



## TOWARDS A SPIRITUALITY FOR SYNODALITY



## **DESCRIPTION**

This document provides a selective overview of the principal aspects and resources helpful in developing a spirituality for synodality and the synodal process.

Commission on Spirituality Sub-Group: Spirituality for synodality

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Commission on Spirituality  
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## CONTENTS

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Introduction  | 5  |
| Spirituality for Synodality – Some Central Themes               | 11 |
| Practicing a synodal spirituality: Developing a Synodal Habitus | 25 |
| Our Lady of the Way - Theotokos Hodegetria                      | 45 |

To hold a “synod” means to walk together.  
I think this is truly the most wonderful  
experience we can have: to belong to a  
people walking, journeying through history  
together with their Lord who walks among  
us!

We are not alone; we do not walk alone.  
We are part of the one flock of Christ that  
walks together.

(Pope Francis, Francis of Assisi, 4 October 2013)

## Introduction

One of the most significant aspects of the 2021-2023 Synod is the recognition that it is informed and shaped by a spirituality. In developing a 'spirituality for synodality', we find that it assists us in integrating our theological reflection and expanding our experience of the Church as we engage more deeply in the synodal process. Indeed, as the features of a synodal spirituality unfold for us, we can come to see in it the ways in which the Holy Spirit graces the life of the Church, drawing each one into a deeper love of Christ and moving us to desire an ever greater communion, participation, and mission.<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this paper is not to give a detailed analysis of the spirituality for synodality and its theological foundations. This important work needs to be done, but it will require more extensive treatment than is possible here. Rather, it is hoped that the foundations, nature and significance of a spirituality for synodality can be developed in the light of the synodal process itself, drawing on the experience of the whole Church.

At this stage, however, it can be useful to offer an overview of the principal features of a synodal spirituality in the hope that it may inform and assist the synodal process. It is also hoped that outlining some central features and dispositions of a synodal spirituality will provide a resource for those who wish to reflect more deeply on the synodal dimensions of our ecclesial life.

<sup>1</sup> *Preparatory Document*, (2021) §1.

**Developing a spirituality for synodality:** Many may ask why developing a spirituality for synodality is important. Synodality is not a new element of the Church's life and self-understanding. It is constitutive of the Church and has been present in many forms since its beginning.<sup>2</sup> Synodality is a way to express who we are as Christians and who we are becoming together as Church through the work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>3</sup> At every stage, it is the same Holy Spirit who constantly renews the Church in communion and draws her ever more deeply into a synodal life. We can recognise the Holy Spirit who constantly works through history, and we can see a development in our understanding and practice of synodality. This is especially true since Vatican II which established the Synod of Bishops and the practice of consultative assemblies at the level of local churches.<sup>4</sup>

One of the important features to emerge for our present understanding is the sense that synodality is not only a theology but a spiritual practice. We are thus invited to explore what a spirituality for synodality might mean and why it provides a deep resource for ecclesial life, understanding and theological reflection. To be a Christian is to have a 'synodal vocation' and this grows through a spiritual life.<sup>5</sup>

From this understanding of synodality, we can see that a synodal spirituality is a way of life or praxis which integrates and makes concrete the three key elements of communion, participation, and mission. It ensures that we do not attempt to separate them in our reflection or in our praxis.

<sup>2</sup> International Theological Commission (ITC), *Synodality in the life and mission of the Church*, (2018) §42

<sup>3</sup> *Preparatory Document*, (2021) §16

<sup>4</sup> It is also traced in ITC, *Synodality in the life and mission of the Church*, Chapter I, 2018. Also, [www.synod.va](http://www.synod.va).

<sup>5</sup> ICT §43.



For this reason, the spirituality for synodality becomes an '*ecclesial habitus*', which is a source of renewal and dynamism for the Church's life and mission. It is a way of being and becoming Church. The spirituality for synodality gives form to the amazing discovery of the hidden energies of love, self-commitment, generosity and sharing that lie within us, sometimes unattended and forgotten: a sort of 'dowry' received in baptism but often neglected. In so far as we truly live the synodal character of the Church, it becomes a witness to all peoples of the advent of God's Kingdom in which all have a home, in justice, dignity, reconciliation and peace.

**The text** is divided into three parts: The central themes (I) and the practices (II) which develop a '*habitus*' of a synodal spirituality and, finally, a reflection on Mary (III) as the one who accompanies us on our synodal path.

Part I (the themes) attempts to map out some of the central theological dimensions and aspects which will ground a spirituality for synodality. Part II (practicing a synodal spirituality) sets out and reflects upon some of the key practices which help us grow towards a synodal life. Spirituality is something concrete. Through our spiritual practices, our ways of living, the life of the Spirit and the ways we relate to each other become effective and real. They become a way of living or a '*habitus*' through which we express our faith and engage the world in which we live. Part III takes Mary, the Mother of God, as its central theme and offers a series of reflections on Mary who illuminates and accompanies the synodal way of the Church.

**A text for Reflection.** The approach adopted here is to offer a text which encourages reflection, prayer and engagement rather than one that offers a series

of propositions and arguments, useful though these may be. In this introductory text, our main purpose is to show that there is a necessary relationship between a synodal spirituality and a synodal theology. The two should not be separated but allowed to inform and shape one another. Often, the Holy Spirit will choose to write a theology in the spiritual practices, values and insights that are given daily expression in the lives of the People of God. These may also reflect the dynamic of the synodal process and life of the Christian community. In this sense, through attending to them and reflecting upon them, the Church not only comes to a deeper experience of itself, but it also finds that it is in the school of the Holy Spirit and is invited into a more profound moment of learning.

Given the approach adopted throughout the present text, an attentive reader will find echoes across the different sections and paragraphs. Although these can risk repetition, hopefully they will help to recognise and capture something of the dynamic, inter-relational nature of the synodal experience. In a limited but helpful way, it can allow us to see that synodality is not only a theological concept, but a spirituality, the daily reality of the Holy Spirit in the whole life and mission of the Church. This text, in both its structure and presentation, attempts to trace the outlines of that reality but, above all, offers an invitation to each reader to enter into the reality of the Church's synodal life through their own reflection, experience and vision.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> It is hoped that each paragraphs, while connected to a major theme or dimension, can also stand on its own. In this way, they may prove useful for prayerful reflection and discussion.

It is not enough to have a synod; you must be a synod.

The Church needs intense internal sharing: a living dialogue between the Pastors and between the Pastors and the faithful.

*(Francis, Address for the Audience with the Major Archbishop, the Metropolitans and the Permanent Synod of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church, 5 July, 2019)*



## Spirituality of Synodality Some Central Themes



The point of entry is always our **'situatedness'**: This begins always in the presence of God, God's redemptive action in Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Every life and every history is the field of God's loving and redemptive action which grounds the dignity and vocation of every human being and places us with the whole life of creation, ordering us to reverence, service and praise of the Triune God. It is within this perspective that we come to recognise our personal and ecclesial need for forgiveness and *'metanoia'*/conversion; the recognition of our brokenness and our vulnerabilities; our growth in the **humility** to confess the truth; openness to our need for God's grace.<sup>7</sup> In some ways, we are currently living a 'cultural Passover'. Synodality is a reflective process which seeks to be attentive to the realities of our time and the desires expressed within the complex movements of human culture.<sup>8</sup> In attending to these, synodality seeks to discern where the Holy Spirit is active in history, calling the Church to a deeper *metanoia* and openness to the needs and longings of humanity for the peace and grace of Christ.

**At the heart of this is the need for forgiveness and reconciliation.** Whatever the Church's 'situatedness' or context, it is always invested with the vocation to mission, to confess Christ and minister God's mercy to all women and men.

<sup>7</sup> In the Address to the Fifth Convention of the Italian Church (10<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2015), Pope Francis identifies three qualities for a Christian Humanism: Humility, Disinterest, and Beatitude.

<sup>8</sup> Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, §4;11.

Part of the Church's realism is the recognition that she cannot exist without asking for **God's forgiveness and mercy**. This truth is not consequent solely to the trauma and destructiveness of the abuse and corruption (at multiple levels) that have recently come to light.<sup>9</sup> The Church's recognition of her need for forgiveness is not only a necessity *ad extra* to have credibility in the eyes of the world; it is also a necessity *ad intra* between ecclesial protagonists at various levels within the universal Church. **Synodality begins in forgiveness and reconciliation *ad intra***. Only then can it be an agent of healing grace between cultures, peoples, and nations. Only then are all welcomed as equal participants in the household of the Lord.

