

Lights and Shadows of the Synod: Reflections from an Ignatian perspective¹

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The Synod on Synodality marks a milestone for the Church, not only because of its scope and significance but also due to the deep spiritual movements it has stirred within. This article seeks to offer a reflection from a personal experience, highlighting the challenges and achievements of the discernment journey, particularly during the second session of its Ordinary Assembly. It also seeks to outline some horizons opening up for a Church called to ongoing conversion and renewal in response to the signs of the times. This process is not merely about structural reforms; it calls for a spiritual dynamism that challenges our securities and propels us toward greater fidelity to the dream of Jesus.

In recent months, reactions to this experience have oscillated between an optimism that at times borders on naivety—and thus a certain irresponsibility in failing to undertake a realistic analysis to acknowledge difficulties and vulnerabilities—and harsh critiques that perceive the Synod as a threat to tradition or to the existing structures of power. My intention is not to take a stance at either extreme but rather to share a testimony based on lived experience, engaging with Ignatian spirituality and elements drawn from the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola.

This approach aims to enrich and guide a deeper reflection on the journey toward a more synodal Church, faithful to the dream of Jesus, while also underscoring the challenges and opportunities that discernment—as an ongoing personal and communal tool—and the horizon of constant conversion present for today's Church.

The Method of Spiritual Conversation: Achievements and Tensions

As has been expressed in various spaces, one of the most significant advancements achieved in the Synod on Synodality—"For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission"—has been the incorporation of Spiritual Conversation as a fundamental axis for fostering communal discernment. This method, which we practiced in both sessions of the Ordinary Assembly, was sustained by personal and communal prayer, deep listening to the Word, Eucharistic celebration, and ongoing sharing within communities that brought forth the fruits of their prayer and

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discernment. It created a favorable space for better perceiving the invitations of the Holy Spirit. As a facilitator at the discernment tables (working groups), I witnessed how this methodology helped participants articulate proposals that reflected a genuine desire for communion and ecclesial unity. It also allowed for particular searches and concerns to be present and, most importantly, provided a way to share differences and process them constructively, in a spirit of respect, openness, and dialogue.

However, the transition between the first and second session of the Synod revealed certain limitations in the continuity of this method. During the nearly year-long intersessional period, many ecclesial jurisdictions diminished their efforts to sustain spaces for listening and participation, seriously weakening the preparation for the second session.

This weakening could be attributed to structural factors such as time constraints, insufficient support from leadership, or even an internal resistance to the transformative implications that deep spiritual discernment entails for particular Churches. Despite these challenges, the positive fruits of this experience demonstrate that Spiritual Conversation can be a powerful instrument for strengthening the path toward ecclesial renewal, especially amid global crises (both internal and external) and the Church's evolving institutional realities. Are we willing to sustain the challenges that communal discernment brings, even when it leads us into necessary tensions for conversion?

In this process, it is crucial to recognize the scope of this method for shaping the Church's identity as a discerning community. Deeply rooted in the Ignatian tradition, Spiritual Conversation calls for active listening, profound prayer, and honest sharing that allows the gathered community to discern the Spirit's invitations. These elements not only enrich the collective experience but also open new possibilities for pastoral action and ecclesial transformation at every level. Furthermore, the fruits of this method must not be confined to the formal instances of the Synod but should inspire similar processes within local communities and parishes, promoting a comprehensive renewal so that we might truly become a People of God that discerns.

In the context of the Synod on Synodality, it is essential to highlight that the methodology of Spiritual Conversation also carried a prophetic dimension. Despite evident limitations and absences, it allowed communities to express themselves during the appropriate phases and fostered participation that generated transformative proposals for the Church as a whole. It raised questions about the possible pathways of hope and renewal in uncertain times. Many of these invitations remain open, and many questions are yet to be answered.

The Subject of Discernment: A Listening Church, a People of God?

