vasto; Cardinal Oswald Gracias, archbishop of Mumbai (India); Cardinal Donald William Wuerl, archbishop of Washington (USA); Cardinal John Atcherley Dew, archbishop of Wellington (New Zealand); Archbishop Victor Manuel Fernández, rector of the Pontifical Catholic University of Argentina; Bishop Mathieu Madega Lebouakehan of Mouila (Gabon); Bishop Marcello Semeraro of Albano (Italy); Father Adolfo Nicolás Pachon, S.J., General of the Society of Jesus.

The first part closes with one of the most important paragraphs in the document, which constitutes the keystone of the entire *Relatio*. We read here: “It is necessary to welcome people in their concrete existence with understanding and sensitivity and to know how to support them in their search for meaning. Faith encourages the desire for God, and the will to feel fully a part of the Church, even in those who have experienced failure, or who find themselves in the most difficult situations. The Christian message always contains the reality and the dynamic of mercy and of truth, which converge in Christ.” This expresses in a synthesis the way the Church looks on such persons. The text goes on to speak of the “plurality of concrete situations,” of “paths,” of “accompanying,” of “pastoral attention,” of “understanding,” and of the fact that “from the perspective of faith, there are no excluded persons.”

The family in the plan of God

The second part of the *Relatio Synodi* is dedicated to “The family in the plan of God.” The Word of God is recognized as the “compass” that gives orientation in Christian understanding. Accordingly, the text “listens to what the Church teaches about the family in the light of sacred scripture and of tradition. We are convinced that this Word corresponds to the deepest human aspirations of love, truth, and mercy, and that it discloses a potential for giving and for welcoming even in hearts that are broken and brought low” (nr. 35). The text sets out a synthesis of Christian doctrine on marriage and its indissolubility, and reflects on the “imperfect analogy” between the relationship of a couple (husband and wife) and the relationship between Christ and the Church.

The Church recognizes “that there is no other nuptial bond between baptized persons than the sacramental bond”; at the same time, the Church is very “conscious of the fragility of many of its children, who struggle on the path of faith” (nr. 51). The Church does not impose ideals, but accompanies people on the path. Then, “in view of difficult situations and wounded families, one must always recall a general principle: ‘Pastors must know that, for the sake of truth, they are obliged to exercise careful discernment of

situations' (*Familiaris consortio*, nr .84). The degree of responsibility is not identical in all cases, and there can exist factors that limit the capacity to take decisions" (ibid.).

After this point, which is central in the document, the *Relatio* declares that "while doctrine must be expressed clearly, one must avoid judgments that do not take account of the complexity of the various situations, and it is necessary to pay attention to the way in which people live and suffer because of their condition of life" (ibid.).

Nn. 53–55 disclose the heart of the Church's mercy. The Church feels the need "to accompany its most fragile children, who are marked by a love that is wounded and has been lost, restoring to them confidence and hope, like the beacon of the lighthouse at a harbor, or the light of a torch that is carried among people to give light to those who have lost their way or who are in the midst of a tempest" (nr. 55).

The mission of the family

The third part of the *Relatio Synodi* is dedicated to "The mission of the family." This section of the document is important because it identifies the family not as an "object" of evangelization, but as a "subject," that is to say, in its active role.²² It is here that we find the themes of preparation for marriage, the first years of family life, the procreative responsibility (understood in a broad sense), the education of the children, family spirituality, and openness to mission. And it is in this part that we also find the themes of pastoral accompaniment and of the situations that are complex.

The fundamental intention of the paragraphs in this part is to present family life as a challenge that is relevant, beautiful, and capable of giving meaning to a human life. Marriage is not a "yoke"; it is the place where human beings are opened up to a life

22. The Pope decided to give a picture and a model of the family as subject of evangelization by canonizing the parents of Saint Teresa of Lisieux, Louis Martin and Marie Azélie Guérin, during the Synod, on Sunday, October 18. As he said in his homily, they "lived the Christian service in the family, building up day by day an environment full of faith and of love."

that is rich in meaning. Above all, marriage is not an existential space that is weighed down by norms, duties, and external precepts; it is an experience of life that gives impetus to the emotions, to responsibility, and to the conscience. This is so true that some fathers asked whether it would be possible to use a more positive word than “indissolubility,” while retaining the same meaning.

The reader is struck by the attentive, delicate, and respectful way in which the text speaks of procreative responsibility. Together with the encyclical *Humanae vitae* and the Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, it calls for an invigoration of the “readiness to have children, in contrast to a mentality that is often hostile to life.” The text then affirms that “the right way for family planning is the way of a consensual dialogue between the married partners, respecting the rhythms and bearing in mind the dignity of the partners.” The responsible choice of parenthood presupposes the formation of the conscience, which “is the human being’s most secret core, and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God, whose voice echoes in his depths” (GS 16).

Discernment, accompaniment, integration, reconciliation

Chapter III of the third part of the *Relatio Synodi* takes up the theme of situations that are complex. The question that accompanies the text is clear: How is the Church to react to wounded families and to breakdowns? The basic attitude seems well described by the four words that are employed in the *Relatio Synodi*: discernment, accompaniment, integration, and reconciliation. The Synod sought to “promote pastoral discernment” (nr. 69), guided by attention to “the positive elements that are present in those situations that do not yet correspond, or that no longer correspond” to the message of the Gospel (nr. 70).