The need for mercy and forgiveness also reaches into the past, not least for the ways in which the Church has consciously and unconsciously been an agent of oppression. In recognising and confessing the many ways in which we attempt to exploit God's good grace for our own designs, the Church grows in humility and in openness, and witnesses to the truth that can only set us free. It lives from the daily experience of St Paul's words, 'when I am weak, then I am strong' (2 Cor 12:10; 1 Cor 1:26). In a counter-cultural acceptance of personal and institutional vulnerability, the Church can truly become a place of refuge for all who live with the realities of a vulnerable and precarious life. The Church herself comes to recognise that she cannot secure her existence by the accumulation of power but only from God, in whom is all her strength and security.

**Communion and Mission.** In the Pentecost event, the Church becomes the **new reality of *communio*/community, which overcomes the ancient alienations introduced**

<sup>9</sup> *Preparatory Document*, (2021) §6.

**by personal and social sin** so vividly expressed in the story of the Tower of Babel. **A synodal Church evangelises in and through the merciful and reconciling quality of our relationships.**

The spirituality for synodality gives expression to this mission. It unfolds in both **the horizontal dynamic of communion between Christ and His people within history and the vertical dynamic of this communion that transcends history.**

Here, the true depth of 'communion' begins to reveal itself. **First, communion is a Trinitarian reality**, that is, an expression of the Triune God who is love. This love is experienced not only as the source of all that is, sustaining the life of all creation in Christ, but it is also revealed and experienced as the personal love of God who reaches out to all humanity with God's salvific gift. The capacity to participate in God's own Triune life is offered through grace. This has a two-fold meaning. Firstly, God the Father pours on every one of us all the very love that He offers from all eternity to His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Secondly, we are not loved as though 'from the outside.' Rather, the Father, through the Holy Spirit, includes us in the very life that is God's own Triune Love. In Jesus Christ, we become one with God: 'heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ' (Rom 8:17). This is our dignity, the reason for our indestructible hope and the joy of our mission to the world.

Communion as participation in the Divine Life is the grounding reality of all Christian life and, therefore, of a synodal Church. This means that communion and participation can never be reduced to a sociological phenomenon, nor can it be sustained by institutional structures alone.

**The 'beyond' of the Spirit.** In the dynamic and mutual unfolding of communion,

participation and mission, the Church lives more fully the life of the Holy Spirit. At its heart is the '*kenosis* of the Spirit', which is the self-gift/self-sacrifice of love. Through the *kenosis* of the Holy Spirit, God continues to meet us with the grace of Christ in our fractured histories and unmask our illusions in order that we may be healed in all the dimensions of our humanity.

It is the Spirit who (a) brings about the reciprocal nature of communion, participation, and mission; (b) makes them essential features of ecclesial life such that all members of the Church are called to realise them locally and universally; and (c) discloses the Church's constitutive synodal nature.

It is the Holy Spirit who constantly moves the Church 'beyond' itself into the *magis* - the 'ever greater' - of God and God's redeeming sacrifice for the life of the world. It is in this very movement of 'beyond' that the Church becomes 'a communion in diversity'. Here, all find their voice and their place; here, all are affirmed. The Church becomes the 'tent of meeting' (cf. Ex 33:7-10) where God comes to meet God's people, the place of Divine welcome for all humanity. The limitless *magis* of the Spirit dwells precisely in this place where the Church opens to God. It is through the Spirit that the many become one in Christ without incurring any loss of identity (the Trinitarian principle). In the Spirit, communion becomes a harmony and a new creativity because it requires that we think and live in terms of the other (love). This is part of the deeper *habitus* to which synodality is an invitation.

This is no *Utopian* vision towards which we must strive. Rather, it is an experience of the gift of grace that we have already received in baptism, a grace that makes us all partakers in the Body of Christ. It is lived and realised in every Eucharistic liturgy, in which we encounter the daily integration of our sacramental life and mission. In



this way, the synodal Church can speak to the fragmentation, alienation, uncertainty and anxiety of the present time. It can offer a new relational vision for the future of a humanity gathered in the life of the Triune God, a future that has already begun here and now.<sup>10</sup>

If the life of the Holy Spirit discloses the possibilities for a renewed world and a healed creation, it also shows us how all these corporate and spiritual works of redeeming love put into action the mission and the spirituality for the synodal Church, the works and acts that flow from a synodal spirituality. It gives expression to the sacraments which sustain and direct the vocational form of every Christian life, for everyone in the Church participates in her mission, each according to the grace they have received. Without excluding all the sacraments of the Church, we can recognise the importance of baptism and confirmation, Eucharist and reconciliation.

**Baptism** grounds our common identity and participation in Christ and the Church. It is the chronological beginning and foundation of the call to become one in Christ through the love we receive from the Holy Spirit and that we share in our relationship. In addition, baptism is the pattern which reveals and 'gives the rhythm' to Christian life. Baptism is the 'place' of our participation in the Father's life as His children. The Father offers us His forgiveness, not as a sole act that touches only our past; on the contrary, He bathes our entire life in the waters of mercy. Therefore, not only are we always forgiven (and forgivable) by God but, somehow, we are constantly offered the opportunity to live through mercy and to share it with others. In this sense, the Church can be seen as the community in which we constantly experience

<sup>10</sup> Explored in the encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis 3<sup>rd</sup> October. 2020

and learn—through the gift of the Holy Spirit (and through our many mistakes and sins)—how to live in accord with this pardon so that we might offer it to others. At the same time, the mercy of God does not exclude justice. Rather, as we saw above, through the recognition of our own sins and faults, God's justice always opens a hopeful path, a journey of repentance, reconciliation, and growth. This experience is thus the pattern and living space for the Church's life.

1. Moreover, the gift of forgiveness, as the experience of being loved by a love which is stronger than any refusal or denial, includes all creation. In fact, the world is no longer just a 'thing', but the place where God reaches us with His saving love; and this saving love reaches us not only at an interior level (or morally), but it reaches us in our very flesh, in our body. Indeed, through the invocation of the Spirit, the world's material (as in the water of baptism) becomes the place of humanity's encounter with divine grace; our materiality becomes the place where it is always active.

2. As we have seen, in baptism and forgiveness, we have been included in God's own Triune life. We are not temporary guests or servants, and we are certainly not intruders. The Son's place is our place. We are at home in the house where there are many dwelling places (Jn 14:2). By baptism, all people in the Church have the same dignity; we are all children of the Father and, as such, there is nothing that can or must be added to it. At the same time, this communion in dignity—as within the Trinity itself—implies personal differences. In this way, the Church is the community that does not fear any social, cultural, or gender differences, since it is in these very differences that communion finds expression. Our reciprocal differences become divisive only because of our sins. In fact, through redemption—the experience of being one by virtue of our unity in Christ—differences become the 'material' by which we live as a whole community and one body. This realisation could become a

cultural contribution that the Church as a community might share with those who are beyond its boundaries. The sharing of this vision could enable us to learn together how to strengthen our mutual and global bonds, not *in spite of* our differences but *in and through* these differences.

3. **The Eucharist** is 'the source and the summit of the life of the Church'<sup>11</sup>. In the Eucharist, the Church experiences itself as being already in the presence of the Father, at the table of the slain but living Lamb of God. We grow in the likeness of the Lord Jesus Christ through the constant purification from our sins and, above all, from our worldly way of thinking and conduct. In the Eucharist, the Kingdom of God is revealed to us as already present and active. Whenever fraternal love, true friendship and self-commitment fill our relationships and institutions, the Eucharistic epiclesis of the Holy Spirit continues to unfold.

The Eucharist is indeed the sacrament of the Church because it is the Body of Christ. While we celebrate the Eucharist and partake in the supper of the Lord, the grace of our baptism, through which we are made members of His body, comes into its fullness. Our being-one-in-Christ is nourished and deepened until it also fills our own existence and relationships. As Saint Augustine says: *'If you, therefore, are Christ's body and members, it is your own mystery that is placed on the Lord's table! It is your own mystery that you are receiving! You are saying, "Amen", to the truth of what you are. When you hear "the body of Christ", you reply "Amen." In fact, when you hear "Body of Christ" you say "Amen." Be a member of Christ's body, then, so*

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Vatican II. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* § 10; ITC Synodality §109.

*that your “Amen” may be true!*<sup>12</sup>

From this perspective, we can see that the sacrament of the Eucharist nourishes in us the dynamism inaugurated by baptism, through which we begin our participation as a community in the life of the Trinity. In Christ, we come to share in his life with the Father and the Holy Spirit. We are anointed with the love of the Holy Spirit. The action of the Spirit is not only ‘spiritual’; it affects our material, bodily reality as well. Through the Spirit’s anointing, the whole person is affected; the body experiences this grace too in the love we share with others, through every experience of welcome and the service of charity.

