The Methodology of the Synod

*Giacomo Costa SJ*

*The following is an abridged version of a paper delivered by Fr Costa SJ to the symposium, “The Road to a Synodal Church” held in Oxford last month.*

Each particular Church was invited to start from experience, to reflect on where it experiences synodality, or on how it “walks together” as the people of God. And it was invited to do so in a synodal way, involving the entire people of God, with a special attention to those who are on the margins of the community and society.

The Preparatory Document clearly states the goal of this consultative phase: “the purpose of the Synod is not to produce documents, but ‘to plant dreams, draw forth prophecies and visions, allow hope to flourish, inspire trust, bind up wounds, weave together relationships, awaken a dawn of hope, learn from one another and create a bright resourcefulness that will enlighten minds, warm hearts, give strength to our hands’[[1]](#footnote-1).”

We can say that the consultative phase had a twofold goal. It aimed at gathering contributions and ideas from particular Churches and their members, giving them a chance to be heard by Rome; the second goal was to ‘kick off’ synodal dynamics at all levels of the Church: the more they enter into the ordinary life of Christian communities, the more they will live a life of their own and become processes of renewal, well beyond the agenda of the Synod 2021-2023. And listening asks for being in relation and to create connections. To be honest, not all dioceses and episcopal conferences around the world have grasped this, as you can tell from the methodology they chose to use. Spiritual conversation moves us from the idea of a “task to be done” to an experience of sharing, both simple and profound.

Gathering materials to assemble a good contribution to send to Rome was not the only purpose of this phase and I dare say not the most important one. Priority should have been given to kicking off processes of lived synodality. Even those in charge of validating the synthesis (typically the bishop) «more than being concerned about the specific content […] have the task of ensuring that the text is the fruit of an authentically synodal journey and is respectful of the synodal process that actually took place[[2]](#footnote-2).”

So, the question now is: What processes contribute to create a culture (habits and structures) of listening, participation, discernment in your communities, diocese, organisations?

Listening to everyone? The voice of the voiceless

Here we touch on a fundamental question for the method: who is invited to join in the phase of listening? Who do we actually listen to? If you want to control everything, it is not possible to authentically listen or open up real spaces for recognition and participation. The question concerns many categories and groups that find it hard to have their voices heard within the Church: from young people who demand the chance to take a leading role, to women who question a male-dominated culture, to homosexuals who ask to stay within the Church without being stigmatised.

From this point of view, it is worth taking some time to explore the meaning of expressions such as “giving a voice to the voiceless”. The key issue is the willingness to listen, much more than the loudness of the cry. Therefore, **the strategy for encouraging the participation of the excluded in the synodal processes is to take the hands off the ears of those who pretend they cannot hear, rather than giving a louder megaphone to those who speak or perhaps already shout.** The guiding question is not “Who can't be heard?”, but rather “Who do we find it hard to listen to, no matter how loud they cry?”

In no way can we consider that handing our synthesis over to the Bishops' Conference or to Rome marks the end of the synodal process, of our “walking together”. “Our goal is not to amass information or to satisfy curiosity, but rather to become painfully aware, to dare to turn what is happening to the world into our own personal suffering and thus to discover what each of us can do about it.” (Laudato Si’, no. 19)

Collecting contributions: the syntheses

We need to look at the synthesis in the same vein. As the analysis of the gathered material proceeds, common tendencies emerge on which there is a certain consensus (not necessarily unanimous). And so do clashing perspectives, lateral thinking and voices singing "out of the chorus": it is essential not to lose track of them, because they can be later recognised as prophetic voices indicating what the Spirit is asking of the Church.

If it is rooted in lived experience and through frank and open dialogue, personal and collective listening to inner motions makes it possible to deal with oppositions and conflicts in a constructive and non-ideological way, to give everyone a place, and above all to listen to what the Spirit is calling us to do. Even when there is no full agreement on everything! Rather, it is important to avoid standardising differences.

In fact, the goal of the synthesis is not to reset differences or artificially harmonise voices: conflicts, tensions and uncomfortable questions may legitimately emerge both in the collected contributions and among the members of the drafting group. In this case, the aim is to identify in which direction it is possible to walk together, discerning what seems to come from God. If this is not possible, tensions can be stated in the synthesis. Respect is the correct approach to all the materials received: the job is not to judge them or to rate them, but to try to grasp the contribution each can bring.

Producing the synthesis is a discernment process. It requires time, care, subtle listening, and deep vision. These spiritual attitudes need being cultivated through prayer and contemplation (to acquire familiarity with the Lord) and more specifically through what is traditionally called examen: an ongoing reflection to grasp the voice of the Spirit in one's own life.

The specific responsibility of the leader is the service of unity, which requires the ability to articulate the different points of view and enhance the specific contribution of each one, instead of merely summarising them. The task of the leader is to offer an interpretation of what participants are experiencing (individually and as a group) and allow the group to check and improve it until everyone feels “at home” within it. To do this, leaders need to be aware they are not the owners of the process, but the stewards, and be ready to accept that the result may not mirror their point of view.

Feedback: an ongoing dialogue

In order for the Church to become more and more synodal, listening cannot be limited to the formal gatherings of the consultative phase, but must become an ongoing feature, turning into dialogue.

In opinion polls or market surveys, respondents are listened to in a very limited sense: their answers are recorded, but then they lose control over how their views are interpreted. This is instrumental listening.

It cannot be the case in the synodal process: participation in the listening phase establishes a relationship that lasts over time. On the basis of local circumstances, dioceses and bishops’ conferences are asked to find a way to return the fruit of the consultation to the People of God before sending it to Rome, and with the willingness to modify it if those who participated in the process do not recognise it. “Once the work of the drafting group is finished, it would be good to find a way to submit the text (confidentially) to a few of those persons who participated in the synodal process, beginning with those who are responsible for it, in order to gather their feedback and modify the text where it seems appropriate. An Episcopal Conference or a Diocese might feel called to live this phase by returning, in some way, the draft synthesis to the People of God to receive further feedback and other suggestions. This further consultation could strengthen the synthesis and lay the groundwork for its subsequent implementation.[[3]](#footnote-3)”

In addition, it might be useful to take some time to reread in prayer the entire synodal process (including the phase of drafting the synthesis). The fruit of this re-reading could enrich the introductory part of the synthesis.

Again, we are asked to focus on the process more than on the contents of the synthesis. The reason is simple: while the process is open-ended and pointing to the future, we already know a lot of what comes out of the consultation process, or we could find it out by commissioning a sociological survey. Do not we already know that priests are clerical, women feel alienated, young people stay clear, certain groups are looked down upon, rejected, marginalised? Of course, we must expect some surprise too, in the form of positive experiences in which things go differently, in which the voice of the Spirit is heard. It is important that they be collected and reported to inspire the next steps. However, the real added value of the consultative phase lay elsewhere: it offered opportunities for these things to be told and heard, in a word to be shared. Even more, the consultative phase allowed people to say things and experience they are listened to, in a dynamic of mutual recognition. This was a way to experience and foster the bond joining the members of the Christian community, even when they may not be in full agreement. And it was the first step in the journey of a synodal Church.

1. FRANCIS, *Address at the Opening of the Synod of Bishops on Young People* (3 October 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Suggestions for Dioceses and Episcopal Conferences on the preparation of the synthesis.* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Suggestions for Dioceses and Episcopal Conferences on the preparation of the synthesis*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)