

Synodality as a lifestyle

Dearest Sisters,

The courageous and prophetic choice of the Bishops' Synod: *The Young, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment* brought to light the value of synodality as a method and a lifestyle for the Church reality called to live today in fidelity to its apostolic origins.

The Final Document of the Synod underlines: "The fruit of this Synod, the choice that the Spirit has inspired in us through listening and discernment, is to walk with the young, going out towards everyone, so as to bear witness to the love of God. We could describe this process by speaking of synodality for mission, or missionary synodality" (FD n. 118).

The Post-Synod Apostolic Exhortation *Christus vivit*, that Pope Francis addresses to the young people and to all the people of God, highlights synodality in youth pastoral and refers to the Final Document. The presence of the young at the Synod, in fact, influenced the method and style of the Synod itself, making clear the importance of *walking together* to proclaim the glorious reality that "Christ is alive! He is our hope, and in a wonderful way He brings youth to our world, and everything He touches becomes young, new, full of life" (*Christus vivit*, n.1).

We are living in a favorable time in which God speaks to us continually through testimonies and events. It is an appeal to receive with faith and hope, as we read in the Letter of Convocation of GC XXIV. For this reason, "we want to live with greater depth and new dynamism the synodal style in our communities. We recognize that we too are 'the people of God formed by young and elderly women and men of every culture and horizon, the body of Christ, in which we are members of each other, beginning with those who are at the margins'." It is a journey that asks for true pastoral conversion, a serious and systematic *formation to synodality* as educating communities to take on with renewed awareness and readiness together with the young people.

I share with you some reflections on the synodal style of the Church, of our communities, and of our educational mission to live *with and for* the young. It seems important to me to begin a study that must be progressive to avoid using the word 'synodality' without understanding its deep meaning.

My wish is that we may increasingly feel that we are *the journeying Church*, making our charism shine as a gift that is enriched by sharing it with other charisms.

A Church in synodal style

Frequently in recent times we have heard the word synodality and, perhaps, we have perceived it as something new. In effect, it is not something unheard of in the history of the Church. Pope Francis in his discourse for the 50th anniversary of the institution of the Bishops' Synod, explains that from Vatican Council II to today, the Church experiences in an increasingly intense way, the need and the beauty of 'walking together'. He himself proposed from the start of his ministry as the Bishop of Rome, to value the Synod, considering it one of the most precious heritages of the Council Assembly. He recalls his predecessors who, at different times, promoted this style: St. Paul VI who, with prophetic intuition, institutes the Bishops' Synod with the intention of repeating the image of the Ecumenical Council and reflecting its spirit and method.

He is echoed by St. John Paul II and Benedict XVI who reaffirm that the journey of synodality increasingly responds to what God expects of the Church in the third millennium (*cf. Pope Francis*,

Discourse for the Commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Bishops' Synod, 17 October 2015).

According to the expression of St. John Chrysostom quoted by Pope Francis, "Church and Synod are synonyms". In fact, the Church is the people of God that *walks together* (*syn-odos*) and therefore, synodality is a constitutive dimension of the Church.

"A synodal Church is a Church that listens, in the awareness that listening "is more than hearing". It is reciprocal listening in which each one has something to learn. The faithful, the Episcopal College, the Bishop of Rome: each one listens to the other; and all listen to the Holy Spirit, the "Spirit of Truth" (John 14: 17), to know what He "says to the Churches" (Rev 2: 7) (Discourse quoted above).

This reflection makes us understand how synodality is not only a methodological strategy. Its deep significance is contained in the preposition *syn*: together, fruit and condition for the presence of the Holy Spirit who loves unity and concord.

Walking together is a reality proper to human life which we find well represented, not only in some figures of the Old Testament, but especially in Jesus Himself who carries out His mission *walking* in the company of His own and all those who await the words of life from Him. He is not only the companion, but He Himself is the Way that leads to the goal of the journey: "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life" (John 14: 6). In walking with the disciples of Emmaus, Jesus approaches them, listens to the reason for their sadness and their disappointment. It is at the breaking of the bread that they recognize Him and without delay, feel the need of sharing with their companions in the faith that the Master is risen (cf. Luke 24: 13, 35).