The Eucharist also shapes the way we look at the world and relate to it, because the world was created as the “matter” of a universal Eucharist, and humanity was created as a priest of this cosmic sacrament. Therefore, the Eucharist determines our liturgical attitude toward the world. It makes us stand at the centre of the world and enables us to be unified in our act of blessing God, of receiving the world from God and, at the same time, offering it to God, and, by filling the world with this Eucharist/ thanksgiving, it enables us to transform our lives, that life we receive from the world, into a life in God, into communion.

Synodality, as the life of the Church, is a gift that we cannot produce through our own efforts or strategies. On the contrary, it is the progressive path of participation and integration into the unique Body of Christ which allows us—as individuals and as community/ies—to have among ourselves ‘the same attitude that is also ours

<sup>12</sup> *Serm.272*

in Christ Jesus' as Saint Paul says (Phil 2:5). In fact, Synodality, through the sole communion which is at once with Christ and our neighbour, introduces us into the way of thinking and the attitude that belongs to Christ himself. Therefore, despite our sins and failures, as Church, we can be the presence of Christ who heals, consoles, cares for and leads his brothers and sisters to the Father's embrace. United to, and like the slain Lamb, the Church discovers in the Eucharist that it is the bread broken and offered 'for the life of the world' (Jn 6:51), so 'that the world might be saved' (Jn 3:17).

**Beauty is intrinsic to the life of faith** and is always evoked or disclosed, in some way or at some level, in the experience of Synodality. It is a sure sign of the Holy Spirit's indwelling life. This beauty, which is present in faith, transcends reason and engages the intelligence of the heart and the mind, for truth possesses its own beauty. Beauty, however, is not mere harmony or balance; rather, beauty is fruit of the paschal dynamic into which we were introduced at our Baptism. God, who is love, is the only reality that can be present in the contradictions of history, in its tragedies and even in death. For this reason, the concrete divine-humanity of Jesus Christ in the event of Easter constitutes the supreme glory of God that we can read as beauty. In Christianity, the only possible aesthetic is a paschal aesthetic, that is, an aesthetic of tragedy and of overcoming tragedy, of sacrifice and of the fruit that comes from sacrifice, of hatred and of the love in the midst of that hatred that transforms it into gift, of death and the risen life that comes forth out of death.

a. Beauty is paradoxical, because the same Christ martyred on Calvary is the Christ of whom it is said that He is the most handsome of men.

This means that it is impossible to think of beauty solely on the level of form. This paradox is so strong that it is not accessible without a light that illuminates the mind: the Holy Spirit. The *kalón*, encompassing both beauty and goodness, is made real in the destruction of sin. This destruction, in turn, takes place through a loving sacrifice in which evil, even though it disfigures, deforms, and makes ugly, cannot erase the fullness of glory that is manifested in its saving action on that same disfigured face.

As we contemplate Christ crucified, the Holy Spirit reveals to us that a life penetrated by love is a beautiful life. If the Church is the communion of Christians who seek to live their Baptismal vocation, which is essentially the vocation to love, then ecclesial communion has everything to do with beauty. Beauty is the gift of spiritual integrity communicated to each person by the Holy Spirit. Beauty touches on our redemption, for it is human life taken up into love. In beauty lies the wisdom of true life; beauty is the royal way giving access to the Holy Spirit and the spiritual world. For the Christian, beauty is manifest not only (or even primarily) in art, but in the liturgy where we receive this 'life in the Spirit' and in the many ways love is communicated through the good that each one does. In the life of faith, 'beauty' is the moment, the place where truth, love and being coincide in the person of the crucified and risen Christ. Through the indwelling life of the Holy Spirit, every Christian is continually transformed into this same 'coincidence' in time and space; every Christian is transfigured into a sanctifying light at the service of all humanity.

**b.** In the life of the baptised, beauty is a way of living and of being that reveals Christ's beauty in our flesh and manifests his redeeming grace. In the Christian life, beauty may be expressed in images and artistic forms; or it may be expressed in the *poiesis* of devotion and liturgy which avail of languages beyond words and concepts; or it may be in those simple acts of love and integrity which restore us to our humanity.

In all this, the Church discovers that the full range of her communicative channels are foundational to, and constitutive of, her experience of the Spirit of Pentecost, who is ever creative and who testifies to the Crucified and Risen Christ in every human tongue. Whether in moments of rapt contemplation or in moments when we consciously attend to the ways in which faith discloses itself in beauty, we touch the hem of God's garment; the haemorrhaging of our souls and our being is healed and we see the divine glory revealed in the face of Christ (2 Cor 4:6; Jn 1:4).

A positive aspect of this approach to beauty lies in the fact that it is not constrictive. If we take an argumentative, predominantly conceptual or ethical approach, a discussion arises that ends up in a dialectic of opinions.

Because beauty is shaped by faith and flows from it, beauty touches the deepest sources of our desire for God. Beauty calls us to itself without ambiguity, without deceit. Its authority runs far deeper than reason. Beauty fascinates, attracts, and leads into its rooms, as Origen says about the bride in the Canticum.

c. In all of this, beauty weaves us into ecclesial communion. More than any other spiritual reality, beauty will help the Church move beyond expressing herself merely as an institution so that she might be manifest, both in history and in the Kingdom, as the living body she is. Synodality, as constitutive of the Church, will give expression to the dynamic beauty of ecclesial life/communion and the Church's holiness.

The synodal Church is called to be **an ecumenical Church**.<sup>13</sup> The fullness of

<sup>13</sup> *Preparatory Document*, p. 36.

communion which awaits us is already anticipated in the synodal process and the reality of the universal Church, yet we also recognise that it is partial and incomplete. For this reason, an essential element of the synodal process is ecumenical, for it lives always from the same desire that Christ expressed in his prayer to the Father 'that all may be one' (Jn 17:21). This is a dynamic communion in which the legitimate diversity of the churches is not lost but their gifts, histories and testimony to Christ is gathered and cherished for the benefit of the whole Body of Christ. Such communion strengthens witness and mission between the whole household of the Lord; it cannot diminish it. At the same time, the synodal process is also a process of repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation, for each community carries within its memory and history the wounds of past divisions as well as the promise of future unity. When gathered in communion, the synodal Church of churches becomes a light for the divided nations of the world. Conflict and violence can be overcome, our histories can be healed and reconciled so that we can come into the fullness of our common humanity, labouring together for the good of all and responsible to all creation in our common home.

The Church walks towards the Kingdom, but she is at the same time rooted in many places. From the very beginning, the word 'Church' has referred to both a place *and* to the sense of belonging to such a universal community. For those concrete human places of Ephesus, Corinth, Antioch, and Rome, 'Church' always refers to the community that belongs to God, the community God purchased with the blood of his Son (Acts 20:28). For this reason, we do not use the language of 'pieces' to speak of the Churches around the world, but rather we speak of the 'local' Church, the 'Church in that place'. The Church of God thus reaches out to




the whole of humanity, penetrating the places of the world, becoming in that place, through baptism, the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Spirit, the community of eschatological reconciliation.

Each of these Churches exists within the diaspora and is part of the pilgrim on its way to the Kingdom, where all will be gathered from 'the four corners' into a final and complete communion that will transfigure the partial communion that already exists.

Therefore, each local Church is entirely open to an eschatological horizon, 'the beyond' that takes it away from its own limits, from closing in on itself, even from the limits imposed by its enclosure within the history and destiny of the place where it has taken root. Since one finds in each of the Churches that which is found in all of them, and in all of them that which is in each, they are together the one Church of God. They are not so in the sense that each one adds something which could ostensibly be lacking in another, but because each is identical with the Church that God raised up in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost; the Church which anticipates the Kingdom, as a pledge and as the first fruits (2 Cor 1:22, 5:5; Rom 8:23; Eph 1:14), the Kingdom of the Father in which it does not yet have a full share, but which awaits it in the feast of universal communion.





## Practicing a synodal spirituality: Developing a Synodal Habitus



A synodal Church is a **contemplative Church**. It is a Church in which the scriptures and sacraments are central, for they are the school of a vision which is open to God's salvific economy in all the realities of creation, human existence, and history. Synodality cannot be realised or sustained unless it is grounded in the prayer of the Church and the faithful people of God. Prayer keeps the heart and the mind open to all that God is doing and desires for humanity and creation; it also nourishes and conforms the will so that we always seek to desire and act according to God's will and salvific purpose. In this way, all prayer is a gift of the Holy Spirit which enables us to imitate Christ, whose whole being is a prayer.

