

Pastoral letter from the Nordic bishops' conference

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

On this Sunday a process of discernment begins that involves all Catholics. 'Pope Francis', we are told, 'invites the whole Church to question itself on synodality.'ⁱ The notion of 'synodality' has received much attention in recent years. It is used to motivate initiatives that in some inspire hope, in others anxiety. What does the word mean? It is a Greek word made up of two parts. The prefix *syn-* [συν] is a preposition meaning 'with' or 'alongside'. We recognise it from a familiar word such as 'sympathy', an openness to carry someone else's pain with them. The noun *hodos* [ὁδος], means 'a way'. A *synodos*, then, is 'a way pursued together'. It stands for fellowship in movement towards a shared goal. There is no particular virtue in just being on the way; it has to lead somewhere. We need to know where we are going.

For us Christians the humble, everyday word 'Way' has rich resonances. The first disciples of Jesus spoke of the Church simply as 'the Way'. This was how others spoke about them, too. Towards the end of the Acts of the Apostles, when Paul presents a potted CV to a crowd gathered in Jerusalem, he confesses that, before he encountered the risen Christ, he 'persecuted this Way up to the point of death by binding both men and women and putting them in prison' (22:4). Christians were perceived as a compact group that followed an itinerary different to that of most other people. This was considered a dangerous provocation.

When we consider salvation history, we find the image of the way recurring again and again. The call to Abram began with a summons to go 'to the land that I will show you' (Gen 12:1). Abram was not given a map with a marked destination and told to find a way of reaching it. The way he was to follow was revealed to him while he travelled. The same thing happened, centuries later, to the Magi, who were led, step by step, to adore our incarnate Lord's glory (Mt 2:1ff.). Walking is a function of human courage and effort. But the demarcation of a goal depends on revelation.

In the Old Testament, the 'way' is above all the way to the Land of promise. It is retraced time and again from places of exile. In the New Testament, the 'way' points towards a Person, our Lord Jesus Christ. He is henceforth the True North towards which our life's compass needle turns. But that is not all. Christ does not remain apart from us as the remote goal of our spiritual desire. He calls us to be one with him. That is why he can say, 'I *am* the Way' (Jn 14:6). The synodality that matters most is our wayfaring in union with Christ as we seek to be faithful to his teaching and example, mindful that 'whoever says, "I abide in him", must walk just as he walked' (1 Jn 2:6). Like Christ, we must learn to love and serve 'to the end' (Jn 13:1), humbling ourselves and becoming 'obedient to the point of death' (Phil 2:8).

The immense beauty of the Church become apparent when Christians in this way, together, make the Way Christ traced for us manifest and credible; when we become, in the splendid words of the third Eucharistic Prayer, an assembly that 'pilgrimages on this earth', made firm in faith and charity, at one among ourselves, at one with our pastors, joyfully bound for our

heavenly homeland, where we shall at last see our Lord ‘as he is’, where God will for eternity ‘be all in all’ (1Cor 15:28).

Where are we now in this shared enterprise focused on Christ? What impedes it? What nurtures it? These questions are at the heart of our synodal discernment.

To sharpen our thoughts and animate our desire, the Holy Father has entrusted to the whole Church a wonderful prayer, the *Adsumus*.ⁱⁱ Its roots go back to the 6th century. A form of this prayer was recited by the Council Fathers before every session of the Second Vatican Council. This is the prayer:

We stand before You, Holy Spirit, as we gather together in your name, with you alone to guide us. Make yourself at home in our hearts. Teach us the way we must go and how we are to pursue it. We are weak and sinful; do not let us promote disorder. Do not let ignorance lead us down the wrong path nor partiality influence our actions. Let us find in you our unity so that we may journey together to eternal life and not stray from the way of truth and what is right. All this we ask of You, who are at work in every place and time, in the communion of the Father and the Son, forever and ever. Amen.

A programme is put before us: to be temples of the Holy Spirit, that the Church may be a worthy tabernacle for the glorious, saving presence of God; to keep our eyes fixed on the goal we are called to reach — union with God in the communion of saints for eternal life; to pursue the way that will lead us to this sanctity, ever conscious of our proneness, sinners that we are, to cause evil and division, and so to ask the Lord to convert us; to love truth and to put it before any thought of status and convenience; to seek our unity *in Christ*, not in anything or anyone else, placing our trust in him who has promised to be with us ‘to the end of the age’ (Mt 28:20).

It is easy to formulate ideas about what *others* must to do conform to Christ’s call through the Church: to focus on people, structures, and customs that irritate us and seem to us useless. We all do this all the time. But this is not the way to engage in the synodal process. Rather, each of us must ask him or herself: How do *I* build up the Church in charity and unity? Am I faithful to Christ’s commandments? Am I recognisable to others as a disciple of Jesus? Does the Gospel shape my life and relationships? Am I a builder of bridges or a closer of doors? Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta was once asked what needs to change in the Church. She promptly answered: ‘*I* need to change’, then fixed her interlocutor and added (with a smile, we might imagine), ‘*and you*’.ⁱⁱⁱ If we let ourselves be converted and changed together, then the Way we share will be a joyful, fruitful Way. We shall pursue it, not dragging our feet, but zestfully, our hearts enlarged by Christ’s love.

Let us, Brothers and Sisters, use this chance to deepen our faith, strengthen our hope, make our love effective. Tertullian, writing in the early third century, tells us that non-believers then looked at Christians and exclaimed, in disbelief: ‘See how they love one another!’^{iv} It must be our aspiration to live like that: to make God’s love visible. That is our primary apostolate. Our faith cannot be reduced to a model for a perfect society of justice and peace, to a catalogue of cogent answers to life’s hard questions: our faith is about life transformed in Christ, redeemed from the reign of sin, whose wages is death, life illumined by the hope of resurrection.

Thanks to the smallness of the Church in the Nordic countries, the mechanics of synodality are well known to us. We appreciate them. It is obvious to us in day-to-day life that we

need to carry, sustain, encourage (and sometimes, in charity, correct) one another during our earthly pilgrimage. To help us make further progress, the Holy See has made a range of resources available on the website: <www.synod.va>. You will find it to be a source of inspiration. However, for each of us to be fully engaged in this process, the way the Holy Father wishes, is above all for each of us to heed again the call with which the Way first began: ‘Repent, and believe the Gospel’ (1:15). It is the premise of synodality. For, as we read in the *Didache*, an apostolic text: ‘There are two Ways, one of Life, and one of Death, and there is a great difference between the two Ways’.^v It matters to see which is which. It matters to choose rightly, so to enable others, too, to choose life and not to languish in the shadow of death (cf. Lk 1:79). Let us, as we gird our loins and get ready, invoke the blessing of Christ, our Way, our Truth, our Life, on one another. And let us follow him, the Lamb who is our Shepherd, wherever *he* goes (cf. Rev 7:17, 14:4).

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ⁱ These words constitute the heading of the official Vatican website: <www.synod.va>.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.synod.va/en/documents/adsumus.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ An incident cited in Pope Benedict XVI’s address in Freiburg on 25 September 2011.

^{iv} *Apologeticus* 39.7.

^v *Didache* 1.1.