



ADVENT IN A SYNODAL CHURCH: CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES

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My Lord Bishops, Fathers and Beloved brethren,

We are in the season of advent, so it is a season of hope and expectation. During this period, we especially reflect on the eschatological and historical comings of the Lord.

In this spirit, we remember how His Holiness Pope Francis in an address he made to those assembled in Rome for the ceremony commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops affirmed that, in line with the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council, the Church is essentially a communion of all those baptized and anointed. And so, the need to develop a stronger spirit of that communion between the laity, the shepherds and the Bishop of Rome would arise whereby *“all the baptized whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith”* become *“agents of evangelization, and it would be insufficient to envisage a plan of evangelization to be carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients”* [Evangelii Gaudium 120].

A Church, where all sectors of its membership is listened to and feel are very much part of it, needs to emerge if a more committed and engaged process of evangelization is to take place. As CFMers as we are very much a part of the Church and thus it is indeed indispensable to fathom in its correct perspective the trend of the present Church. So it is a period of expectation that the Lord is going to do something unprecedented within the next few years with the proceedings of the upcoming synod.

SYNODAL CHURCH

The Pope calls for a more Synodal Church where the laity, the bishops, the priests, the religious and the deacons as well as the Pope himself listen to each other, grow in closer communion with one another and, discerning what God wants it to carry out, would move forward in its evangelizing mission. The Pope wishes to engage in a new search for meaning and a new ecclesiology based on what he calls: Synodality. This Synodality according to him should make us listen and be open to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit coming to us not only from the hierarchy but much more from “all the baptized” and even those who are in the periphery of the Church, those who have left the Church and those who are living a wounded existence. The Pope sincerely wishes to make way in this for a re-appraisal of his own role as Pope and that of all the structures of the Church. In short he wishes to move in the direction of a deeper spirit of communion, consultation and co-responsibility within the Church.

We as CFMers are perhaps in contact with these segments of people who are not happy with the existing Church and we can play a pivotal role in this regard. Since Pope is contemplating as to how well the present Church can be a blessing to the people of God if she changes her trajectory towards communion. We as CFMers should support the endeavours of His Holiness at the local and global level. At the same time, it is needed to find out as to where we stand regarding communion among our members, active involvement of the members and co-responsibility related to the Christian Family Movement and the Church. It can be a self-evaluation of our undertakings in relation to the vision of the Christian Family Movement as Pope himself is doing the same with regard to his pontificate.

CONSULTATION

As we are aware, he has thus called for a broad consultation of all levels of the Church in the organization of the forthcoming Synod of Bishops on the theme: “*for a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission.*” This Synod has been timed for October 2023 in Rome. But the Pope, through the General Secretariat of the Synod in Rome, has called for a broader consultation of all sectors of the Church, non-Catholic Christians and even men and women of goodwill, in order to listen to the Holy Spirit and to discern God’s will for the Church in the future.

A Vademecum (handbook) has already been drafted and sent to us and so also a questionnaire to be replied by as many of our faithful as possible. This process has to be first implemented at the diocesan level and a summary of the conclusions ratified by a diocesan pre-Synodal assembly is to be forwarded to the Bishops’ Conference in each country. Thereafter a national summary of the diocesan papers prepared by them is to be forwarded to the continental federation of episcopal conferences and their continental summaries, in turn, are to be forwarded to the Secretariat in Rome. And so, the Secretariat in Rome would

prepare the final draft of the Instrumentum Laboris [working document] for discussion in Rome at the General Synod to be held in October 2023.

QUESTIONNAIRE

Ten themes have been suggested to be used in the questionnaire. Here we find various aspects which need our attention if we envisage a renewal of local and universal Church. For the members of the CFM, all these dimensions are of importance as the vision and mission of CFM demand us to be “all things to all men” (I Cor 9, 22). It is good to reflect on these ten areas briefly. As we do so I would like to invite all of you to find out as to what is expected of us as individuals, couples, families and members of a recognized ecclesial movement of the Church basing ourselves on the methodology of See, Judge and Act.

1. Companions on the journey:

- a. Who are those who ‘walk together’ with you as you serve in the parish? (parish priest, religious brothers and sisters, members of the parish pastoral council, associations, fraternities etc.)
- b. Who are the active participants in the parish mission?
(When the faithful answer these questions, in the way we as CFMer are serving our parish communities, will they include us also as companions on the journey?)
- c. Who are those who have not caught our attention in the mission of the parish? (In our ministry in our parishes, are there segments of people who need our attention, care and concern?)

2. Listening

Listening is the first step, but requires having an open mind and an open heart without prejudices.

