
Synodality: a way of life and ecclesial mission

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Following Christ to become an apostle

The English word Synod comes from a Greek compound word. Literally, it derives from the Greek “syn” that means “together” and the Greek “hodos” that means “way”, “road”, “path”, therefore journeying together, traveling together.

When we look at how Jesus’ ministry unfolds and develops, this dimension of “togetherness” is very much present. And not only because along the way Jesus’ charism, embodied in what he taught and did, attracted to him many people, but also because Jesus’ himself did not live his call and mission alone.

During his public ministry, Jesus is not only devoted himself to fulfill the mission that the Father entrusted to him; he was also committed in forming a community of followers who would be able to continue his very same mission, once ascended to the Father.

The importance of this dimension in Jesus’ ministry is testified by the fact that one of the first things Jesus does at the very beginning of his public ministry is to call his first disciples (see for example Matthew 4:18–22, Mark 3:16–19 and Luke 5:1–11). This episode is one of the key-moments of Jesus’ ministry.

Moreover, the Gospel of Mark also let us know the three-fold goal of Jesus’ choice. In chapter 3, verses 14 and 15, mark writes: “He appointed twelve that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons.”

What it is beautiful to notice is the process of growth and transformation that Jesus’ first followers experienced while walking with and behind their Master from Nazareth. Such a growth is very clear from the way that the Gospels relate to them, to those that we are used to call the “Twelve Apostles”. In fact, at first, they are identified simply by their names (Matthew 4:18.21; Mark 3:16–19), or their professions (Matthew 4:18.21), or their family ties (Matthew 4:18.21; Mark 3:17.18). At a certain point, after having spent a sufficient amount of time with Jesus, the Gospels refers to them as disciples. Finally, at the moment of the Great Commission, they are designated as Apostles.

In addition to preaching the Good News of the Kingdom of God, Jesus also took care to form those who would then have continued his work of evangelization. From what we can attest to from the Gospels, Jesus did not consider the mission the Father entrusted to him a “personal” treasure, or privilege. On the contrary, he shared his vision and experience of the Father with those who would be responsible for leading the life of the very early church. The way Jesus conducted his ministry started a kind of “domino-effect”: ordinary men are called to follow him; from simple followers they become disciples, and, finally, apostles who will make other disciples.

This dynamic is well attested to in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles and in some of Saint Paul's letter. Two events from the Book of the Acts of the Apostles can well illustrate this "synodality" of the early Church. The first one is Acts 6:1–7 and the second one Acts 15. In Acts 6, to cope with a concrete need to care for widows who were neglected in the distribution of food, the twelve gathered all the disciples and proposed to choose seven men from among them who were known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. Once the proposal is made, the text says that it "pleased the whole group."

The second passage that illustrates this synodality of the early Church is Acts 15, also known as the Council of Jerusalem. The text let us know that in order to solve the question about the circumcision or not of the Gentiles, Paul and Barnabas were sent to Jerusalem to meet the apostles and elders (Acts 15:2).

The fact that Mary at La Salette, just before disappearing, entrusted Maximin and Melanie, with the mission to make her message known to all her people, reflect this dynamic. At the feet of the Beautiful Lady of La Salette, Maximin and Melanie became her disciples. Once she disappeared, they also started to be "missionary-disciples". Mary included them and let them partake in the mission of her Son. A new domino-effects started that would eventually lead to the birth and growth of the Missionaries of Our Lady of La Salette. And we are part of this domino effects!

Prayer makes it possible to walk together

"Behold, your mother!" (Jn 19:27) was Jesus' last wish as he lay on the tree of the cross. With these words Jesus implies that his mother is to be considered within the community that will gather in his name, that is, the Church. Indeed, from the earliest moments in the life of the Church, Mary's presence has been widely recognized in her role as the first disciple, who reserved for herself the mission of opening the treasure of her heart to share her Son's deepest intentions.

The disciples, united with Mary, "were of one heart and soul" (Acts 4:32) and together they followed the life of Jesus as the only way that leads to the Father. In fact, in life and mission, synodality is about having Jesus as our way, walking together on this road and feeling together the implications of the Church's mission in the world.

When in her message, the Beautiful Lady asks the two children if they say their prayers well, this question is addressed to everyone in our present-day history because our Christian identity is linked to the trunk that is Christ, the divine Master who left this practice as the privileged place and time for his presence. For two thousand years, the Church has always considered prayer to be the great treasure of graces, the encounter of the creature with its Creator marked in the intimacy of the heart. For this reason, more than a simple reminder, the message of La Salette is an open school for us to review our obligations and duties as beloved children of God.