The prayer of the Church, in sacrament and liturgy, is also an encounter with the living God who is active in and beyond time. It is a moment of disclosure in which we see what God has already done and who we are becoming. This is why the Church is both the keeper of humanity's memory (of who we are and who we are called to be) and the witness to the unexpected hope that is always present for us through grace.

**A synodal Church is a listening Church.**<sup>14</sup> It is attentive to all the modalities of God's self-communication. It is attentive to the movements of the world and the many voices that are raised in lament, protest, supplication, and witness. A listening

<sup>14</sup> *Preparatory Document*, p. 34.

Church is attentive to the many different narratives of lives, cultures, and peoples. One could say that it is a place of narrative hospitality. To listen, the community must first be self-aware of all that it brings, which makes attentive listening more than just 'hearing'. Then it must understand how 'listening' is an act of attention, a gift, and a recognition of the other; a willing generosity to let them speak in their own voice without trying to first determine the categories or translating in order to make the challenge of the other more comfortable and acceptable. Listening is a gift which places us at the disposal of the other. It carries an ethical commitment to walk with them, for once we attend to another, we make their lives and their story part of our story. This is especially true when we choose to privilege those whose lives suffer the violence of poverty and those who suffer the burden of rejection, or marginalization, or carry the weight of false and distorting narratives. When we are listening, we are also consulting: genuinely seeking to draw upon the insight, experience and wisdom of others. Listening, which is also consulting, is a reciprocal act of engagement, for we are all involved in seeking together the good to which the Holy Spirit is calling us to. For this reason, at its best, discernment is characterised by inclusivity and openness.

When we 'listen', we are attuned to the voice that *lies within the voice* that we hear, that is, the deep voice of the Spirit. Often this voice is not accessible in words, but it speaks to us nonetheless, 'heart calling to heart' in the silent music of God. Listening at such a level requires a freedom to be available to whatever the Spirit is asking or wherever the Spirit is leading. It will also require us to listen with the intelligence or understanding of faith, so that Christ and the Word of God become the school in which we learn to recognise, to understand, and to judge what we have heard.

**The synodal Church is a discerning Church.**<sup>15</sup> The Church is a pilgrim community on the path by which God leads it through the vast expanse of history.<sup>16</sup> In order to be sure that it is the path on which God is leading her, the Church is always actively engaged in discernment. Although it may entail the same sort of intellectual and reflective processes, discernment may be distinguished from prudential decision-making. Discernment is essentially a theological act; it is the gift of wisdom to see all things in relation to God and to recognise God's desire for the lasting human good revealed in Christ. Discernment is an expression of our heart's desire to love God and find the best ways of serving God's saving purpose in the ever changing and complex circumstances of our lives, without ever losing sight of the ultimate destiny and goal to which Christ calls us. This means that discernment also commits us to a continual process of conversion of our ways of seeing and knowing, loving and acting, as we come to see the world through and in Christ and perceive God's constant work of redeeming grace in our world. This is also the life of the Holy Spirit working in us and in the Church that conforms us to Christ and leads us into truth.<sup>17</sup>

**Prayer:** Discernment always has a context. However, even if the circumstances in which we discern are changing, prayer and listening remain constant. Prayer opens us and disposes us to wait attentively upon God's word. Through it, we come to recognise the way in which God is present and active in every situation and moment.

<sup>15</sup> *Preparatory Document*, p. 35.

<sup>16</sup> *Lumen Gentium* Chapter VII ff.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Phil 2:5; I Cor 2:16; Jn 16:13; Rom 8:26ff. *Lumen Gentium* §12. Re. conversion cf. *Preparatory Document*, pp. 25 ff.

The Lord's own prayer, *The Our Father*, the most fundamental prayer of Christian life, is a prayer for the gift of discernment: '*Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*' This is the prayer which Christ lives not only in his acts but also in his person. In these familiar opening words, we are placed in the right disposition for discernment:

- We are orientated to God as the fundamental condition and purpose of our life. Through the grace of our adoption, we can now know the nature and depth of God truly, not as some remote deity but as *Abba*, 'Father' (Gal 4:6).
- To know and love God is to seek to do God's will. This is the fulfilment of every life and the ultimate source of its joy. Discernment is an act of faith—knowing, loving and trusting—God in all things and in all the circumstances of our life. If this is true for individuals, it is also true for the Church, the great community of faith.
- We also come to discover that not only has God a purpose for us, but for the whole of humanity and, indeed, for everything in creation.
- It is when we realise this that our relationships and our responsibilities change. We become servants and friends of Christ in the work of healing the world until it comes to the fullness of life in God's redemptive plan. This is our entry into a new way of understanding and acting, and it is the mark of our conversion.

'*Thy will be done*' is not only a prayer; it is a deep desire and commitment. Whether in great things or in the mundane things of everyday life, when the Holy Spirit prays the Lord's prayer in us, our discernment is drawn under the sovereignty of God, the Kingdom is announced, and the name of God in Christ is sanctified. Discernment, then, is integral to the vocation and mission of every member of the Church and to the Church herself. We ask for it every time we pray the Lord's prayer, and we enter ever more deeply into his life and service.

**Discernment as attunement – a metaphor.** In many ways, we can see the gift of discernment in musical terms. Often, we learn to sing through singing with others. From them, we learn to recognise the true and false notes. Gradually, we become familiar with the music and we begin almost intuitively to know when we are in harmony. So, too, from familiarity with God, we can come to recognise what is true and in harmony with God's purpose and what is out of tune or strikes a false note.

We also learn that which is God's way of loving and acting for the salvation of the world through the new 'music of the Cross'. In the end, discernment is an act of love for God and for neighbour. It is the knowledge that comes through love. In discerning in and through love, we can begin to comprehend reality in all its relationships and in its ultimate destiny to participate in God's triune life. Discernment, then, is also an opening of the heart in love and mercy to all things. As St Isaac of Nineveh (St Isaac the Syrian) expresses it:

What is a merciful heart? It is a heart on fire for the whole of creation, for humanity, for the birds, for the animals, for demons, and for all that exists. By the recollection of them, the eyes of a merciful person pour forth tears in abundance. By the strong and vehement mercy that grips such a person's heart, and by such great compassion, the heart is humbled, and one cannot bear to hear or to see any injury or slight sorrow in any in creation. For this reason, such a person offers up tearful prayer continually even for irrational beasts, for the enemies of the truth, and for those who harm her or him, that they be protected and receive mercy. And in like manner, such a person prays for the family of reptiles because of the great compassion that burns without measure in a heart that is in the likeness of God.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> *First Collection, Homily 74.*

So discernment comes through the life of the Church, the faith-filled lives of its members, the rhythm of the liturgy, the attention to the living word of scripture and the celebration of the sacraments. In all these ways, the ordinary life of the Church is for us the great school of discernment.

Centred on God - to keep us free: If we are to live in this 'attunement' with Christ which the Holy Spirit creates in us, we must strive to keep God as the centre of our lives: its '*cantus firmus*.' For this reason, discernment is always a God-centred act; it is guided by love of Christ and our desire to deepen our service of Him and to build up His Body, the Church. It flows directly from our love of God, which orders our whole self to God and God's saving work revealed in Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

**Discernment in freedom.** Discernment requires freedom: the freedom to serve God and neighbour and the humility which recognises and accepts God's freedom to engage us in service or not. Thus every genuine attempt of discernment will begin in examining the extent to which we are free and asking for the grace to make ourselves available. Although our own desires, thoughts, and agendas will be the context in which we seek to know what God is asking of us, they cannot be our primary goal. Whether as an individual or as a community, we certainly need to recognise them and understand how they affect us so that we can judge better if they help or hinder us in our process of discernment: do they block us from hearing and understanding? Do they help us to be more open and receptive to the sources through which God is speaking? Do we need first to be reconciled and forgiven before we are free to set out on the journey of discernment, or perhaps this will be one of the graces we receive in the process itself? Are we ready for that?



However we judge our desires, thoughts, agendas and histories, we will need the graced freedom to sacrifice them or transform them if they are not helping us find God's will. We will not discern well if we have not the freedom to be at God's disposal.

In this sense, discernment is also about **giving God the freedom** to ask of us whatever is needed in the Divine service.

Throughout our discernment, we will always need to seek this freedom, to ask for the grace of a pure intention and unclouded focus. Without this, there is always the risk of trying to make God our servant. Discernment then would become a sort of blasphemy.

**Humility:** For this reason, every act of discernment, whether personal or communal, begins in humility. The touchstone of this is the paschal mystery and, as we journey together in this disposition of humility, we will also journey into the humility of the crucified and risen Lord. Discernment knows that it is taught and guided by the wisdom of the cross. It has no fear of being foolish in the eyes of an uncomprehending world. It desires only to share in the work of the crucified and risen Christ, the work of unblocking and opening channels for the new life of the Holy Spirit that humanity and all creation may 'have life and have it to the full.' (Jn 10:10).

