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Synod 2023 Preparatory Document

For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission

1) The Church of God is convoked in Synod. The path entitled "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission" will solemnly open on the 9th – 10th of October 2021 in Rome and on the following 17th of October in each particular Church. One fundamental stage will be the celebration of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, in October 2023, which will be followed by the implementation phase that will again involve the particular Churches. With this convocation, Pope Francis invites the entire Church to reflect on a theme that is decisive for its life and mission: "It is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium." This journey, which follows in the wake of the Church's "renewal" proposed by the Second Vatican Council, is both a gift and a task: by journeying together and reflecting together on the journey that has been made, the Church will be able to learn through Her experience which processes can help Her to live communion, to achieve participation, to open Herself to mission. Our "journeying together" is, in fact, what most effectively enacts and manifests the nature of the Church as the pilgrim and missionary People of God.

2) A basic question prompts and guides us: How does this "journeying together," which takes place today on different levels (from the local level to the universal one), allow the Church to proclaim the Gospel in accordance with the mission entrusted to Her; and what steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow as a synodal Church?

Here, we will indicate the main objectives, which define synodality as the form, the style, and the structure of the Church:

- a)** recalling how the Spirit has guided the Church's journey through history and, calls us to be witnesses of God's love;
- b)** living a participative and inclusive ecclesial process that offers everyone—especially those who find themselves on the margins—the opportunity to express themselves and to be heard in order to contribute to the edification of the People of God;
- c)** appreciating the wealth of the charisms that the Spirit bestows for the good of the community and the benefit of the entire human family;
- d)** exploring participatory ways of exercising responsibility in the proclamation of the Gospel and in the effort to build a more beautiful and habitable world;
- e)** examining how responsibility and power are lived in the Church and the structures by which they are managed, trying to convert prejudices and distorted practices that are not rooted in the Gospel;
- f)** accrediting the Christian community as a credible subject and reliable partner in paths of social dialogue, healing, reconciliation, inclusion and participation, the reconstruction of democracy, the promotion of fraternity and social friendship;

- g)** regenerating relationships among members of Christian communities and between communities and other social groups, e.g., communities of believers of other denominations and religions, civil society organizations, popular movements, etc.;
- h)** fostering the appreciation and appropriation of the fruits of recent synodal experiences on the universal, regional, national, and local levels.

3) This Preparatory Document is at the service of the synodal journey, especially as a tool to facilitate the first phase of listening to and consulting the People of God in the particular Churches (October 2021 - April 2022).

I. The Call to Journey Together

4) The synodal journey unfolds within a historical context marked by epochal changes in society and by a crucial transition in the life of the Church, which cannot be ignored ... in its tensions and contradictions ... we are called to "scrutinize the signs of the times and interpret them in the light of the Gospel"

5) A global tragedy such as the COVID-19 pandemic "momentarily revived the sense that we are a global community, where one person's problems are the problems of all. No one is saved alone; we can only be saved together" The pandemic has made the already existing inequalities and inequities explode: the tragic condition faced by migrants in all regions of the world shows how high and strong the barriers dividing the single human family still are. The Encyclicals *Laudato si'* and *Fratelli Tutti* document the depth of the fault lines that run through humanity, and we can refer to these analyses to start listening to the cry of the poor and of the earth and to recognize the seeds of hope and of the future that the Spirit continues to sow in our time: Humanity still has the ability to work together in building our common home"

6) This situation, which unites the entire human family, challenges the Church's ability to accompany individuals and communities to reread experiences of mourning and suffering that have unmasked many false certainties, and to cultivate hope and faith in the goodness of the Creator and his creation. However, we cannot hide from the fact that the Church herself must face the lack of faith and the corruption even within herself. In particular, we cannot forget the suffering experienced by minors and vulnerable people "due to sexual abuse, the abuse of power and the abuse of conscience perpetrated by a significant number of clerics and consecrated persons." For too long the cry of the victims has been a cry that the Church has not been able to hear sufficiently. These are deep wounds that are difficult to heal, for which forgiveness can never be asked for enough. The whole Church is called to deal with the weight of a culture imbued with clericalism that she inherits from her history, and with those forms of exercising authority on which the different types of abuse (power, economic, conscience, sexual) are grafted. It is impossible to think of "a conversion of our activity as a Church that does not include the active participation of all the members of God's People: together let us ask the Lord for "the grace of conversion and the interior anointing needed to express before these crimes of abuse our compunction and our resolve courageously to combat them."