- a. How well do you listen to God’s voice reaching you through the shepherds of the Church?
- b. How well do you listen to God’s voice reaching you through the laity?
- c. How well do you listen to the voice of women?
- d. How well do you listen to the voice of youth?
- e. How well do you listen to the voice of those who are distanced from the Church?
- f. How well do you listen to the voice of the men and women religious in the Church?
- g. How well do you listen to those who hold a different opinion of yours?
- h. How well do you listen to those minorities who are oppressed, marginalized and poor in the society?

3. Speaking Out

All are invited speak with courage, integrating freedom, truth and charity.

- a. What are the factors that inspire you to speak out courageously and honestly?
- b. What are the factors that obstruct you to speak out courageously and honestly?
- c. How good is the relationship you have with the local media (Catholic and Non-Catholic)?
- d. Who are those speaking on behalf of the Catholic Church (Bishop/ priests/ lay representatives)?
To what degree? (Excellent/ Good/ Ordinary/ Not Satisfactory)
- e. To what degree are competent speakers who are loyal to the teachings of the Church chosen?

4. Liturgical Celebrations

Walking together is only possible if it is based on the communal listening to the Word of God and the celebration of the Eucharist. To what extent we as CFMers are a part of liturgical celebrations.

- a. How do prayer and liturgical celebrations actually inspire and guide our common life and mission in our community?
- b. To what extent do the factors mentioned below assist in increasing the process of sanctification and active participation of the faithful? (A proper spiritual preparation/ A well-organised liturgy/ A meaningful homily/ Increase in the active lay participation).
- c. To what extent are you satisfied with the space provided for the Liturgical Ministries mentioned below? (Lectors/ Cantors (ministry of singing)/ Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion/ Lay prayer leadership/ Sacristans/ Acolytes (Altar servers))

5. Sharing responsibility for our common mission

Synodality (Journeying together) is at the service of the Church, in which all members are called to participate.

- a. Since we are all missionary disciples, how is every baptized person called to participate in the mission of the Church? (As a member of the CFM/ As a member of the parish pastoral council/ As a member of any other ecclesial movement).
- b. How does the parish community (CFMERS) help its members to be better dedicated to the mission?
- c. How does the parish community (CFMers) help its members to dedicate themselves to social services such as social justice, human rights, engagement in politics, environmental conservation, scientific research and education?

6. Dialogue in Church and Society

Dialogue requires perseverance and patience, but it also enables mutual understanding.

- a. To what extent do diverse groups in the parish find opportunity to dialogue?
- b. How satisfactory are the places and means of dialogue in the parish?

- c. How do the activities mentioned below help promote cooperation among the neighbouring parishes, deaneries, religious communities, and lay associations/ movements? (spiritual programs/ activities of social welfare/ children's and youth activities (education/ sports and cultural).
- d. How do activities mentioned below help in bringing diversity, conflicting views and difficulties into dialogue? (By forming open attitudes/ by listening to diverse views and opinions/ By arriving at consensus through dialogue).
- e. What are the special problematic issues that must catch more attention of the Church and the society?
- f. What are your experiences about dialogue and cooperation we have established with people of other religions and with those who have no religious affiliations?
- g. To what extent do factors mentioned below contribute to the church to engage and learn from it as she engages in dialogue with the political, economic, cultural, different strata of the civil society and the poor?
 - i. Engaging in dialogue with the relevant parties in the face of burning issues of the society.
 - ii. Engaging in welfare activities during afflictions which render civil life helpless
 - iii. By showing right direction and giving proper guidance such moments of crisis
 - iv. By providing courageous and fearless leadership in the face of crisis

7. Ecumenism

Dialogue among Christians of different confessions, united by one baptism, has a special place in the synodal journey.

- a. To what extent do activities mentioned below help us to share our experience of synodality with the mainstream churches? (Engaging in ecumenical dialogue/ Standing up for the Christian position in common matters/ Working together in activities of social welfare).
- b. How do we estimate the results obtained from such dialogue? (Promotion of understanding among the Christian denominations mentioned above/ The ability to work together in common social issues)
- c. To what extent have the problematic issues mentioned below affected the synodal experience? (Differences in theological teaching/ Diversity in liturgical rites/ Differences in church traditions)

8. Authority and Participation

A synodal church is a participatory and co-responsible Church.

- a. In order to become a participatory and co-responsible church, to what extent have the activities mentioned below, contributed towards achieving the identified goals by the parish/ diocese.