If humility is grounded in the realisation that all we have has been given, it also recognises that we need God's grace to illuminate our entanglements with sin and liberate us from them. Not only does sin enter into the way we act, but it also distorts our ways of knowing and judging. We can be prey to illusions which appear to be

good. These are only obstacles if we fail to recognise them. Therefore, discernment requires a commitment to truth and transparency. It follows from this that it will also be receptive to others who may have the insights we need to guide us. This is especially the case when we are engaged in a communal discernment. We need the desire to be open to the wisdom of the tradition and the truth which the Church carries in its teaching and common life. We need the humility to admit when we are wrong or have misunderstood, and we need the humility to change so that we can be more open to the God who is calling us.

**The ecclesial dimension of humility for discernment.** All discernment, even when it is about a personal matter or choice, is done in and with the community of faith; it is an implicitly ecclesial act. Whatever the particular outcome of the process of discernment, it will lead to a deeper faith in the Church and the Church's mission. This will be one of the hallmarks of a true discernment.

However, it is important for discernment to recognise that every member of the Church is both a disciple and a teacher, indeed one must be enrolled as a disciple in the school of the Lord to become a teacher. If the humility to learn and to follow is the condition of teaching, we can also see how wide and deep the implications are for ecclesial life. If it is true that every bishop is both disciple and teacher, it is also true of every priest and parent, indeed, everyone who teaches by their witness of their life.<sup>19</sup> This requires not only the humility that is a prerequisite of every genuine learner, but also an openness which strives to be free from fear, ambition, prejudice and ideology which can blind us to God's action in the world and distort our reading of 'the signs

<sup>19</sup> Cf. *Episcopalis Communio* §5

<sup>20</sup> *Gaudium et Spes* §4;11.

of the times'.<sup>20</sup> The quality of our discernment and the decisions which arise from it can be judged by the ways in which it builds up the Church, deepens its communion and mission. This should not diminish creativity, freedom and boldness (*parrhesia*) in following where the Holy Spirit leads to make Christ known and loved.<sup>21</sup> Christ's call always frees us to 'put out into the deep....' (Lk.5:4). At every stage, however, discernment and its fruits will be governed by a humility that seeks the good of all. This will sometimes mean that we must wait with loving patience and understanding to allow everyone to participate in peace and trust. Unlike other decision-making processes, discernment will not work well if it operates by imposing a particular view or course of action. Within every community, people will have different capacities and ways of seeing things; not everyone can move at the same pace (1 Cor 8:9). Part of the growth that communal discernment brings is respect for each other, a real desire that no one is dismissed or excluded, and the patience to wait until all are ready.

Humility comes in the way we choose to listen and to wait. Indeed, the guiding disposition is one of receptive listening which is generous to the other who is speaking, even when one may disagree or be disconcerted by what is said or the way in which it is said. Such receptive listening is not in a rush; it will seek to discover the perspective, insight, truth or pain of what is being said which often cannot be fully expressed by words. A disposition of generous, humble, and receptive listening reaches out to the other and the reality that they live and experience. This will often be very different from our own so we must be prepared to go on a journey, to go into another country,

<sup>21</sup> *Preparatory Document*, p. 35.

one that is not familiar to us or where we may not feel all that comfortable. In some sense, this is the journey of the incarnation and we must be ready to find that Christ is already there in the world of the other, waiting for us to see Him.

In these ways, the process of discernment allows the community itself to grow into a deeper self-knowledge, solidarity, and sense of belonging to the one Lord. With humility, therefore, will come the great gifts of generosity, kindness and gentleness so that, with patient fortitude, we can bear with each other, creating time and space so that trust in each other and faith in Christ can grow and deepen (Gal. 6:1-5). These commitments will also be the signs that a community is living that graced freedom which discernment needs to find God's will and follow it.

**Gratitude and consolation:** From whichever tradition of discernment we draw, all discernment begins in gratitude for what God has done, is doing and will do: gratitude, above all, for the gift of Christ himself, and the Holy Spirit who gathers, sustains and guides us in our service of God and neighbour. The discernment that flows from consolation will recognise that it already lives from a depth of faith, hope and love. It will begin by recognising these gifts already active in the life of the Church and of the community. They are all the sure signs of the Holy Spirit that is present, strengthening the community for its life and mission. Whatever the circumstances, discernment will begin and continue in thanksgiving for these gifts. It will recognise that they are the authentic gifts with which the Spirit anoints every Christian life and fills the whole Church. Already they are fruits of the Kingdom still hidden in mystery, but whose promise is already fulfilled and secured for us in Christ.

If our discernment is not first grounded in the graces that the community (Church) already possesses, it will risk losing its memory of the salvation history it has

lived and the experience of God's consoling presence in its life. When this happens, discernment will fall into desolation. This will show itself by a loss of faith in the process. Individually, or as a community, we can be overwhelmed by complexity and apparent obstacles; we become fearful and immobilised, seeking to guarantee our own security, driven to find some false consolation in things or our own construction or settling for less than that to which the Holy Spirit is calling us. In such moments, we will experience a discernment that has become wearied by struggles, soured by conflicts and distractions. We will experience a loss of confidence, creativity and spiritual peace.

In any process of discernment, it is important to recognise these patterns of desolation and their sources, for they can hold a community in captivity (Gal 5:16-26). When recognised and acknowledged, the way becomes open to return with deeper faith, knowledge and love to God who is our wisdom and the source of all consolation.

**Discernment needs time:** Discernment will certainly take time and we should be prepared to give it the time it needs. This is not a delaying tactic to avoid decisions. Rather, it is about attending to dynamics within the community, its growing freedom, the participation and understanding of its members, their openness to embracing the possibilities that emerge.

Although space, time, and prayer need to be given for a consensus to grow, we will recognise that consensus, which is the fruit of the process of discernment itself, is more than just a common agreement about the rightness of a particular decision or course of action. It will certainly reflect a coming together of the community, but it will allow for different levels of appropriation, insight and understanding as well as action. We can discover that, in the ecclesial community, consensus is agreement

and co-operation in action to serve mission. It is not the imposition of a uniformity; it will not deny the wonderful interplay of grace and nature that gives shape to our existence and history.

This freedom within consensus does not destroy or dissipate diversity; it is the expression of the common faith and trust which is also the fruit of discernment. It will usually have three aspects:

First, there will be a **trust in the competent authority** who, after discerning with the community, takes the decision or confirms it. This is the grace that belongs to office. It is at the service of the Spirit working in and through the necessary ministries that the community needs to sustain its living communion and mission in place and time.

Second, a central dimension of a community in consolation regarding the outcome of discernment will be **peace**. Again, this will reflect a deeper level of unity which moves consensus beyond agreement to a common faith. This faith is grounded not only in the experience that the Holy Spirit is present and active in all the members, but that it is the **same** Spirit who is working in all the members of the community, those who hold the office of service, and in those whom they are called to serve. Whatever the final nature of the discerned decision, all members are called to find peace in it.

Third, **consensus is the acceptance of a co-responsibility** exercised by all the members of the community according to the measure of grace that each receives for the life of the Church. Co-responsibility is the realisation of the profound and dynamic reality of a lived participation and communion grounded in the grace of baptism.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> *Preparatory Document*, p. 35.

It is marked by an interior sense of unity and peace. **With co-responsibility comes accountability.** In the unfolding of synodality, we are accountable to one another in how we use our gifts and our responsibilities to serve the Church and its mission. This accountability is also an expression of our humility, our openness to let ourselves stand before the other, not in power or in subjection but in the communion of equals whose distributed offices and gifts are all in the service of Christ.

**This accountability and responsibility operates in history,** for it is exercised in relation to those who have gone before us (tradition and past generations) and those who will come after us (the hope of future generations). Here, we can begin to live and appreciate all the dimensions of communion, participation and mission. Ultimately, it is to Him that we are accountable.

All these dimensions flow from the Spirit's indwelling in the whole community allowing the **community** to live in **mission**. It experiences itself as a living *koinonia* through the diversity and sharing of gifts which it receives from God. It also recognizes that precisely as gifts or charisms given for the good of the community and its mission they cannot be in competition with each other; the community must always strive to live this dynamic plurality of gifts in the unity that comes from the service of mission received from the Lord. In this way, whatever the circumstances and challenges that the ecclesial community faces, it will do so in consolation. Preserving the community in the consolation of communion, participation, and mission is the mark of leadership and service of the People of God.

