



IFCA 8th ASSEMBLY

Synod for communion and mission. Reflexion at the light of the Word

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The life of God's people has always been and will always be marked by dialogue, encounter, rupture, departure and displacement: Abraham, Moses, Elijah, Jonah, Ruth, and now on the path of the Church: Saint Paul, the great father of the monks Saint Anthony, Dominic and Francis, Ignatius, Teresa of Jesus and so many others. The intuition of these great ones, after listening to the Word, made their lives fruitful and, by their spirit, made the Church's journey of many centuries fruitful, giving God's response to each concrete moment.

But this characteristic of going out, of itinerancy, is not simply geographical, it has much that is symbolic: it is an invitation to discover in this "setting out", what is the movement of the heart which, paradoxically, needs to go out in order to remain, to change in order to be faithful, but which does not cease to be afraid of the consequences of the new. Overcoming fear, not without hesitation, "both the saints and next door ones" brought the Church to life.

Times change and situations are different, but the ways of facing life have very common features, and this is a source of inspiration and wisdom for us.

Our present day is marked by change; human and cultural displacements bewilder us and leave us perplexed as we seek paths for our interior and pastoral life. Everything happens so fast that we feel we are losing our ability to react. The usual truths and certainties no longer seem to be such, creating an atmosphere of insecurity and subjecting us to the temptation to cling to the known or to disguise their importance with disinterest, instead of discovering the signs that God wants to show us, because **every present can be the home of the mystery of God's love and mercy** (H. U. von Balthasar).

Like Jonah, God tells us: "Arise and go to Nineveh, the great city, and proclaim in it that its wickedness has come upon me". The prophet's peace of mind, based on order and clear ideas about right and wrong and how God acts, is shattered. The recipe for being a good prophet, doing "what has always been done" is broken.

Everything invites him to look beyond the edge of his boundaries, to go to the periphery. Nineveh, "the great city", was the symbol of all the separated, alienated and lost to whom he had to remind that God's arms were open and waiting for them to return and to heal them with his forgiveness and nourish them with his tenderness.

Facing difficulties, the great temptation is to flee, and Jonah went towards the direction opposite to Tarsis. Twice God will have to push him to fulfil his mission. However, because of his own wounds and frailties, God spoke to Jonah and asked him to be for the people to whom he was sent the balm of the grace that heals, the strength of the spirit that becomes newness of life, encourages and creates a new style of living together. We too feel fragile and wounded. Our identity and value are threatened; we do not exercise moral leadership as before, nor do we have a social place of relevance; we are faced with problems we apparently do not have the answer for and we are reluctant to be one among many.

Today the temptation of Jonah to flee to a "Tarsis" can have many names: individualism, spiritualism, enclosure in small worlds, dependence, installation, repetition of fixed patterns, dogmatism, nostalgia, pessimism, return to the rules, clericalism....

In our ecclesial journey we have made and continue to make enormous efforts along different paths, we have supported and continue to support diverse forms of pastoralism, we have faced and continue to face crises and upheavals, we have seen and continue to see how many of the projects we dedicate time and dedication are proving incapable of sustaining our yearnings and good evangelizing expectations, as many people fall along the wayside.

In addition to this comes the complaint about the lack of committed lay people, vocations, people don't understand - the bishop doesn't understand either -, people come to use us - the bishop too -, we can't do everything, nobody notices what's going on, nobody cares. Without being untrue, these complaints can be a shield for our resistance to leave a territory that was known and manageable for us. And we start again and again after each storm with the same umbrella that is no longer useful. And when we think we are relaxed in the belly of the whale, the evidence tells us that everything we have achieved has only been a step, and the whale has vomited us into the Nineveh of a world in which God seems to be more absent than before and to which we are of no interest with the words we say and the values we try to proclaim seem unimportant and out of fashion. All the difficulties can be like the storm, the whale, the worm that dried up Jonah's castor beans or the wind and the sun that burnt his head; those that force us to return from our evasive "Tarsis", to approach Nineveh with the certainty of the presence of God who sends us with a renewed and renewing spirit.

God's people ask us for the Father's tenderness that we can only draw near as ***we renew our apostolic fervour, living with parresia*** the love of the One "who first loved us".

Like Jonah, reality is challenging us with new needs that demand new answers. Whereas we used to be able to manage very well on our own, doing things our own way, the fragmentation of our society brings us face to face with the evangelising demand for a ***common identity*** that springs from ***a greater communion***.

We are living in a privileged time, with the incarnate magisterium of Pope Francis who illuminates, without escapes, the time that touches us with all its ambiguities. He does not give us recipes but keys to interpretation, enlightenment, proposals and gestures so as not to succumb to the temptation that everything remains on paper or in a sterile slogan. The Gospel needs to become flesh in our flesh and from there in the life of God's people. That is our vocation and mission.

It is in this context that the Synodality proposal for the whole Church fits in. It is not a functionalist or analytical proposal for a later time which, if we stop too long, we may reach too late. It is to walk today together with the Risen One; his spirit assists us and is the protagonist. "In every age, the Spirit opens us to his newness; "he always teaches the Church the vital need to go out, the physiological need to proclaim, not to remain closed in on herself," the Pope explained. "Whereas the worldly Spirit drives us to concentrate on our own problems and interests, on our need to appear relevant, on our strenuous defense of the nation or group to which we belong. The Spirit liberates us from obsession with emergencies. He

beckons us to walk his paths, ever ancient and ever new, the paths of witness, poverty and mission, and in this way, he sets us free from ourselves and sends us forth into the world.”(Francis)

Synod means walking together. A journey that means: meeting, listening and discernment. The icon presented to us is that of the disciples of Emmaus, with the three verbs enunciated by the Pope. Encounter, listen, discern. However, Jesus himself, in his evangelising and pilgrim walk among his people, marked these three attitudes with his own particular and novel style. A contemplative look at Jesus in the Gospel finds him always going out to meet, listening, discerning and then doing. "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind see and the paralysed walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised and the Good News is preached to the poor" (Mt.11,5). He did this with the rich young man, with the Syrian Phoenician woman, with the blind who asked to be healed, with the crowd that followed him.