At La Salette, Mary did not come with a new message because with the Mother of God the old truth becomes new and within the context of the apparition there is an invitation to listen to the message of her Son, that is to say, a pressing invitation which brings about a change in life. So we can say that the words of the Beautiful Lady are inspired by the Gospel.

Synodality as a path has always been present ever since the first ecclesial community received from the risen Christ the mission to proclaim the Good News to be preached to all the ends of the earth. At the heart of its preaching was and always will be the *kérygma*, that is, the proclamation of Jesus who died and rose again for the life of the world. Without any illusions, Paul leaves us with a clear idea of our duty to preach the Crucified Christ.

Indeed, one cannot conceive of the Church without the centrality of the cross. From the pioneers of evangelisation we learn that the cross is the glorification of God and of the Son of God; it is the victory over Satan and over all the powers of the world; it is the proof of God's strength in the weakness of ourselves; it creates peace between God and man and new unity among peoples.

The fact that the brightness of the cross carried by Mary attracted the attention of Maximin and Melanie so strongly means that fidelity to the crucified Christ must be a daily task for us.

Closely linked to the Cross is the centre of all Christian life, the Eucharist. It nourishes the Church's synodal journey. Without it we are nothing in this uncertain world.

In this missionary journey the action of the Spirit is predominant, since it sustains the synodality of the Church and manifests among the faithful, as *Lumen Gentium* eloquently emphasises, the gift of equal dignity of the baptised, that is, the universal vocation to holiness; the participation of all the faithful in Jesus Christ's priestly office, prophetic and regal; the wealth of hierarchical and charismatic gifts; the life and mission of every local Church.

As a religious family, and following in the footsteps of the first La Salette missionaries, we feel synodality to the extent that we take up the charism of reconciliation together.

Mary as a path of encounter, listening and prayer...

Gathered in the Upper Room, the Apostles, Mary and the disciples were together, praying. The extraordinary events of the last days involving Jesus certainly prevailed in their words and thoughts. His life, passion, crucifixion and death roused sadness and grief. But his appearances after death, as the Risen Lord, roused hope and consolation. When the Holy Spirit descended, their identity was changed: they became a Church, to which Christ entrusted the evangelisation of the whole world. The Mother of the Lord was present with them in Jerusalem, and then remained bound to the Church until her Assumption into heaven, at Ephesus, and after the Assumption she stayed by her Son and interceded for us from Heaven.

At La Salette she shows her care for the Church, and taking advantage of her role as Heavenly Queen, she reminds the children of the values that make up the Church.

First of all, she emphasises the role of the Eucharist. It is neglected by most people and disregarded as a place of close encounter with God. Only old women participate in the Eucharist, while men work on Sundays, failing to distinguish it from the other days of the week. Until the end of the world there will be no better chance of meeting the Lord than by receiving His Body and Blood amidst prayers and thanksgiving. Our attitude, however, shows that we seek something else and expect nothing from God, immersed as we are in the problems of this world. Furthermore, Mary asks the seers how they pray. Their sincere answer, that they do not pray much, prompts Mary to advise them that prayer is necessary, especially in the morning and in the evening. Prayer in the morning expresses the hope of living the new day according to God. Evening prayer is an opportunity to re-examine the past day in the light of the commandments. Knowing us well, Mary requires at least two prayers: an Our Father and a Hail Mary. The first was taught to us by Jesus, at the request of the disciples, the other reminds us of the announcement that the Archangel Gabriel made to Mary, revealing her election to be the Mother of the Son of God. For every person, they constitute the very minimum of what we are expected to know with regard to the models of prayer.

The Beautiful Lady also recalls the facts of daily life that confirm the indissoluble link that exists between our behaviour and the condition of our environment: failed crops, hunger, disease, the death of children, penance without escape and suffering. All this requires a reference to God, which is what keeps this world in existence. We - Mary says - pay no attention to it. She admonishes us, thus expressing her care for us, so that we do not blame God for the damage and suffering in the world, but ourselves. It is we who have brought about the corruption of the world, and we alone are responsible for what the world will be like in the future.

In the end, Mary shows how God is aware of everything that troubles our thoughts and hearts, and reminds Maximin of a personal fact about his father, which he had already forgotten. God is always present beside us, nothing escapes His attention and no one is indifferent to Him.

These facts indicate that Mary is well aware of the situation in the world and, through the witnesses to Her apparition, shares this knowledge and experience with all Her people. She does not even hide the fact that she is sad because of us and that her Son does not want to tolerate this any longer. Jesus wants to act, but His action may be too difficult for us to understand, so Mary warns us. We must not underestimate what she says. St Paul rightly says. "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life" (Gal 6:7-8). In this context, the Covid-19 pandemic can be regarded as a less painful and disturbing means by which God wants us to turn to Him, because His heavy arm could have employed a far more troublesome means.

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