The experience of the two sessions of the Ordinary Assembly of the Synod underscored the importance of recognizing the People of God as the collective subject of discernment, despite the complexity and significant limitations still present in finding an adequate way to ensure this. Nevertheless, this subject manifested itself at different levels, each with its challenges and potential:

1. **The People of God as a whole:** The initial phase of broad consultation and listening allowed for the voices of hundreds of thousands of faithful to be gathered. However, their participation afterward was significantly limited, raising many questions and future challenges. This limitation, which generated tensions, reflects the need to establish permanent mechanisms for deeper and more representative listening, ensuring ongoing, active, and formal participation in the Church's diverse decision-making spaces. How can we guarantee that these voices—the voices of the People of God in the broadest sense—are not only heard but also fully integrated into the Church's pastoral decisions and directions so that it may walk faithfully in the present time?
2. **Continental-Regional Assemblies:** These gatherings provided an invaluable contribution by integrating specific sociocultural and geographical perspectives, strengthening the Church's catholicity in relation to identity diversity at the continental level. This intermediate level—between the local and the universal—reflects a creative and dynamic tension that has been and will continue to be essential for synodal discernment. It raises the question of how to update these structures, grant them greater competencies, and accompany them so they may truly foster discernment at the intersection between territorial realities and the Vatican's broader perspective. How can we ensure that these intermediary structures are not only consulted but also accompanied and empowered to exercise authentic discernment in their specific contexts, making their resolutions more binding or strongly considered?
3. **The Two Sessions of the Ordinary Assembly in Rome:** Although representative, this small portion of the People of God faced significant limitations in achieving greater integration and exchange, such as language barriers and a lack of time to delve deeper into the Spirit's movements beyond the small group, which frequently changed. Despite these difficulties, the process revealed the potential of a Church that walks together, listens, and discerns as one body, capable of addressing present challenges with a common and committed vision.

From an Ignatian perspective, the concept of the discerning subject takes on special relevance in this context. In the Spiritual Exercises, Saint Ignatius describes the discerning subject as one who is interiorly free—not trapped by disordered attachments or paralyzing fears. This interior freedom is essential for the person and

the community to genuinely open themselves to the Holy Spirit, facilitating deeper and more fruitful discernment, paving the way for authentic conversion.

Within the framework of the second session of the Ordinary Assembly of the Synod, this inner freedom was challenged by various factors, among them the implicit pressure to reach consensus on everything at all times, leaving little room for deeper listening to differences or for dissent, which can also carry the voice of the Spirit. Although consensus can be a legitimate expression of unity and a positive aspiration, it can also become an obstacle if it is sought above all else and at the expense of the spiritual depth required for genuine discernment. Is it possible that, in the eagerness to reach immediate or viable agreements in a context of diversity, the capacity to listen to the more subtle motions of the Spirit has been diminished?

Ignatian spirituality invites us to discern between apparent good and greater good, a task that requires courage, parrhesia, and a systematic methodology of discernment that was not centrally present in the second session of the Synod, especially due to the change in format and methodological emphasis, which leaned towards formulating more concrete and well-supported proposals. This generated a certain pressure or directionality. This approach also highlights the enormous need to form individuals who can discern at different levels, from the personal to the communal and ecclesial, where the diversity of perspectives enriches decisions and contributes to a more creative and adapted pastoral action to contemporary realities. It was very clear that a large number of those who attended the Ordinary Assembly of the Synod had no prior experience, internal disposition, or suitable conditions for this. This was a difficult issue, especially in the second session, and at times led to a model with some procedural traits that could be considered more "mechanical" in order to produce the requested outcomes.

Conditions for Genuine Discernment

Community discernment requires specific conditions that allow for the clear identification of the motions of the Holy Spirit, as well as the distinction of those that come from the evil spirit. These conditions, inspired by the Spiritual Exercises, include, among others:

1. **A climate of prayer and listening:** God's presence must be at the center of the entire discernment process. Personal and communal prayer creates a space of openness to the Holy Spirit, facilitating the reception of His/Her motions. In the synodal process, this element was carefully maintained, but in the second session, its centrality was somewhat lost in favor of ensuring the formulation of valuable proposals, though perhaps with less clarity, as they were not the fruit of a more solid prayerful process throughout. This is more than a

methodological resource; it is the space where the Spirit speaks to the community.

