

□ Reading time: 7 min.

## Missionary Synodality: A Salesian Perspective

### Synodality in the New Testament

In recent years, the noun “synodality” has become more commonly used. Unfortunately, some have their own ideological or flawed understanding of the concept. So, it is no surprise that many people, even religious and priests, openly ask: “what is this thing? What does it mean?” Synodality is actually a new word for an old reality. Jesus, the pilgrim who proclaimed the Good News of the Kingdom of God (*Lk* 4,14-15) shared with everyone the truth and love of communion with God and our sisters and brothers. The image of the disciples of Emmaus in Luke 24,18-35 is another example of synodality: they began by *remembering* the events they have experienced; then they *recognised* the presence of God in those events; and finally, they *acted* by returning to Jerusalem to proclaim Christ’s resurrection. This means that, we disciples of Jesus, ought to walk together in history as the People of God of the new covenant. In fact, in the *Acts of the Apostles* the People of God moved forward together, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, during the Council of Jerusalem (*Acts* 15; *Gal* 2,1-10).

### Synodality in the early Church

In the early Church, St. Ignatius of Antioch (50-117) reminded the Christian community in Ephesus that all its members are ‘companions on the journey’, by virtue of their baptism and their friendship with Christ. While St. Cyprian of Carthage (200 – 258) insisted that nothing should be done in the local church without the bishop. Similarly, for St. John Chrysostom (347-407) ‘Church’ is a term for ‘walking together’ through the reciprocal and ordered relationship of the members leading them to have a common mind.

In the early Church, the two-part Greek word: *syn* (meaning “with”) and *ódós* (meaning “path”) was used to describe the journey together of the People of God on the same path to respond to disciplinary, liturgical and doctrinal issues. Thus, synods have been held periodically in local Churches and dioceses since the middle of the second century, that is, from about the year 150. Similarly, since 325 in Nicaea, the gathering of all bishops of the Church, called ‘Council’ in Latin, took decisions as expressions of communion with all the Churches.

## **Synodality in Vatican II**

The Second Vatican Council did not specifically address the theme on synodality nor use the term or concept in its documents. Instead, it used the term 'collegiality' for the method of building the conciliar processes. However, synodality lies at the heart of the work of renewal the Council was encouraging. While collegiality concerns decision-making process of bishops at the level of the universal Church, synodality is the fruit of active efforts to live the Vatican Council II's perspectives at the local level. This understanding was embodied in its vision of the nature of the Church as '*communion*' which has received the '*mission*' of proclaiming and establishing among all peoples God's kingdom (*Lumen gentium*, 5). It envisions the Church walking together and sharing "[the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties](#)" of all those we walk with (*Gaudium et spes*, 1).

## **Pope Francis and Synodality**

Since 2013 Pope Francis has been teaching us about synodality in all that he does and says. Synodality is not a simple discussion nor like the deliberations in parliaments in search for the consensus which end in the vote of the majority. It is not debating, arguing or listening in order to respond. It is not a process of democratisation or putting doctrine up for a vote. It is not a plan, or a programme to be implemented. It is not even about what bishops or other stakeholders want, nor about command and control. Instead, synodality is about who we are and who we aspire to be as a Christian community, as the body of Christ. It is the style of life that qualifies the life and mission of the entire Church. Synodality is attentive listening in order to understand on a deeper, personal level. It is being a Church of participation and co-responsibility, beginning with the Pope, bishops and involving the whole people of God, so that we may all discover God's will as we face a particular set of challenges.

The presence of the Holy Spirit, through the sacrament of Baptism they received, enables the totality of God's people to have an *instinct of faith (sensus fidei)* which helps them to discern what is truly of God as well as feel, sense and perceive in harmony with the Church. Synodality involves the exercise of the *sensus fidei* of the whole People of God, the ministry of leadership of the college of Bishops with the clergy, and the ministry of unity of the Bishop of Rome.

## **Synodality and Discernment**

Above all, synodality is marked by a constant discernment of the presence of the Holy Spirit. This is a dynamic, unfolding reality, because we cannot predict where the Holy Spirit may lead us. Synodality is not a path marked out in advance. It is, instead, an encounter that shapes and transforms. It is a process that challenges us to recognize the prophetic function of God's people and requires us to be open to the unexpected of God. Through mutual listening and dialogue, God comes to touch us, to shake us, to change us interiorly. In the final analysis, synodality is the expression of the collective involvement and sense of co-responsibility for the Church of the totality of God's people.

This implies an attitude of attentive listening with humility, respect, openness, patience to our experiences and readiness to listen even to discordant ideas, to people who have left the practice of the faith, to people of other faith traditions or even no religious belief so as to discern the promptings of the Holy Spirit, who is the main protagonist, and consequently promote God's action in people and society by acting with wisdom and creativity.