In them is reborn love for the community and zeal for the proclamation. They cannot keep for themselves what they have experienced because the presence of the Risen One, not only transforms their life, but also renews the joy of courageously proclaiming Jesus.

The icon of the disciples of Emmaus that accompanied us in these six years, is an obvious example of synodality. The disciples let themselves be transformed by their encounter with Jesus and they become the Church 'in missionary outreach' that necessarily leads to *pastoral conversion*. By its very nature, walking together includes a missionary dimension. It is for the mission, for the proclamation. It does not finish within the narrow confines of an individualistic experience, of a 'house', but it always goes 'beyond'.

We ask ourselves: in our educating communities, are we aware of the presence of Jesus who walks with us and helps us to concretize a real pastoral conversion? In our encounter with Him, do we find the apostolic ardor to proclaim with joy, especially to the young, of having met Him as the Risen One and of having recognized Him in the breaking of the bread?

Walking together is a process, sometimes fatiguing, that requires a deep faith experience, a sense of ecclesial belonging, readiness to receive, to accompany, to discern. It especially requires ongoing formation. I think these are some conditions for synodality to generate life. Pope Francis does not tire of inviting us to go along this road to feel that we are truly the people of God.

It is a journey rooted in an essential theological foundation. It is participation in the Trinitarian communion. It is the vocation of the human person to live communion that becomes real with the sincere gift of self, in union with God, and in unity with our sisters and brothers in Christ (Cf. International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the life and mission of the Church*, n. 43).

Our Constitutions are in full harmony with this reality: "Our community... finds the deepest reason for its existence in the mystery of Trinitarian communion. Among the People of God it is a particular sign of a new way of living together, not founded on ties of flesh and blood, but on the power of faith and sisterhood in Christ" (C 36).

Dear sisters, it is the synodal style that we are all called to carry out every day and that was lived in simplicity and depth by the first community of Mornese.

To be a community with a synodal style today

Perhaps the question arises in us: how can we recognize if our community is living the synodal dimension today and how can we make it more visible in all its richness?

I think we can be illumined by placing ourselves in docile listening to the Holy Spirit to discover in His light the marvels that God has worked in the history of our Institute, in the life and mission begun by Mother Mazzarello and in the first community of Mornese up to today. In this way, we can find a realistic, concrete response that will help us to open our heart to the marvelous action of God that has generated and generates holiness of life in so many sisters and young people in all parts of the world. Then a new apostolic passion will invade our being and will renew in each of us the joy of *walking together*.

“*The freshness* lived at the origins is re-proposed today as the attraction of the atmosphere of Mornese, in simplicity of life and relationships, in ardent love for Christ, and in missionary daring, characteristics of the first community” (*Circular of Convocation of GC XXIV*). It is an image of community that clearly expresses a life that bears the imprint of an active, open, co-responsible togetherness that does not provoke in us ‘nostalgia for the past’, but stimulates us to express today, our being creative communities, sowers of prophetic hope. There are many aspects we could share in this regard. I wish to pause on one in particular whose urgency I perceived in many sisters in the numerous personal and community encounters in various parts of the world. It is *community*.

For us FMA “living and working together in the name of the Lord is an essential element of our vocation” (C 49). The family spirit is vital for us and requires everyone’s commitment to contribute to create an atmosphere of trust and joy, such as to involve the young and the collaborators and thus favor the birth of Salesian vocations (cf. C 50).

The consensus expressed by many sisters on the Chapter theme: *Communities that generate life in the heart of contemporaneity* confirms the will to re-discover and love the community as the privileged place to express today, as Church and in a tendentially closed and self-referential society, the synodal style of life. We can find it in Mother Mazzarello’s style of animation in the Mornese community that placed its foundation in the Trinity and concretized it in the communion between the Sisters and the young people, in co-responsibility, and with an explicit openness to the educational mission.