The fathers are well aware that simple cohabitation “is often chosen because of a general mentality that is opposed to definitive institutions and commitments, but also because the couple are still awaiting an existential security (with work and a fixed salary). In other countries, *de facto* unions are becoming ever more numerous, not only because of the rejection of the values of the family and of

marriage, but also because getting married is perceived as a luxury, thanks to social conditions. This means that material wretchedness impels people to live in *de facto* unions.” The analysis is careful to avoid generalizations and to tackle the situations “in a constructive way, seeking to transform them into opportunities for the path of conversion towards the fullness of matrimony and of the family in the light of the Gospel” (ibid.).

The text affirms, in this context, that even the experience of breakdown, which is painful for everyone, “can become an opportunity for reflection, for conversion, and for entrusting oneself to God: when each one becomes aware of his or her own responsibilities, it is possible to rediscover in Him trust and hope” (nr. 79). The synodal fathers are aware that a breakdown not only causes pain, but involves injustices that have been committed. This is why they insist that “there is a path that grace makes possible. Our pastoral work must therefore aim at conversion and reconciliation” (nr. 79) – also in view of what is best for the children, who often are the first victims of these critical situations. And “the first duty of the Church is not to distribute condemnations or anathemas, but to proclaim the mercy of God, to call people to conversion, and to lead everyone to the salvation given by the Lord (see John 12:44-50).”²³ Pope Francis expressed this clearly in his discourse at the close of the Synod: “The Church is the Church of the poor in spirit and of the sinners who are looking for pardon – not only of the righteous and of the saints, but rather of the righteous and of the saints when they feel they are poor and sinners.”

Baptized persons who are divorced and have remarried in a civil ceremony

With regard to baptized persons who are divorced and have remarried in a civil ceremony, the primary affirmation is that “they must be more integrated into the Christian communities in the various ways that are possible.” The logic that guides nnr. 84-86

23. Pope Francis, concluding discourse at the 14th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, October 24, 2015.

of the document is that of integration, which is the key to a solid pastoral accompaniment. Here once more, the Church proves to be a mother, telling divorced and civilly remarried persons that they must be conscious of belonging “to the body of Christ, which is the Church,” and of being “brothers and sisters.” The text states that “the Holy Spirit pours out gifts and charisms on them for the good of all.” The intention is to affirm that these persons have not lost their vocation for the common good, their mission in the Church. Their ecclesial participation can find expression in a variety of ecclesial services, and one must “discern which of the various forms of exclusion that are practiced today in the liturgical, pastoral, educational, and institutional spheres can be overcome” (nr. 84). For the Christian community, taking care of these persons “is not a weakening of our own faith and of our testimony to the indissolubility of matrimony: on the contrary, the Church expresses its charity precisely in this care” (ibid.).

The *Relatio Synodi* takes up the overall criterion expressed by Saint John Paul II in nr. 84 of *Familiaris consortio* (nr. 84), namely, “the careful discernment of situations.” There is in fact a difference “between those who have sincerely tried to save their first marriage and have been unjustly abandoned, and those who through their own grave fault have destroyed a canonically valid marriage” (*Relatio*, nr. 85). But there are also some who have entered a second marriage in view of the education of their children, and who are subjectively certain in their conscience that the preceding marriage, which is irreparably destroyed, was never valid (see nr. 84). The Synod therefore states that it is the task of priests “to accompany the persons concerned on the path of discernment in accordance with the teaching of the Church and the guidelines laid down by the bishop.”

This path requires a pastoral discernment that touches on the authority of the pastor as judge and doctor, and as one who is above all a “minister of the divine mercy” (*Mitis et Misericors Iesus*). We follow here the direction of the recent *motu proprio* of Pope Francis on the reform of the canonical process for the declaration of the nullity of a marriage, and we see in this reference to the bishop

a significant guideline of the reform by the Pope, who gives the bishops greater pastoral powers in this matter.

The document takes this path of discerning individual cases, without placing any limits on the integration of the persons concerned (as was the case in the past). It also states that one cannot deny that in certain circumstances, “the imputability and the responsibility for an action can be diminished or nullified” (CCC 1735) because of various conditionings. “This means that the judgment on an objective situation must not lead to a judgment about the ‘subjective imputability’ (Pontifical Council for the Interpretation of Legislative Texts, Declaration of June 24, 2000, 2a)” (nr. 85). There exists a general norm, but “the responsibility with regard to specific actions or decisions is not identical in every case.” This means that “pastoral discernment, while taking account of the correctly formed conscience of the persons involved, must bear with these situations. Similarly, the consequences of the actions that are performed are not necessarily identical in every case” (ibid.).

The conclusion is that Church becomes aware that one can no longer speak of an abstract category of persons and confine the praxis of integration within a completely general rule that is valid in every instance. The text does not say how far the process of integration can go – nor does it place any precise and insurmountable limitations. This is because “the path of accompaniment and discernment orients these believers to become aware of their situation before God” (nr. 86). This line of reasoning makes the personal conscience the basis of the action and the judgment of the Church (nr. 63).