**Discernment and wisdom.** Discernment is a sapiential act, attentive to God who

is at work in the Church, in all peoples and in creation. It is God who hears the cry of the poor, the suffering and the lost, and the cry of creation itself. It is God who knows the violence of the world and the wounds it leaves on the soul as well as the body. Yet it is the same God who in the risen Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit has given us a new understanding of God's purpose and working (Col 1:15-21; Eph 1:3-23; Rom 8:31-39). This makes active and present in every age and circumstance the future which comes to meet us in Christ and liberates us from the 'dead-ends' (death-end) of our actions and our histories. With this wisdom grasped through the eyes of faith, we become agents of the in-breaking Kingdom of God, reconciling all things in peace and messengers of the kingdom of life. Here, we begin to understand that discernment itself is part of the process of salvation, making concrete and real the prayer with which we began: "Thy Will be done on earth as in heaven."

Discernment is the slow, patient and deep commitment to serving God's redeeming work. It participates in Christ's mission of reconciliation, healing, forgiveness and peace.

Finally, when we feel we have reached the decision or mapped out a path or received the grace that we were seeking, we need to take **time to confirm** it, time to ask God to confirm it with a growing sense of consolation. With this, the energy and the will to realise what has been discerned will also be a confirming sign. Likewise, the emergence of the 'fruits' not only immediately but also over time. However, confirmation is also something of a process too: while the choice or direction may be clear, its execution will often require adaptation and revision. This is not because the discernment was wrong, but because it is worked out in the circumstances of our lives and our times. Just as sailboats must tack to the prevailing wind if they are to stay on course and reach their destination, so too with the ways in which we live out our



discernments, never losing sight of goal which is the ever greater love and service of Christ and the world to which we are sent.

When it discerns, the synodal Church will begin with Christ's prayer, the Our Father, but it will also ask Mary, the Mother of God, to teach us to say with simple, joyful trust and abandon: 'Behold, the servant of the Lord, be it unto me according to your word' (Lk 1:35)

Within listening and discerning, which are intimately connected, is a recognition of all **the charisms the Spirit bestows upon the community for communion, participation, and mission** (cf. 1 Cor 12:4ff). Ecclesial office is a charism given for the Church's unity and fidelity, and as guarantor of the truth of faith. But it does not and cannot stand independently of the whole People of God or the charisms that the Spirit distributes for the needs of the community in every time and place. The charisms of ecclesial office and those given to the whole People of God are not in opposition; they all work in service of communion and mission. The exercise of one enhances and supplements the other; it does not threaten, diminish, or devalue it. Synodality recovers this reciprocity and mutuality of charisms and therefore opens the way of renewing and reordering (redeeming) ecclesial structures and our understanding of how power is given and exercised within the Church. It is always a gift and not entitlement; it is never in competition but always seeks to realise itself in service. Therefore, power in the Church is first recognised by humility, whereby it is exercised for the benefit of the other (subsidiarity), for the unity and building up of the whole body.

**The poor and the peripheries.** The Church following her Lord has an unqualified solicitude for the poor and is called to love her 'poor and sorrowing members' and 'those who are suffering persecution for justice's sake' (LG §23). A synodal Church

has within it a desire to include the poor, the marginalised and the oppressed. It experiences the truth of Paul's own apostolic horizon: '*caritas Christi urget nos*' (2 Cor 5:14). This is the love that takes the Church to the poor and drives its desire to reach the peripheries. The Church also needs to understand the lives of those on the margins, for it is there that Christ is also to be found (Matt 25:31 ff.). In this process, we are called not only to listen to but **to listen with** the poor, the marginalised and those whose voices our societies can drown out or whose presence can be made invisible. This will require a different methodology, a way of accompaniment and walking with or alongside so that we come to see reality from their perspective. In many ways, **it requires a conversion to the margins which will be counter-cultural for many.**

We must recognise that it is not easy to involve people on the margins in processes which have not been developed with them at the heart. **People on the margins and those who suffer the violence and vulnerability of poverty will often say unusual and unexpected things;** things that are often counter-intuitive and challenging. Here, **we need the grace to allow them their own voice and modes of expression** rather than trying to absorb them into conventional categories or institutional language. It will be necessary to allow our own language and concepts to be enriched symbolically as well as verbally through these voices and histories from the margins. **We need to discover again the imaginative horizon of the gospel and the Kingdom.** Such a change can only be sustained first by the conviction and then by the experience that, through all these people, the **Holy Spirit is speaking to the Church and, through them, Christ is calling us and our world to a new understanding and way of living.**

The poor and those on the margins are certainly found within the world, but they are also found within the Church itself. Here, we meet another dimension of 'the poor'. The scriptures know them as '**the *anawim***' and Jesus extolls them in the

Beatitudes: 'blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven' (Matt 5:3). These are the ones who are completely dependent upon God. They have no one else to turn to or to defend them. They can be found in every parish, at every mass and in every parish activity. **These are the ones who may never speak at a meeting but, without whose witness and presence, the Church itself would be impoverished.** Like Jesus observing the widow in the Temple (Mk 12:41ff.; Lk 21:1ff.), they often speak in the language of faith and devotion. We need to 'see' them and learn their language. **The synodal Church must have the eyes of Christ to see those whose silent presence fills the margins where faith is unseen and taken for granted.** For the Church itself is the Church of the 'anawim' – the little ones, the humble ones, those without power or status but whom God cherishes. ***These are the ones whose lives of witness and humble service—in prayer and act— nourish the Church; they are the privileged heirs of the Kingdom.*** Mary, Mother of God, is one of their number and, if we can listen deeply, we hear her song again in their lives.

'The Church cannot let the poor down...' (Pope Benedict, *Verbum Domini* §107). A synodal Church will be concerned to give all a place and a voice; it will be creative in reaching those who are often unseen, unheard or seldom thought of. This would include other Christian Churches and traditions. It is also possible that, on the margins of our societies and our churches, we may discover today's saints and martyrs, persecuted communities, along with those who strive to build bonds of communion and peace among peoples and religions.

**As we have already noted, all of these 'synodal gifts' presuppose our desire to be converted;** a desire to leave our own pre-judgements and ways of seeing things behind in order to let God enter our lives, our communities and teach us anew the things of God's Kingdom; to open our eyes to see anew the world in which we live, in

its pain and beauty, loss and hope; to open our hearts to see Christ in the very midst of our realities and to hear again his voice: 'come follow me'.

**Conversion is the presupposition of the adventure and the risk of faith in Christ and the God whom he reveals.** It is in that process of 'dying to self' that we might live for Christ and serve him more completely (cf. Phil 1:21ff). It is the grace that is given always to change, to start again, to live within the 'beyond of the Holy Spirit'. It is not a programme for self-transformation, which we can do for ourselves. It is the gift which only Christ can give because that alone ensures that it is God's gift. And that grace-gift can come in many different ways, either as a sudden surprise or after a long time of searching; but whenever it comes, or however it comes, we can only make one response: 'yes'. In that moment, we recognise that we are not alone; we have many friends who have also said 'yes' and are on the road of conversion with us. They can help us to always cherish the gift and keep it alive, for it is the 'yes' to life, the God of life. Therefore, the synodal process is a journey of conversion, a 'yes' to the God of life and to a Church whose mission is 'for the life of the world' (Jn 6:51).