In the first millennium, "walking together", i.e. practising synodality, was the Church's usual way of proceeding". The Second Vatican Council highlighted this dimension of the ecclesial life, so important that St. John Chrysostom could say: "Church and Synod are synonymous" (Explicatio in Psalmum 149).

Meeting, listening, discerning. To speak of synodality is not to speak of a working method but of an intense spiritual process that belongs to the very being of the Church. To do synod means to walk together in the same direction. A synodal Church, as Francis anticipated in *Evangelii Gaudium*, is: "A Church which "goes forth" is a Church whose doors are open. Going out to others in order to reach the fringes of humanity does not mean rushing out aimlessly into the world. Often it is better simply to slow down, to put aside our eagerness in order to see and listen to others, to stop rushing from one thing to another and to remain with someone who has faltered along the way". (46)

The synodal journey is an ecclesial moment of encounter in the Lord; it is a space to affirm our identity and become aware of our mission", "not with functional preconceptions" but guided and harmonised by the Spirit. It is an invitation to encounter that leads to listening "moving with the freedom of the Spirit".

With the COVID-19 crisis we now find ourselves in a situation where all our assurances seem to vanish. Where so many truths we have heard do not stand a second in the light of reality, and vanish like vampires in the sun.

The synodal journey requires us to break down attitudes and behaviours that arise from certain rigid principles in order to make way for bonds and relationships that spring from closeness to the very reality of life and people. Meeting each other does not mean going for a walk with the Bible or going fishing. Encountering each other means offering friendship, blessing and welcome to all men and women... Samaritanly carrying the suffering brother, the enslaved, the unemployed, the marginalised, the one who simply feels invisible to others. This implies moving from looking to close accompaniment and mercy. Listening; not as surveyors to gather information. It is to look into the eyes, to share life, to get involved in the questions that many do not find answers to and in the pain that paralyses hope. To listen to us is to allow ourselves to be surprised without having the stereotyped answer beforehand. What were you talking about on the road, what is happening to you? The Risen One says to the disappointed pilgrims on the road to Emmaus.

The action and the founding synodal gesture is to approach, to stop, to join the journey of the people of God, to go along the road and, perhaps, to ask, to make them feel that they understand that something is happening: What is happening to them, what is the suffering, what is the problem? Sometimes it is not necessary to ask, sometimes you don't even know what is happening. The Lord approached, he was interested, he asked.

This attitude of freedom is a grace that we have to ask for and we have to make ourselves available to. It is the key to the synodal journey. An obedient freedom to Jesus Christ, to the Church and to the people of

God. And, since it is a freedom in the Lord and within the Church, it will be a freedom capable of facing purifications, corrections; a freedom that is creative in apostolic fruitfulness; a freedom whose horizon is holiness. It is the freedom that God asked of Abraham: "Walk before me and be blameless" (Gen. 17:1) (Bergoglio 2006).

Encounter, listen, discern. This "walking in the presence of God" places us in a situation of spiritual struggle. The spirit of the synodal journey "will be built up in this way: paying attention to what is going on in my heart; seeing what I have encountered, what I have heard, what I have seen, what I have been involved with, what I have felt in the face of this or that proposal. To be attentive to the movement of the different spirits (the good, the bad, my own) in my heart. And this in order to be able to discern and find the Will of God".

It is, in a way, an invitation to uninstall ourselves. The proposal to "something more", to a step forward between successes and failures, which puts us fundamentally in "spiritual movement". According to the way we react to what we hear, the "spirit" that animates us becomes evident.

Let us strive for this path to be characterised by listening and mutual acceptance. Even if we do not see concrete results in the short term, the encounter and the deep and truthful dialogue are already valuable.

May the synodal journey lead us not to introspection, but stimulate us to go out to meet everyone in whatever situation they find themselves. Pope Francis, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, calls us to be a Church that is not afraid to get its hands dirty by getting involved in the wounds of humanity, a Church that walks in listening to and serving the poor and the existential peripheries. This synodal dynamism in "going out" towards our brothers and sisters, with the compass of the Word and the Spirit, is bringing to fulfilment the great original plan of the Father: "that they may all be one" (Jn 17,21). In his Encyclical, *Fratelli tutti*, Pope Francis asks us to commit ourselves to this together with our brothers and sisters of other Churches, the faithful of other religions and all people of good will: universal brotherhood and love without exclusion, which must embrace everything and everyone. This synodal journey is an opportunity offered to us in this present time we are living in. Let us be aware that the present of the Gospel is not like that of the world of science and technology. The present of the believer is a full time, not a fragmented one. It is a present that looks at God, open to the intervention of the Spirit, it is not a time closed in on itself that is pushed by the previous one and is eaten up by the one that comes quickly after it.

Catholic Action in our countries, from that "ecclesial maternity" which is in its DNA, must revitalise synodality and incarnate without delay this spirit of going out to the encounter to make a journey with everyone, avoiding the temptation to go to our possible "Tarsis or Emmaus", to offer both "Ninives or Jerusalemites mistrusted ones" the close, simple, fraternal witness of those who, even in their doubts, "believe" in the word of the Risen One who makes all things new.

Our present under the influence of the Spirit can be a "kairos", an appropriate moment of grace, in which God intervenes with his love for our good, a full time prepared since before all centuries and patiently awaited by so many who believed, a fruitful time because it is open to faith in a God who does not disappoint.