### **The Church is missionary**

The Church exists to spread the good news of Jesus. Thus, its missionary activity is, above all, proclaiming the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God (Paul VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi*, 14, 22). Since all members of the Church, by virtue of the baptism received, are agents of evangelisation, consequently a synodal Church is an indispensable precondition for a new missionary energy that will involve the entire People of God. Evangelisation without synodality lacks concern for the structures of the Church. Inversely, synodality without evangelisation means we are just another social, business or philanthropic club.

### **Missionary synodality**

Missionary synodality is a systemic approach to pastoral reality. Sent to proclaim the Gospel, every baptised, as missionary disciple, has to learn to listen attentively and respectfully, as fellow travellers, to the local people, to followers of other religions, to the cries of the poor and marginalised, to those who have no voice in the public space, in order to be closer to Jesus and his Gospel and become a Church that goes forth, not closed in on itself.

If our public witness is not always evangelising in a broad sense, we are just

another NGO, in a world of increasingly growing inequality and isolation. Today there is a growing realisation that everything we do as Catholics is a touchpoint of evangelisation. We evangelise through the way we welcome people; how we treat our friends and family; how we spend our money as individuals, communities and groups; how we care for the poor and reach out to the marginalised; how we use the social media; how we attentively listen to the longings of the young and how we disagree and dialogue with one another.

## **The synodal process**

In order to attentively listen to the instinct of faith of God's people (*sensus fidelium*), which the Church teaches as an authentic guarantor of the faith it expresses, Pope Francis instituted the 'synodal process.' By journeying together, discussing and reflecting together as God's people, the Church will grow in its self-understanding, learn how to live communion, foster participation, and open itself to the mission of evangelisation.

Indeed, the synodal process is meant to inspire hope, stimulate trust, bind up wounds so that we may weave new and deeper relationships, learn from one another, and enlighten minds to dream with enthusiasm about the Church and our common mission. It is a *kairos* or 'ripe moment' in the life of the Church to undergo conversion in preparation for evangelisation and it is a moment of evangelisation.

## **Synodality and the Salesian charism**

From the pedagogical and spiritual treasures of the Salesian charism we can draw out expressions of missionary synodality.

Our Patron, St. Francis de Sales, made real friendship as the necessary context where journeying together through spiritual accompaniment takes place. He believed that there could be no real spiritual accompaniment without real friendship. Such friendship always involves mutual communication and reciprocal enrichment, which allows the relationship to become truly spiritual.

In the Oratory at Valdocco, Don Bosco prepared his boys for life and made them aware of God's love for them, helped them love their Catholic faith and practice it in their ordinary daily life. He took care to maintain one-to-one relationship so as to provide them, according to the needs of each one, personal and group accompaniment. Thus, he wrote in his letter from Rome of 1884: "familiarity leads

to love, and love leads to confidence. It is that that opens up the heart and the young reveal everything without fear.” By maintaining a beautiful balance between a healthy, mature environment and the individual responsibility, the Oratory became a home, a parish, a school and a playground.

Don Bosco formed around him a community in which young people themselves were key players. He fostered participation and the sharing of responsibility by ecclesiastics, Salesians, lay people. They helped him teach catechism and other classes, assist in church, lead the young in prayer, prepare them for their first communion and confirmation, assist in the playground where they played with the boys, and help the more needy to find employment with some honest employer. In return, Don Bosco took diligent care of their spiritual life, through personal encounters, conferences, spiritual direction and the administration of the sacraments. Such an environment gave rise to a new culture where there was deep love for God and our Lady, which in turn, created a new style of relationship between young people and educators, between laity and priests, between artisans and students.

Today the *Educative-Pastoral Community* (EPC), through the *Salesian Educative Pastoral Plan* (SEPP), is the centre of communion and sharing in the spirit and mission of Don Bosco. In the EPC we foster a new way of thinking, judging and acting, a new way of confronting problems and a new style of relationships – with young people, Salesians and lay people, in various ways as leaders and collaborators.

An essential element of Don Bosco’s charism is the missionary spirit which he passed on to his Salesians and to the whole Salesian family. This is summed up in *Da mihi animas* and is expressed through the ‘oratorian heart’, fervour, drive and passion for evangelisation, particularly of young people. It is the capacity for intercultural and inter religious dialogue and the willingness to be sent where there is a need, particularly to the peripheries.

### **A time for conversion**

Personal and communal conversion will always be needed because we humbly recognise that there are still so many hindrances within us to our efforts to live the missionary synodality: an urgent sense to teach than to listen; a sense of privilege and entitlement; a failure to be transparent and accountable; a slowness to dialogue and lack of animating presence among the young; a propensity to control

and to claim the sole right to make decisions; a lack of trust in empowering the laity as mission partners; and a lack of recognition of the presence of the Holy Spirit in cultures and peoples even before our arrival.

Indeed, Salesian missionary synodality is both a gift and a task!