7) In spite of our infidelities, the Spirit continues to act in history and to show his life-giving power. It is a reason for great hope that Churches have already begun meetings and consultation processes with the People of God. The desire of young people to be protagonists within the Church and the request for a greater appreciation of women and spaces for participation in the mission of the Church are also confirmed.

8) We cannot ignore the variety of conditions in which Christian communities live in the different regions of the world. If a secularized mentality tends to expel religion from the public space, religious fundamentalism, without respect for the liberties of others, feeds forms of intolerance and violence that are also reflected in the Christian community and in its relations with society. Christians not infrequently adopt the same attitudes, even fomenting divisions and opposition, including within the Church. It is equally necessary to consider the reverberation, within the Church and in its relations with society, of the fractures caused by reasons of ethnicity, race, caste, or other forms of social stratification or cultural and structural violence.

9) Within this context, synodality represents the main road for the Church to renew herself under the Spirit and by listening to the Word. The ability to imagine a different future for the Church and her institutions depends largely on the decision to initiate processes of listening, dialogue, and community discernment, in which each and every person can participate and contribute. A Church capable of communion, participation and subsidiarity, will stand beside the poor and least and lend them her voice.

II. A Constitutively Synodal Church

10) It is this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium. Synodality is much more than the celebration of ecclesial meetings and Bishops' assemblies. The title of the Synod proposes: communion, participation, and mission. It reveals and gives substance to the Church as communion when all her members journey together, gather in assembly and take an active part in her evangelizing mission.

11) In the first millennium, "journeying together"—practicing synodality— was the ordinary way in which the Church acted. Here are the roots of a synodal praxis at all levels of the Church's life—local, provincial, and universal.

12) The Second Vatican Council emphasizes that "God does not make people holy and save them merely as individuals, without bond or link between one another." The members of the People of God are united by Baptism, "... yet all share a true equality with regard to the dignity and to the activity common to all the Faithful for the building up of the Body of Christ" (LG, no. 32).

13) The (2nd Vatican) Council emphasized how, by virtue of the anointing of the Holy Spirit received in Baptism, the totality of the Faithful "cannot err in matters of belief. This People, gathered together by its Pastors, adheres to the sacred deposit of the Word of God ... perseveres constantly in the teaching of the Apostles, in fraternal communion, in the breaking of bread, and in prayer.

14) The Pastors should not be afraid to listen to the Flock entrusted to them. The consultation of the People of God does not imply the assumption within the Church of the dynamics of democracy based on the principle of majority, because there is, at the basis of participation in every synodal process, a shared passion for the common mission of evangelization and not the representation of conflicting interests. Every synodal process, in which the Bishops are called to discern what the Spirit is saying to the Church, not by themselves but by listening to the People of God, is an evident form of that “journeying together.”

15) The meaning of the journey to which we are all called is that of discovering the face and form of a synodal Church, in which “everyone has something to learn. The faithful people, the college of bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the ‘Spirit of truth’ (*Jn 14:17*).” This includes the call to deepen relationships with other Churches and Christian communities. The perspective of “journeying together,” then, is even broader, and embraces all humankind, whose “joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties” we share.

III. Listening to the Scriptures

16) The Spirit of God, who illuminates and vivifies this “journeying together”, is the same Spirit who works in the mission of Jesus promised to the Apostles and to the generations of disciples who hear God’s Word and put it into practice. The Spirit does not limit himself to confirming the continuity of the Gospel of Jesus, but will illuminate the ever-new depths of his Revelation and inspire the decisions necessary to sustain the Church’s journey. It is appropriate that our journey of building a synodal Church be inspired by two “images” from Scripture. One, the “community scene” that constantly accompanies the journey of evangelization; the other, the experience of the Spirit in which Peter and the early community recognize the risk of placing unjustified limits on faith sharing.