I invite you to rediscover with renewed charismatic passion, the originality of this style that certainly was not described with the term ‘synodality’ but which, for all intents and purposes, it was. This is still alive and well today: we translate it with the expression *coordination for communion*. The Formation Plan *Rooted in the Covenant* dedicates the third part to this style of animation, translating it as *prophecy of togetherness*. GC XXIII, referring to the Formation Plan, highlighted how the service of animation must be carried out in an inclusive and circular style, with openness to dialogue, to evaluation, to discussion, promoting paths of maturation in co-responsibility, awakening everyone’s potential, involving everyone around a common project and listening as well to those who have different ideas (cf. *Acts GC XXIII*, n. 40).

Our Institute has been working in this direction for a number of years. In fact noteworthy steps have been made, but there is still need for the communities to make more evident this participative, communal, synodal style. Thus, we feel the need everywhere to intensify the family spirit in the communities, which provides the conditions for this to happen: gift each other with an attentive listening that expresses acceptance of the other as a part of myself; value everyone’s contribution; involve and make co-responsible for the sign of the presence of God who is love and inter-personal communion. Listening becomes dialogue when the person is at the center and can freely express her face, her richness and creativity.

It is a challenging but surprising attitude, because it makes us open our heart to God’s dimensions that are always those of gratuitous love, mercy, forgiveness, and tenderness. To broaden our vision also on reality with its complexity and challenges, on the precarity of the ‘common home’ that is increasingly threatened, to the untold needs of the educative mission attentive to the poverty of the young people.

The contrast between the huge needs of the mission and our poverty in facing urgent challenges, is the space to activate a great synergy between people of good will, open and available to accomplish a shared project through attentive discernment.

Let us work together to build with conviction and joy this family style that is so necessary and fruitful for us, for the young, for the Church, and for society. It is an invitation that I give you with trust, even in the knowledge that there are difficulties, fatigue, and that shadows and lights are always present. The logic of *walking together* finds its strength in the Eucharist (cf. C 40). It was thus for Mary Domenica (remember the ‘window’ of the Valponasca) and also for our sisters in Mornese who found in the celebration of the Easter mystery, the secret to make themselves a gift of love.

Dear sisters, I wish to share with you the wise and illumined word of Mother Rosetta Marchese, at this time when we are officially about to open the diocesan process for her Cause of Beatification.

Let us welcome it with gratitude and let it become *new life* for our communities:

“That window of the Valponasca speaks to us of a heart that burned with the love of God, that was centered in Him, that had God at the center of everything, a heart that saw everything in God...To build community-communication, we always say that we must be open to dialogue, we must listen to each other, respect the thought of another, forgive each other, foresee. We say all these things are needed to arrive at communion. However, it is not these things that lead us to community-communication: they are only means. We arrive at community-communication only if we, instead of stopping at our sister, in our sister, we see the Lord beyond our sister. He is the Center...To have unity we must respect, help, welcome, dialogue, yes, but all this with one sole Center – Jesus! The open Heart in the Center, in the Tabernacle, He who is the life of everyone” (Conference of Mother Rosetta: *Reflection on a little window*, Innsbruck 1978 – manuscript).

The words of Mother Rosetta, fruit of her inner richness and of a realistic knowledge of the Institute, offer a deep and essential indication on which to build the solid foundation of the communities, so that they will walk in a synodal style *with* and *for* the young people.

For an educational mission on the way

Living the educational mission as synodal communities, brings me back to what I specified in the preceding Circular 986: *“I entrust them to you”*. We are entrusted with the young, but we also ‘entrust’ ourselves to them in the awareness that they too are our educators and that it is possible to be together “journeying communities”.