2. **Interior freedom:** Participants must be willing to let go of attachments and prejudices that hinder openness to the Spirit, thereby creating a space of freedom that fosters authentic discernment. This may have been one of the most complex elements of the Synod on Synodality's discernment process. Despite creating favorable conditions for listening and dialogue, in many cases, positions did not change, particularly on more complex issues. The tendency was for minority or dissenting voices to be reduced or eliminated when formulating proposals. This remains a constant challenge, especially when organizational structures, including ecclesial ones, tend to prioritize institutional dynamics over spiritual processes.
3. **Communication with parrhesia:** Speaking with courage, without fear of tensions, is fundamental for discernment to be genuine. This freedom is necessary to allow the authentic voices of all members of the Church to be heard and taken into account. In the second session of the Synod, I perceived a surprising self-limitation or self-regulation of some of the more prophetic voices compared to the first session. This makes me reflect on the structure of these spaces, especially in the phase of formulating proposals, where the seemingly superficial consensus led to an unspoken submission of peripheral or prophetic voices. At times, there was a sense of the "domestication" of the Spirit, driven by the strength of majority voices or the pressure to not disrupt the apparent "consensus." What structures can ensure that these voices are not silenced?
4. **Adequate accompaniment:** The presence of facilitators trained in the methodology of discernment is key to guiding the process and helping to identify the motions of the Spirit. These companions are fundamental instruments in forming subjects of discernment. In some cases, less experienced facilitators were influenced by the pressure of strong voices within the groups, whether due to the hierarchical roles of some members or the methodological emphasis on defining and substantiating proposals (in a more rational manner) rather than focusing on the deeper calls of the Spirit. In a few instances, facilitators also lost their role momentarily by inserting themselves into group discussions, ceasing to exercise their role of moderation and accompaniment. In response, it is necessary to form many more facilitators with the proper tools and experience to sustain this process within the Church, which will be a true challenge.
5. **Adequate time and space:** Deep discernment cannot be rushed. Sufficient time is necessary for internal motions to be recognized, processed, and adequately discerned, requiring a space for calm and profound reflection. The experience

of the two Synod sessions provided very favorable conditions to foster this dynamic of discernment; however, time was always pressing. The changing of groups also posed challenges, and above all, the different focus on the need to formulate objective proposals made time very limited for sustaining a more consistent process of listening to the deeper motions and invitations of the Holy Spirit.

The Prophetic Dimension of Synodal Discernment

Synodal discernment should not be limited to generating consensus but should open spaces for the prophetic action of the Church. Tensions and crises, when well accompanied and processed, can also offer new insights from the Spirit if they are properly discerned. In this sense, the second session of the Synod demonstrated how some prophetic voices, emerging from marginalized groups or specific cultural contexts, can illuminate the path toward greater fidelity to the Gospel. However, these voices often faced the temptation of self-censorship. Are we willing to embrace tensions as part of the journey toward conversion, rather than avoiding them out of fear of division? Pope Francis has repeatedly expressed that all voices must be heard. There must be room for "everyone, everyone, everyone."

From the perspective of Ignatian spirituality, tension is not something to be avoided but embraced as part of the discernment process. The motions of the good spirit often manifest as an inner restlessness or healthy confrontation that drives action and change. Ignoring these motions in the name of false peace can lead to what Saint Ignatius calls "spiritual desolation," which obscures the path to conversion.

Conclusion

The Synod on Synodality is a *kairos*, a unique opportunity for the Church to advance toward greater fidelity to Jesus' project. This process, still under construction, calls us to embrace tensions and challenges as part of the Spirit's dynamism. Synodality is not merely a method but a way of being Church that requires constant personal and communal conversion. The challenge is to ensure that this synodal journey continues to deepen its methodologies and enable the People of God to listen to the Spirit as full subjects of discernment, not just in consultation phases or when receiving decisions already made by hierarchical authorities. The Jubilee of Hope presents itself as a horizon for embodying the fruits of synodal discernment into transformative initiatives. This is the moment to be bold, to open ourselves to the overflowing action of the Holy Spirit, and to walk together, with free hearts, toward a Church that is more faithful to the Kingdom and to Jesus' dream. Are we willing to be a Church that discerns, listens, and acts—even if this means questioning our certainties and embracing the unknown?