Jesus, the Crowd, the Apostles

17) An original scene appears as the constant of the way in which Jesus reveals himself throughout the Gospel, as he announces the coming of the Kingdom of God. Essentially, three actors (plus one) are involved. The first is *Jesus*, who takes the initiative, sowing the words and signs of the coming of the Kingdom without “showing partiality” (cf. *Acts 10:34*). Jesus pays special attention to those who are “separated” from God and those “abandoned” by the community (the sinners and the poor, in gospel language). He offers liberation from evil and conversion to hope. Even in the diversity of the Lord’s calls, the common trait is that faith always emerges as a valuing of people: their plea is heard, their difficulty is helped, their availability is appreciated, their dignity is confirmed and restored to the community’s recognition.

18) The work of evangelization and the message of salvation would not be comprehensible without Jesus’ constant openness to the widest possible audience, which the Gospels refer to as the *crowd*, that is, all the people who follow him along the path: this is the second actor on the scene of Revelation. The proclamation of the Gospel is not addressed only to

an enlightened or chosen few. Jesus' interlocutor is the "people" of ordinary life, the "everyone" of the human condition, whom he puts directly in contact with God's gift and the call to salvation. In a way that surprises and sometimes scandalizes the witnesses, Jesus accepts as interlocutors all those who emerge from the crowd: he listens to the impassioned remonstrances of the Canaanite woman (cf. *Mt* 15:21–28), who cannot accept being excluded from the blessing he brings; he allows himself to dialogue with the Samaritan woman (cf. *Jn* 4:1–42), despite her condition as a socially and religiously compromised woman; he solicits the free and grateful act of faith of the man born blind (cf. *Jn* 9), whom official religion had dismissed as outside the perimeter of grace.

19) Some follow Jesus more explicitly, experiencing the fidelity of discipleship, while others are invited to return to their ordinary lives: yet all testify to the power of the faith that has saved them (cf. *Mt* 15:28). Among those who follow Jesus, the figure of the *apostles* clearly becomes prominent. The third actor's entrance occurs because it coincides with Jesus' call. The election of the apostles is not the privilege of an exclusive position of power and separation but the grace of an inclusive ministry of blessing and fellowship.

20) Jesus, the crowd in its diversity, the apostles: this is the imagery and the mystery that must be constantly contemplated and explored in depth so that the Church may increasingly become what she is. If Jesus is absent, and someone else takes his place, the Church becomes a contract between the apostles and the crowd, whose dialogue will end up following the plot of the political game. Without the apostles, the relationship with the evangelical truth [of Jesus] is broken, and the crowd remains exposed to a myth or ideology about him. Without the crowd, the apostles' relationship with Jesus becomes corrupted into a sectarian and self-referential form of religion, and evangelization, which emanates from the self-revelation that God addresses personally to all, loses its light.

21) Then, there is the "extra" actor, the antagonist, who brings to the scene the diabolical separation of the other three. Faced with the perturbing prospect of the cross, there are disciples who leave and mood-changing crowds. The insidiousness that divides manifests itself in the forms of religious rigor, of moral injunction that presents itself as more demanding than that of Jesus, and of the seduction of a worldly political wisdom that claims to be more effective than a discernment of spirits. In order to escape the deceptions of the "fourth actor," continuous conversion is necessary. Emblematic in this regard is the episode of the centurion Cornelius (cf. *Acts* 10), the antecedent of that "Council" of Jerusalem (cf. *Acts* 15) which constitutes a crucial reference point for a synodal Church.

A Double Dynamic of Conversion: Peter and Cornelius (Acts 10)

22) The episode narrates the conversion of Cornelius, a pagan centurion in the Roman army of occupation, a profession based on violence and abuse. Yet, he cultivates a relationship with God and cares for his neighbor. In his home an angel calls him to send his servants to Peter. That same day, Peter receives a vision ordering him to kill and eat animals, some of which were unclean. He recognizes that the Lord is speaking to him, but he emphatically refuses, because that order demolishes precepts of the Torah that are inalienable for his religious identity.

23) Men sent by Cornelius arrive. The Spirit indicates to Peter that they are his envoys. Peter responds to them: "I am the one you are looking for." This is true conversion, the painful leaving one's own cultural and religious categories: Peter accepts to eat with pagans the food he had always considered forbidden. It is in the encounter with people, welcoming them, journeying with them, that he realizes the meaning of his vision: no human being is unworthy in the eyes of God.

