

Peripheralization of the Centre

The First Session of the XVI General Assembly of the Synod in Retrospect

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When the angel of the Lord encountered Hagar in the desert as she fled from her mistress Sarah, he asked her two questions: ‘Where have you come from? Where are you going?’ (cf. Gen 16:8) Surprisingly, Hagar knew the answer only for the first question. She knew that she came from the house of her mistress, but she did not know where she was going. The angel of the Lord directed her steps back to her mistress.

‘Where have we come from?’ and ‘Where are we going?’ – these are our questions today as we have concluded the First Session of the XVI General Assembly of the Synod for a Synodal Church. The participants may answer these questions wittily: ‘Where have you come from?’ ‘We have come from Rome.’ And ‘Where are you going?’ ‘We are going back to Rome.’ For the rest of us the answers are: ‘We have come from home!’ ‘We go back home!’ The answers of Hagar are our real answers.

Three C’s of the First Session of the Assembly

Those who entered the synodal hall were surprised to know that this synod was different from the earlier synods: earlier they entered for the synod of bishops, now they entered for the synod with many non-bishops with rights to vote; earlier synod was an event, now it was an experience; earlier the product (the outcome) of the synod was given prominence, now the process was given prominence.

The method of procedure and the participation of the synod brothers and sisters could be summed up in three C’s: (a) Conversation in the Spirit – the participants were face to face with each other seated at a round table; (b) Communion through baptismal identity – the participants, hailing from different corners of the earth with different backgrounds, gifts, charisms, celebrated communion with each other as baptised persons. The baptismal water made them feel connected to the ‘tears’ of the entire humanity, and our common home; and (c) Complementarity – the spiritual sessions were animated by a priest and a woman religious (gender complementarity), there was silence and speech (symphony), and the hierarchical gifts and the charismatic gifts were celebrated together.

The Milestones of the First Session

30 Sep ‘23	Prayer vigil
1-3 Oct ‘23	3-Day Retreat
3 Oct ‘23	Release of <i>Laudate Deum</i> . Apostolic Exhortation.
4 Oct ‘23	Synod Inaugural Mass. Homily on ‘the gaze of Jesus.’
4-28 Oct ‘23	General Congregations; Working Groups.
12 Oct ‘23	Pilgrimage
15 Oct ‘23	<i>C’est la Confiance</i> . Apostolic Exhortation on Saint Therese of Lisieux.
19 Oct ‘23	Synod prayer for migrants and refugees.
22 Oct ‘23	World Mission Day
26 Oct ‘23	Rosary prayer for peace
26 Oct ‘23	Letter to the People of God, written by the Participants.
28 Oct ‘23	Synthesis Report. No signature in the Document!

29 Oct '23 Synod Concluding Mass. Homily on 'To adore God, and to serve our neighbours in love.'

Towards Oct '24 The journey of reflection continues in the Local Churches, at the Episcopal Conferences, and the Intercontinental Assemblies.

The Highlights of the Synthesis

The '41-pages synthesis', which was voted at the First Session of the General Assembly, is divided into three parts, which correspond to three tags of the Synod: 'Communion, Mission, Participation.' Part One (Chapters 1-7), titled as 'The Face of the Synodal Church,' defines the identity of the synodal church. Being part of the synodal church is an experience, and to understand it one must live it. It has its communion in the Trinity and is being sent towards the poor, the all people, towards the Eastern Churches, and towards other Christians. In Part Two (Chapters 8-13), 'All Disciples, All Missionaries,' all the baptised are called disciples and missionaries. This section underscores the mission of all the faithful, deacons, priests, women, bishops of the Local Churches, and the Bishop of Rome. The Part Three (Chapters 14-20), 'Weaving Bonds, Building Communities,' focuses on the joint formation all the people of God, mission in digital environment, strengthening the structures of participation.

Each Chapter is divided into three sections, viz., (a) Convergences (the areas of thought and practise that are agreed upon by all), (b) Matters for Consideration (the areas that need further clarification and understanding), and (c) Proposals (the prospective points for implementation at the Local Churches, the Episcopal Conferences, Intercontinental Assemblies, and Universal. The Matters for Consideration and the Proposals open space for further discussion and discernment.

The expressions that draw our attention are: 'synodal culture,' 'formation for synodality,' 'joint formation of the clergy, the religious, and the lay faithful,' 'conversation in the spirit at all levels,' 'pastoral structures to be re-organised,' 'canonical and theological revisit to the structures,' 'missionary dynamism,' 'charismatic sign,' 'women as partners in mission,' regular audit of priests and deacons,' 'review of the selection of the candidates for the episcopate,' 'reviewing the performance of the bishops,' 'grouping of churches,' and 'evangelical solidarity.'

The only word that revolves around synodality is mission, mission as evangelisation of the joy of the gospel.

Where are we going?

What's next? Hagar has to return home! We need to return home – the home of our hearts, parishes, dioceses, episcopal conferences, and intercontinental assemblies – to pause, sit, reflect, and interiorise the contents of the synthesis. The peripheries of our homes, local churches, neighbour religions, other Christians, migrants, women, children, young people, the poor have now become the centre – not only of the mission of the Church, but of her prime identity.

"Alice stood at the crossroads perplexed. A cat that passed by asked Alice, 'Girl, why are you perplexed?' Alice said, 'I don't know which road to take?' The cat asked, 'Where do you want to go?' The cat answered, 'To someone who does not know where to go, every road is the same!'

At the First Session, we now know where we want to go!