“When the prudent person listens to the moral conscience, he can hear God speaking” (CCC 1777). The *Relatio Synodi* draws the concrete inference from this principle that “the conversation with the priest in the *forum internum* aids the formation of a correct judgment with regard to whatever presents an obstacle to the possibility of a fuller participation in the life of the Church, and to the steps that can promote this participation and make it grow” (nr. 86). The aim of this discernment is the “sincere search for the will of God.” It is characterized by the “desire to attain a more perfect response to God’s will”; and it is shaped by “the Gospel’s demands of truth and of love, which are expounded by the Church” and by

conditions such as “humility, discretion, and love of the Church and of its teaching.”

When our periodical interviewed Cardinal Schönborn before the Synod, he stated that there are situations in which a father confessor who knows the persons in the *forum internum* can draw the conclusion that “Your situation is such that in conscience, in your conscience and in my conscience as a pastor, I see your place in the sacramental life of the Church.”²⁴ The confessor can say this when he bears in mind that the conditions laid down by *Familiaris consortio* thirty-five years ago were a step forward, that is to say, a concretization that was more open than in the past, and more attentive to people’s actual lives.

The tension surrounding the sacramental situation of divorced persons who have remarried in a civil ceremony is generated precisely by what *Familiaris consortio* says about them: they are not to “consider themselves as separated from the Church, for as baptized persons, they can, and indeed must share in her life” (nr. 84). This is an idea that Pope Francis has repeated many times. But this “opening” poses the serious problem of what this recognized “ecclesial communion” is. How is it possible to be genuinely in ecclesial communion with arriving sooner or later at sacramental communion? The claim that a full ecclesial communion is possible without a full sacramental communion does not appear to be a path that can leave us tranquil. We should also note that there is no longer any mention of “spiritual communion” as an alternative path to the sacrament (as had been suggested down to the time of the Extraordinary Synod).²⁵

It is true that the path of discernment and of the *forum externum* exposes us to the risk of arbitrary decisions, but “*laissez-faire* has never been a criterion that permitted the rejection of a good pastoral accompaniment. It will always be the pastor’s duty to find a path that corresponds both to the truth and to the life of the persons whom he is accompanying, although he may not be able to explain

24. Reply by Cardinal Schönborn in A. Spadaro, “Matrimonio e conversione pastorale. Intervista al cardinale Christoph Schönborn,” in *Civ. Catt.* 2015 III 504.

25. See G. Pani, “La comunione spirituale,” in *Civ. Catt.* 2015 II 224–237.

to everyone else why those persons take one decision rather than another. The Church is the sacrament of salvation. There are many itineraries and many dimensions that must be explored in favor of the *salus animarum*.²⁶ The Ordinary Synod has thus laid the bases for access to the sacraments, opening a door that had remained closed in the preceding Synod. It was not even possible, one year ago, to find a clear majority with reference to the debate on this topic, but that is what happened in 2015. We are therefore entitled to speak of a new step.²⁷

The Synod towards the Holy Year

In his concluding discourse, the Pope said that the Synod had “given proof of the aliveness of the Catholic Church, which is not afraid to stir up the consciences that have been anesthetized, nor to get its hands dirty in an animated and frank discussion of the family.” But the close of the Synod does not mean that the open process has come to an end. The theme of the Synod and its pastoral attitude, which was approved by a clear majority, flow into the Holy Year of Mercy, which begins on December 8. But the imminence of this Jubilee had already given “a special light and a precise orientation” to the synodal labors.²⁸

We must also consider carefully the fact that the synodal process has launched a profound process of reflection on topics related to the family; and this process too is marked by *parrhêsia*. It is interesting to see how many publications and seminars, meetings, and debates have taken place in various ecclesial contexts, from parishes and communities to academic circles.²⁹ In other words, this has been a time of grace. The most important thing about this Synod was in

26. A. Spadaro, “Matrimonio e conversione pastorale,” op. cit., 504 f.

27. Nr. 52 of the *Relatio Synodi*, which set out the different positions, did not reach two-thirds of positive votes in 2014.

28. During his apostolic visit to Ecuador, the Pope himself had created a bridge linking directly the Synod and the Holy Year. See Pope Francis, Homily at the Parque de los Samanes, Guayaquil, Ecuador, July 6, 2015.

29. *Civiltà Cattolica* accompanied the period between the Synods with a series of articles which were then collected in two volumes: A. Spadaro (ed.), *La famiglia, ospedale da campo*, Brescia, Queriniana, 2015; G. Cottier, C. Schönborn, and J.-

fact the image of a Church that draws near to reality in order to look it in the face, to look at every person with his or her concrete history. The Church does not intend to “judge” before “looking” and touching the life of its children with a hand that is able to accompany and to heal. The 14th Ordinary Assembly of the Synod Bishops was thus a fundamental stage in a journey that the Church is taking under the guidance of Pope Francis, in the direction indicated by the Second Vatican Council.