24) The apostolic action accomplishes God's will by creating community, breaking down barriers, and promoting encounters. This form of communicating is similar to the one Peter will adopt in Jerusalem when the circumcised believers criticize him, accusing him of having broken the traditional norms. Peter reports what happened to him, in a process of discernment that consists of listening together to the Spirit.

IV. Synodality in Action: Pathways for Consulting the People of God

25) Enlightened by the Word and grounded in Tradition, the synodal path is rooted in the concrete life of the People of God. Synodality is also a pilot experience for discernment on the direction in which to continue to move.

26) THE FUNDAMENTAL QUESTION that guides this consultation of the People of God is the following: *A synodal Church, in announcing the Gospel, "journeys together:" How is this "journeying together" happening today in your particular Church? What steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow in our "journeying together"?*

- a)** What experiences in your particular Church does the fundamental question call to mind?
- b)** What joys did they provoke? What difficulties and obstacles have they encountered? What wounds have they brought to light? What insights have they elicited?
- c)** Where, in these experiences, does the voice of the Spirit resound? What is he asking of us? What are the points to be confirmed, the prospects for change, the steps to be taken? Where do we register a consensus? What paths are opening up for our particular Church?

Different Articulations of Synodality

27) In the prayer, reflection, and sharing prompted by the fundamental question, keep in mind three levels on which synodality is articulated:

- a)** The level of the style with which the Church expresses its nature as the People of God that journeys together and gathers in assembly and roles;
- b)** The level of ecclesial structures and processes at the local, regional, and universal levels;
- c)** The level of synodal processes and events in which the Church is convoked by the competent authority.

These three levels refer one to the other and must be held together in a coherent way, otherwise a counter-testimony is transmitted.

28) “Journeying together” can be understood from two different perspectives. The first looks at the internal life of the particular Churches; relationships between their constituent parts (faithful and their pastors, diocesan synod), parishes; relationships between the Bishops and with the Bishop of Rome; Synods of Bishops and Episcopal Conferences; ways in which particular Churches integrate the contribution of various forms of monastic, religious, and consecrated life, lay associations and movements, ecclesial and ecclesiastical institutions (schools, hospitals, universities, foundations, charitable and assistance organizations, etc.). It also embraces relationships and common initiatives with the brothers and sisters of other Christian denominations, with whom we share the gift of the same Baptism.

29) The second perspective considers how the People of God journeys together with the entire human family. The state of relations, dialogue, and possible common initiatives with believers of other religions, with people who are distant from the faith, with specific social environments and groups and with their institutions (the world of politics, culture, economics, finance, labor, trade unions, and business associations, non-governmental and civil society organizations, popular movements, minorities of various kinds, the poor and the excluded, etc.).

Ten Thematic Nuclei to be Explored

30) In order to highlight the experiences and contribute in a richer way to the consultation, we indicate below ten thematic nuclei that articulate different facets of “lived synodality.”

I. THE JOURNEYING COMPANIONS

In the Church and in society, we are side by side on the same road. In your local Church, who are the ones “journeying together”? When we say: “our Church,” who is part of it? Who is asking us to journey together? Who are the road companions, including those outside the ecclesial perimeter? What persons or groups are left on the margins, expressly or in fact?

II. LISTENING

Listening is the first step, but it requires having an open mind and heart, without prejudices. To whom does our particular Church “need to listen to”? How are the Laity, especially young people and women, listened to? How do we integrate the contribution of Consecrated Men and Women? What space is there for the voice of minorities, the discarded, and the excluded? Do we identify prejudices and stereotypes that hinder our listening? How do we listen to the social and cultural context in which we live?

III. SPEAKING OUT

All are invited to speak with courage and parrhesia, that is, integrating freedom, truth, and charity. How do we promote a free and authentic style of communication within the community and its organizations, without duplicity and opportunism? And in relation to the society of which we are a part? When and how do we manage to say what is important to us? How does the relationship with the media system (not only Catholic media) work? Who speaks on behalf of the Christian community, and how are they chosen?

IV. CELEBRATING

"Journeying together" is only possible if it is based on communal listening to the Word and the celebration of the Eucharist. How do prayer and liturgical celebration inspire and direct our "journeying together"? How do they inspire the most important decisions? How do we promote the active participation of all the Faithful in the liturgy?