- i. Understanding the need of a participatory church
- ii. Identifying the responsibilities of the clergy, religious and laity
- iii. Highlighting the importance of the lay contribution in the church

- b. In view of a participatory and co-responsible church, how is pastoral authority and governance exercised in your parish?
- c. To what extent do activities mentioned below help in assessing participation and co-responsibility in your parish/ diocese?
- d. To what extent do opportunities and programs mentioned below help in increasing lay ministries and responsibilities in the parish? (Awareness program to help laity to understand their role in the parish/ Creating more space for lay ministries and responsibilities/ Appreciating lay ministries)
- e. To what extent has your parish / diocese achieved success in the experience of journeying together (synodality)?
- f. Are the levels at which various units (parish, deanery, diocesan pastoral council, presbyterium) that contribute towards synodality in your parish/ diocese satisfactorily?
- g. To what extent do factors mentioned below assist towards promoting participation and servant-leadership in order to develop a better synodal approach? (Surfacing a servant attitude within our leadership/ Understanding the importance of active participation)

9. Discerning and Deciding

In a synodal style we make decisions through discernment of what the Holy Spirit is saying through the whole community

- a. To what extent are you open to prayer and contemplation in the process of making decisions?
- b. According to the synodal way are you satisfied with the extent you are making use of the methods mentioned below? (Acting in surrender to the Holy Spirit/ Having sanctification and welfare of the people as objectives/ Listening to the views of all intently and making better decisions)
- c. Within the hierarchy (bishops, priests, religious and lay) to what extent are the methods mentioned below are made use of in order to increase participation? (Acting according to the Apostolic Tradition of the Church/ Listening to one another attentively within the hierarchy/ Accepting the different degrees of leadership within the hierarchy/ Respecting the views of all)
- d. How do assess the contribution of the methods adopted in decision-making, as a stepping stone to listening to the whole people of God?

- e. How effective are the methods which are used to increase transparency and accountability? (Consultation of opinions/ Getting the participation of the experts of the relevant fields/ Accepting the levels of hierarchical leadership/ Presenting clear and true data and records)

10. Forming ourselves in Synodality

Synodality entails receptivity to change, formation and on-going learning.

- a. How do the activities mentioned below contribute towards formation of the members of the parish community to work together, to listen to one another, to engage in the mission and to enter into dialogue? (Promotion of the values of the first Christian Community in the Bible/ Introducing and strengthening of the Small Christian Community methods/ Conducting programs of Christian leadership/ Strengthening the mechanism of Parish Pastoral Council)
- b. To what extent do the opportunities and activities mentioned below contribute to make discernment and authority within synodality service orientated? (Organising retreats at parish, deanery and diocesan levels/ Introducing and strengthening of lay apostolate/ movements/ Effecting a renewal in the available lay apostolate)

These are the areas of the ten themes about which we are supposed to give our opinions. If we have not been invited by the parish priest or the contact person of your diocese, you may go to the website of the diocese or Holy See (www.synod.va) and write your trends of thought and forward the same to your diocese or Vatican secretariat. It is because we care for the Church, we support the initiatives of His Holiness and we as CFMers would like to see a marked change in the right direction. I consider you all as a group of people who love the church very much. It is one of the ways we can demonstrate our love and concern by writing as to what we think of the areas given above under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

HUMBLY AND PRAYERFULLY

Beloved brethren, as this exercise is something that could lead to significant changes in the way the Church is to be governed and its future mission, it is important that we call upon the Lord to guide this process according to His will. And so, we need to pray for His blessings and inspiration as a Church. The truth of the matter is that the Church is ultimately what He builds because Jesus stated so: ***“I will build my Church”*** [Mt. 16:18] and it is indeed His Church. And as the Psalmist states: ***“Unless the Lord builds the house, in vain do the labourers toil and unless the Lord watches the city, in vain do the watchmen stay awake.”*** [Ps. 127:1].

The Church, as we know, is God’s own instrument for the salvation of the world. And so, profoundly humble and yet confident in His guidance, we will put out our nets into the deep in order to discern His will for us, in union with the Holy Father who for us is Peter. We will do this therefore with a sense of

deep loyalty to him as he is God's chosen instrument to edify the Church. I would like to call upon all of you to answer the questionnaire with a profound spirit of humility and prayerfulness and a deep sense of love for the Lord. Let our answers be as St. Paul stated: "*unto edifying*" [1 Cor. 14:26] and not unto division and sinful haggling.

Let us also call upon the maternal intercession of Mary, our heavenly Mother and Mother of the Church, to intercede with the Lord and protect and guide the Church always in fulfillment of her own mission to be the mother of us all, who will always love and protect her dear sons and daughters. May St. Joseph, the protector of the Church too pray for us.

I call upon all of you now to recite the special prayer prepared by the Synod Secretariat in Rome to invoke God's blessings and guidance upon this profoundly spiritual venture.

Prayer for the Synod: Adsumus Sancte Spiritus

**We stand before You, Holy Spirit,
As we gather together in Your name.**

**With You alone to guide us,
Make Yourself at home in our hearts:
Teach us the way we must go
and how we are to pursue it.**

**We are weak and sinful;
Do not let us promote disorder.
Do not let ignorance lead us down the wrong path
nor partiality influence our actions.**

**Let us find in You our unity
So that we may journey together to eternal life
And not stray from the way of truth
And what is right.**

**All this we ask of You,
Who are at work in every place and time,
In the communion of the Father and the Son,
Forever and ever. Amen.**