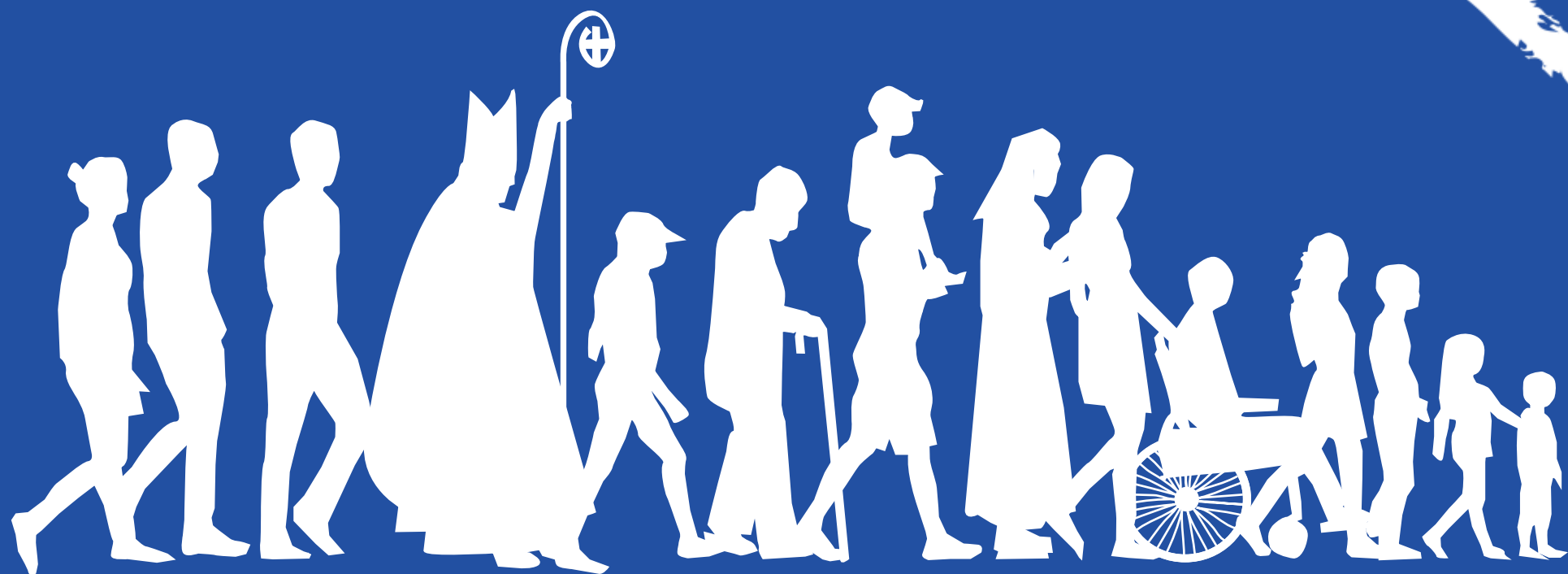
The synodal process is a journey which we make together into the mystery of the Church's life and mission. As with any journey, there will be moments of confusion, doubt, disagreement, and weariness. In these moments, we need the faith and wisdom of those who journey with us, especially the great communion of the saints, and all who have gone before us 'marked by the sign of faith'. They can show us that the great gifts of faith, hope and love are lived for Christ in our relationships with each other and especially our neighbour, especially the neighbour who is in need.

In these moments, too, we need the theological gifts of faith, hope, and love to sustain us; they find their expression in gestures of patience, perseverance,

reconciliation and care. We are called to journey together, to invite all to 'the banquet of life' in which the whole of creation participates. Then, together in the full communion of God's life, we can join in the great hymn of praise for the victory of God's triune love:

*Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen. (Eph 3:20-21)*







# I

## Showing the way

One of the oldest and most venerated icons of Mary, Mother of God, is known as the 'hodegetria': she who shows the way. As we conclude these reflections, we might find in Mary the one who embodies all the dimensions of the spirituality for synodality that we have sought to outline. She is the one who accompanies the Church on its synodal journey. As depicted in the icon, she always directs our attention away from herself to her son, to the source of our salvation and the terminus of our hope. Every parent will recognise Mary's simple gesture. In this one natural loving movement, Mary opens the way for the journey of the pilgrim Church. She also points out the way for the whole of humanity searching for healing and the fullness of life.

Mary, the mother of God, is always with us on the synodal path, for she is also 'Mother of the Church' (*Mater Ecclesiae*); mother of all those who are companions and disciples of her son. Whenever we are feeling lost, confused, or hesitant about the way, we only have to look to her to point out the way.

Mary does not speak. She does not need to. She only needs to direct our gaze to her son. In her wordless gesture, she sums up the whole mission of the Church. Even when the People of God are 'in via'—on the journey—they are always in mission. The two cannot be separated, for there is but one way and one object of our desire, one source of our life and our hope: Jesus Christ.

## Our Lady of the Way Theotokos Hodegetria

# III



It is in making the journey that we become the communion into which the Spirit has already called us. In walking together, we discover that we need each other to participate in the mission we have received. However we walk, whatever we bring, even if we sometimes need to be carried, we are never a burden. Whatever our state or condition, we can show the object of our love and the source of our hope and joy: Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour, Son of God and son of Mary.





## II

## The Journey together

In a sense, the whole of Mary's life is a journey: the inward journey of handing herself over to God's purpose, even when she does not fully understand where it will take her, and the physical journeys that map her life: the roads from Nazareth to Bethlehem, the refugee road into Egypt and the long road back. We find her on the pilgrim journeys of her people as they travel to celebrate the great festivals of Israel's pilgrim history in Jerusalem. We meet her on the hardest road of all: following her son into the dark night of Calvary and Golgotha.

We encounter her in the stillness of God's silence, as a mother waiting for the annunciation of new life again; waiting to hear her risen son call her and then to follow him into the journey of the resurrection. For Mary, whether the journey is inward or physical, a journey of exile or return, there is but one journey only: the journey of faith in her son, Jesus Christ, who is her way.

With her son, Mary knows all journeys that we each must make. She is truly 'Our Lady of the Way'. She, too, has learned how to listen and respond to the Word



that comes to her amid the routines of daily life, prayer, worship and family. She has learned how to speak the truth in humility, for she is also one of the '*anawim*'; how to proclaim the coming of God's Kingdom; how to serve it with unwavering faith and courage, not seeking her own path but only that which Christ walks.

One of her first journeys is the Visitation. Here, Mary shows us that, if the synodal journey is to proclaim God's mighty work, it will also be an intergenerational one. In making the journey to the home of Elizabeth, we can see that the gifts of the 'elders' are needed to recognise, support and nurture the graces of younger generations. Like the young Mary of Nazareth, they need those who can give them a home while the graces they possess have time to grow. In finding welcome and understanding companionship in each other, Mary and Elizabeth already witness to the new community that God is fashioning. Together they can sing the prophetic and joyous song which announces the advent of God's Kingdom.

Their song does not arise from a pre-prepared text but from the Spirit moving within them. From their own experience, they have a 'new song' which gathers up the whole tradition in which they stand. In their common song and shared voice, they can only proclaim what God has done for them. Although they stand within the prophetic tradition of Israel, they are not women who look back. They are women who walk into the future which they already know from their experience of God's grace in their lives.

The lives of these two women are forever entwined. They know that their lives are no longer their own. They belong now to God's future and to the community which is still being born.

Mary and Elizabeth anticipate the prophetic Church. Their presence reminds it that it speaks best when it speaks from its experience of God's grace in its own life. In Mary's journey to her kinswoman Elizabeth, and Elizabeth's response, we are shown the way to a synodal community of welcome, refuge and joy. In them, we learn that from listening to the Word comes receiving and welcoming the unexpected gift of God, for whom nothing is impossible. Together, Mary and Elizabeth, and all the generations which enter their song, are already the community of hope that God's promises in Christ will never fail.



### III

### The Journeying in Care

In the gospels, we find that she is always on the road with Christ, sometimes anxious and protective about his safety but always following with a discreet, attentive and caring love. We have a sense that, as she made a home for Jesus, so too, she makes a home for his disciples and all who follow him. Because he is her home, how could she not live the grace of hospitality? How could she not care for those for whom he cares, especially the poor and those on the margins for whom he keeps a special place in his heart? Her door is always open to those who seek him, and she is always willing to guide us to him, especially those who need him most. In this sense,



Mary is mother of the Kingdom; mother of all those, who like her, live in and for her son and the God whom he reveals.

At the foot of the cross, from her suffering son and Lord, her mission is confirmed: to be the mother of the new community born from his sacrifice. At the foot of the cross, gathered with her community of faithful women bound in love and friendship beyond the natural bonds of family, we find her. Together, they are not afraid to be seen as those who love him; to bear witness to him when all have deserted and are filled with fear. Through their long vigil of his suffering, putting their own lives at risk, they show a love that is stronger and more enduring than any worldly power. With these women, Mary waits to receive the tortured and lifeless body of her son into her arms and place him in the tomb, returning him to the Father God who gave him to her.

Yet even those disciples and followers who abandoned him in this hour always had a home with her and the women who stood in solidarity with her. This is their grace; it is the grace of a synodal Church to which Mary and these women of astonishing love and faith continue to call us. They never ceased to be witnesses to future generations that, no matter how far they stray, they will never be abandoned. They will always have a home.