V. CO-RESPONSIBLE IN THE MISSION

*Synodality is at the service of the Church's mission, in which all her members are called to participate. Since we are all missionary disciples, how is each Baptized person called to be a protagonist in the mission? How does the community support its members committed to service in society (social and political commitment, in scientific research and teaching, in the promotion of social justice, in the protection of human rights, and in caring for the Common home, etc.)? How do you help them to live out these commitments in a logic of mission? How is discernment about mission-related choices made, and who participates in it? How are the different traditions that constitute the patrimony of many Churches, especially the Oriental ones, integrated and adapted in view of an effective Christian witness? How does collaboration work in territories where different *sui juris* Churches are present?*

VI. DIALOGUE IN CHURCH AND SOCIETY

Dialogue is a path of perseverance that also includes silences and sufferings, but which is capable of gathering the experience of persons and peoples. What are the places and modes of dialogue within our particular Church? How are divergences of vision, conflicts, difficulties addressed? How do we promote collaboration with neighboring Dioceses, with and among religious communities, with and among lay associations and movements, etc.? What experiences of dialogue and shared commitment do we have with believers of other religions and with non-believers? How does the Church dialogue with and learn from other sectors of society: the world of politics, economics, culture, civil society, the poor...?

VII. WITH THE OTHER CHRISTIAN DENOMINATIONS

The dialogue between Christians of different confessions, united by one Baptism, has a special place in the synodal journey. What relations do we have with the brothers and sisters of other Christian denominations? What areas do they concern? What fruits have we drawn from this "journeying together"? What are the difficulties?

VIII. AUTHORITY AND PARTICIPATION

A synodal Church is a participatory and co-responsible Church. How do we identify the goals to be pursued, the way to achieve them, and the steps to be taken? How is authority exercised within our particular Church? What are the practices of teamwork and co-responsibility? How are lay ministries and the assumption of responsibility by the Faithful promoted? How do synodal bodies function at the level of the particular Church? Are they a fruitful experience?

IX. DISCERNING AND DECIDING

In a synodal style, decisions are made through discernment, based on a consensus that flows from the common obedience to the Spirit. By what procedures and methods do we discern together and make decisions? How can they be improved? How do we promote

participation in decision-making within hierarchically structured communities? How do we articulate the consultative phase with the deliberative one, the process of *decision-making* with the moment of *decision-taking*? How and with what tools do we promote transparency and accountability?

X. FORMING OURSELVES IN SYNODALITY

The spirituality of journeying together is called to become an educational principle for the formation of the human person and of the Christian, of the families, and of the communities. How do we form people, especially those who hold roles of responsibility within the Christian community, to make them more capable of "journeying together," listening to one another and engaging in dialogue? What formation do we offer for discernment and the exercise of authority? What tools help us to read the dynamics of the culture in which we are immersed and their impact on our style of Church?

To Contribute to the Consultation

31. The purpose of the first phase of the synodal journey is to foster a broad consultation process involving Pastors and the Faithful of the particular Churches at all the different levels: the consultation, coordinated by the Bishop, is addressed "to the Priests, Deacons and lay Faithful of their Churches, consecrated men and women, the Presbyteral Council and the Pastoral Council". Equally valuable will be the contribution of other ecclesial entities to which the Preparatory Document will be sent, and that of those who wish to send their own contribution directly. Finally, it will be of fundamental importance that the voice of the poor and excluded also find a place, not only that of those who have some role or responsibility within the particular Churches.

32. The synthesis that each particular Church will elaborate at the end of this work of listening and discernment will constitute its contribution to the journey of the universal Church. To make the subsequent phases of the journey easier and more sustainable, it is important to condense the fruits of prayer and reflection into a maximum of ten pages. If necessary to contextualize and explain them better, other texts can be attached to support or integrate them. We recall that the purpose of the Synod, and therefore of this consultation, is not to produce documents, but "to plant dreams, draw forth prophecies and visions, allow hope to flourish, inspire trust, bind up wounds, weave together relationships, awaken a dawn of hope, learn from one another and create a bright resourcefulness that will enlighten minds, warm hearts, give strength to our hands.