

## THE SYNODAL PROCESS BEGINS

On Sunday, Oct. 10, Pope Francis formally begins the synodal process that will culminate in the October 2023 Synod of Bishops meeting in Rome. From now until next April, the first stage of the process will occur in individual dioceses. In an address to the people of Rome – the Pope’s diocese – in mid-September, Francis explained that the heart of this synodal process is the dynamism of mutual listening.

*I want to emphasize this: a dynamism of mutual listening, conducted at all levels of the Church, involving all the people of God. The Cardinal Vicar and the Auxiliary Bishops must listen to each other, priests must listen to each other, religious must listen to each other, the laity must listen to each other. And then, inter-listen to each other. Listen to each other; talk to each other and listen to each other. It's not about gathering opinions, no. This is not an investigation; but it is a question of listening to the Holy Spirit, as we find in the Book of Revelation: "Whoever has ears, let him hear what the Spirit says to the Churches" (2:7). Having ears, listening, is the first commitment. It is a matter of hearing God's voice, grasping his presence, intercepting his passage and breath of life.*

Synodality is not a slogan or a catch-phrase – Francis says it expresses the very nature of the Church and her mission, as found in the *Acts of the Apostles*.

*The word "synod" contains everything we need to understand: "walking together." The book of Acts is the story of a journey that starts from Jerusalem and, crossing Samaria and Judea, continuing in the regions of Syria and Asia Minor and then in Greece, ends in Rome. This path tells the story in which the Word of God and the people who turn their attention and faith to that Word walk together. The Word of God walks with us. Everyone is the protagonist; no one can be considered a simple extra. ... Ministries were still considered authentic services. And authority was born from listening to the voice of God and of the people – never separating them. ... [That story] expresses a continuous inner restlessness, ... born of one's own faith and invit[ing] us to evaluate what is best to do, what must be maintained or changed. Movement is a consequence of docility to the Holy Spirit, who is the director of this story in which everyone is a restless protagonist, never stopped.*

Just as Peter, Paul, and the other Apostles resolved conflicts by recognizing the movement of the Holy Spirit in their midst, so we must listen to each other and the Spirit, who remains the key protagonist in the Church.

*In this Synod we go on the path of being able to say "it seemed to the Holy Spirit and to us," because you will be in continuous dialogue with each other under the action of the Holy Spirit, also in dialogue with the Holy Spirit. Do not forget this formula: "It*

*seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to impose any other obligation on you” (Acts 15:28): it seemed good to the Holy Spirit **and to us**. In this way you will have to try to express yourselves, in this synodal path, in this synodal journey. If there is no Spirit, it will be a diocesan parliament, but not a Synod. We are not making a diocesan parliament, we are not doing a study on this or the other, no: we are making a journey of listening to each other and listening to the Holy Spirit, of discussing and even discussing with the Holy Spirit, which is a way of praying.*

We don't act alone. Only in union with the Holy Spirit does the Church fulfill her mission to witness to God's unconditional love. *“To receive the power of the Holy Spirit to be witnesses: this is the way of us Church, and we will be Church if we go on this path.”*

We are a pilgrim Church, continuing the journey that began with the Apostles. *“When the Church stops, she is no longer Church, but a beautiful pious association so that she may cage the Holy Spirit.”*

*Fidelity to tradition does not consist in worshipping ashes but in guarding fire. I ask you: “Before beginning this synodal journey, what are you more inclined to: to guard the ashes of the Church, that is, of your association, of your group, or to guard the fire? Are you more inclined to adore your things, which close you – I am Peter's, I am Paul's, I am of this association, you of the other, I am a priest, I am a Bishop – or do you feel called to guard the fire of the Spirit?”*

The initial, diocesan phase of the synodal process involves all the baptized, not just the clergy and teachers. We are a horizontal community, walking together, not a vertical one of higher and lower positions. Pastors walk with the people, sometimes in front to guide, sometimes in the middle to encourage and to feel what the people feel, and sometimes at the rear to help those who remain a little behind. Through baptism, all receive the Holy Spirit and share in the prophetic mission of Jesus Christ. All should listen and be listened to, even the marginalized of our communities. The Lord is our Shepherd and we are all his sheep.

*“But, Father, what are you saying? Are the poor, the beggars, the young drug addicts, all these that society discards, part of the Synod?” Yes, dear, yes, dear: I do not say it, the Lord says it: I am part of the Church. To the point that if you do not call them, you will see the way, or if you do not go to them to be with them for a while, to hear not what they say but what they hear, even the insults they give you, you are not doing the Synod well. The Synod is to the limits, it includes everyone.*

*We must feel part of one great people who are the recipients of the divine promises, open to a future that awaits everyone to be able to participate in the banquet prepared by God for all peoples (cf. Is. 25:6). ... Let the Spirit speak to us.*