## IV

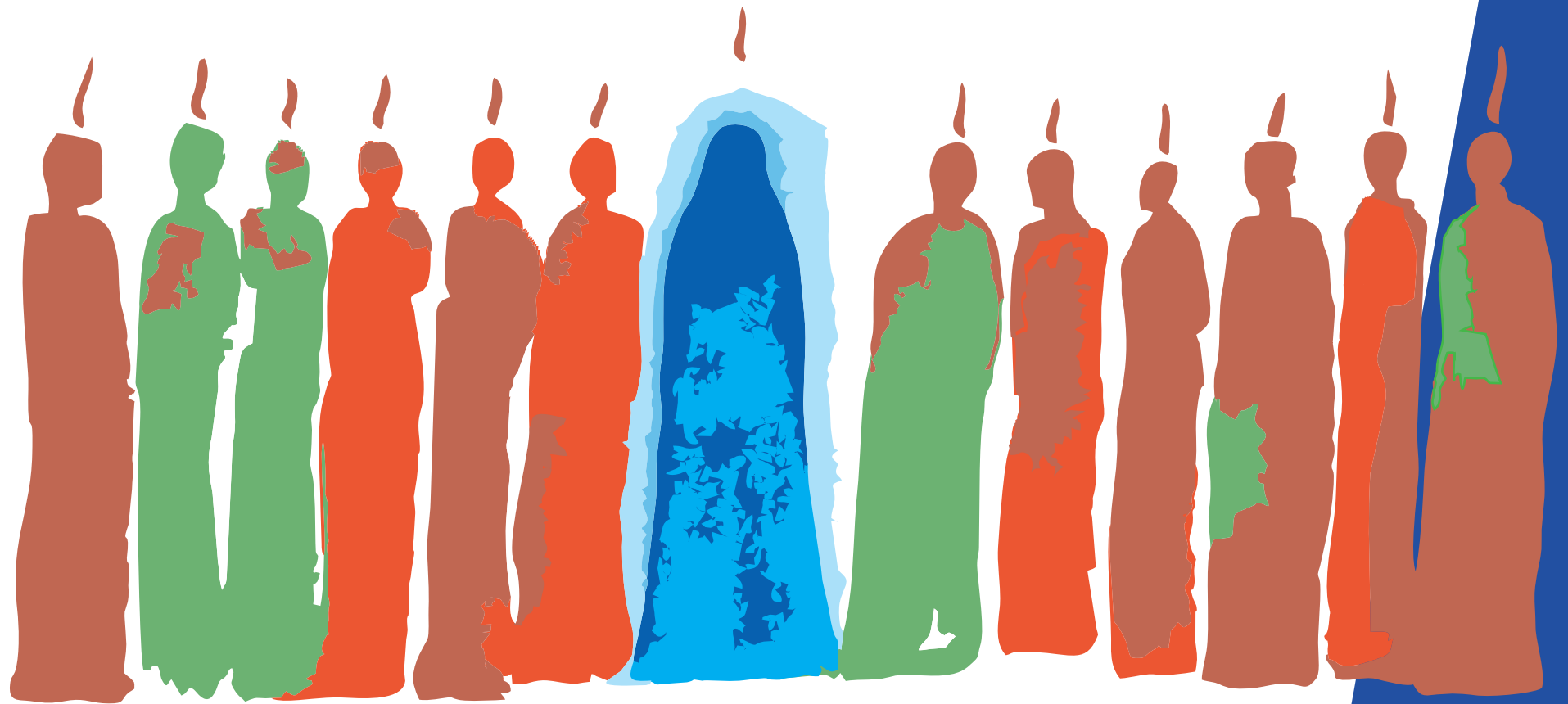
### The Journey of a Pentecost Magnificat

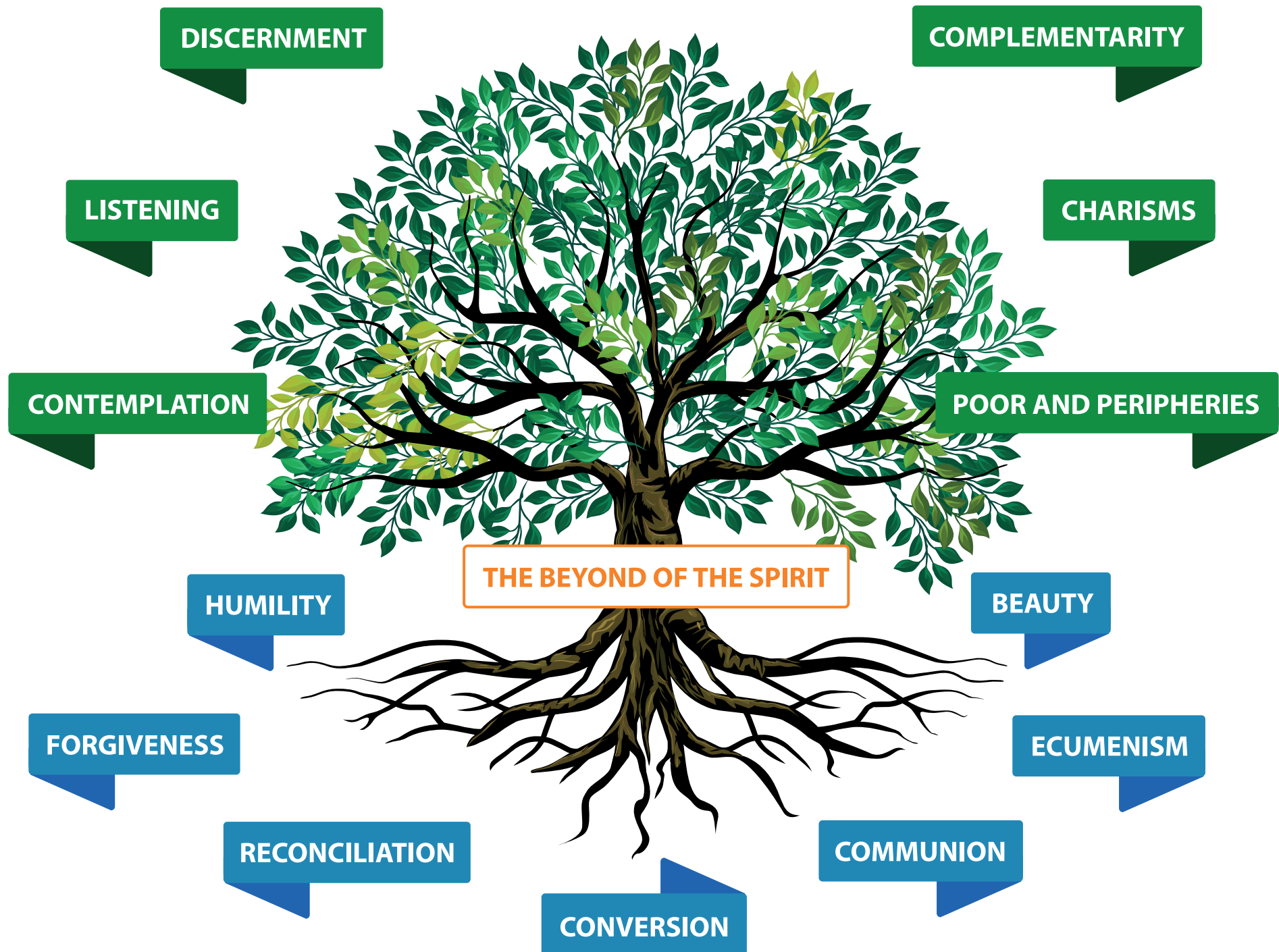
It is no surprise that we find Mary, Mother of God and Mother of the Church, refuge of sinners and all who seek a home, with the disciples at Pentecost, for no one knows better than she how the indwelling Spirit makes a home in us.

Again, we see how, without a word, Mary remains the deep source and touchstone of truth for Christ's disciples. With her in their midst, they can never invent another Christ. While she is at the centre of the community, it will always know who he is: the Lord and Saviour of the world. In Mary, we have an image of the *sensus fidelium*: all those in every age who, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, know Christ by love in their hearts, express his truth in their lives and unerringly remain faith-filled and faithful to him and his Church. As in her, '*Theotokos*'—Mother of God—so in them the flame of Pentecost does not grow cold nor is its light dimmed. No matter how dark the road ahead or difficult and unmarked the road, the light of the Holy Spirit continues to guide the holy People of God.

In Mary, we learn how to travel as a synodal Church. We learn to be at home in the world and to make a home for all those who are seeking home, a place of welcome and refuge, healing and salvation, a place of reconciliation, peace and the assurance of eternal life. This is a Church for which we long and need. At some point, we all become refugees seeking a homeland. With Mary, Mother of the Church, we learn how to make the Church, the Body of Christ, such a place, a people of living communion, participation and mission. With her, we learn to say our '*fiat*' in all the circumstances of our lives and to join in the great chorus of faith that echoes through

the centuries, '*Magnificat anima mea dominum*' – 'My soul glorifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my saviour'. So long as that chorus never fades, the world has a sure hope; if it follows the great song, it will find its way to the inestimable gift of life who is Jesus Christ.







“In Mary, we learn how to travel as a synodal Church. We learn to be at home in the world and to make a home for all those who are seeking home, a place of welcome and refuge, healing and salvation, a place of reconciliation, peace and the assurance of eternal life”.



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