Now is the time for the *new wine* to be poured into *new wineskins*. At GC XXIII the young were the voice for many others who asked us for a gaze of benevolence and trust. They asked us to know how to listen to them, to receive them, to ‘remain’ with them, to love what they liked and not be afraid if we do not understand their language immediately. They asked us to share our community life with them to mature in a faith journey and in social responsibility (cf. *Acts GC XXIII*, nos. 16-17).

As educating communities, we must increase our belief that the freshness of the young and their effort are sources of new life, of renewal, and of openness toward those who are far from a faith life or are marginalized, toward those who are searching and look to the horizon for life to come. We possess the richness of the Preventive System that is light and strength to ‘walk together’ and cultivate in our educational service those aspects that characterize the synodal style: “the sacred sense of the human person, joyful and familiar acceptance, trust, closeness, hospitality, solidarity, gratuity, integration, the recognition of others for who they are”. In fact, the Salesian style is an efficacious road to discover and live with greater awareness our being together as educating communities that generate life (cf. *Convocation Circular of GC XXIV*).

All of us, dear sisters, have experienced the existential need that the young have of feeling accepted and loved, of being understood in their fragility. They ask us to believe in their dreams, to understand their restlessness and their tears, to accept even their rejection, to understand their problems and wounds, and at times, their struggle to live.

The Apostolic Exhortation *Christus vivit* of Pope Francis remains for us a 'Reference Letter' that offers us a method for 'walking together', a very concrete interpretative reading of the youth reality with its difficulties, dreams, and expectations. It is an invitation to go in depth to make them meet *the living Jesus who loves, surprises, and calls us by name*.

Let us continue to receive today with love and apostolic passion the mandate: "I entrust them to you", to you personally, to you as local and world community, to you as educating community.

The last Chapters of *Christus vivit* underline the importance of accompanying the young through a discernment process to find their place in life, to discover God's plan for them, and freely recognize and accomplish it in the various kinds of vocations, to the point of saying that 'yes' to the call of Jesus to follow Him unconditionally.

I asked myself, "if our communities, through a *synodal youth pastoral*, have the courage to propose a gradual and appropriate vocational journey as a response to the concerns of the young? Is there in our communities this proactive force that springs from the personal and community encounter with the Lord Jesus met in prayer, adoration, listening to the Word of God, in service to the poor?"

This too can be the commitment of a *synodal community* that knows how to find the road to say, that even today, God calls and waits for a response to 'come and follow Me'. It takes courage to risk with Him and for Him; wanting to get involved totally and willing to face an unprecedented challenge, which requires audacity and resourcefulness; in other words, it requires trusting in God, in whatever vocation He calls young people.

Pope Francis addresses young people in this way: "There is no greater joy than risking your life for the Lord! I especially want to say to you, young people: do not be deaf to the call of the Lord! ... Do not let yourself be infected by the fear that paralyzes us in front of the high peaks that the Lord proposes. Always remember that, to those who leave the nets and the boat to follow Him, the Lord promises the joy of a new life that fills the heart and animates the journey" (*Message for the 56th World Day of Prayer for Vocations*).

As for young people, so too for us adults, the call of God is always timely to tell us that life is a vocation, that life is a mission to discover and live together and it is a potential for the good of the Church and society.

Dear sisters, this is what I felt to share with you in the confidence that you will be able to grasp in these simple reflections the reason for a renewed impetus in our educational mission and in proclaiming the Good News of the Gospel.

To Mary, Mother of the Church and of the Institute, I entrust our commitment to walk together with the laity, the young, the families, with the Salesian Family and with every person involved in our mission to bear witness to the Love of God and contagion the heart of the world with hope and joy.

God bless you.

Rome, 24 May 2019

Aff.ma Madre

New Provincials 2019

Preprovince “Stella Maris” (CSM)

Sr. Yide Teresina ZHAO QINGPAI

Province “Our Lady Queen of Ireland” (IRL)

Sr. Bridget O’CONNELL

Province “St. Teresa” (BMT)

Sr. Madalena Luiza SCARAMUSSA

(Prolonged for two years)