

### 3. Vincentian spirituality, a synodal spirituality



#### 1. SEE – A contemplative look

We are living a particularly intense and fruitful time in the Church since Pope Francis called us to walk the path of *Synodality*. It is a time of revision of life, prayerful discernment, and profound revitalization, which places us in the framework of the Second Vatican Council. This is with a view to stimulating and consolidating *communion, participation, and mission* among all those who form the People of God, called to live and bear witness to the faith received in Baptism in order to collaborate in building a world that reflects the values of the Kingdom. As the Pope reminds us, *“we are called to: unity, communion, the fraternity born of the realization that all of us are embraced by the one love of God ... In the one People of God, therefore, let us journey together, in order to experience a Church that receives and lives this gift of unity, and is open to the voice of the Spirit”* (Moment of reflection for the beginning of the synodal journey, 9 October 2021).

The method proposed by the Pontiff could not be other than that of attentive and respectful listening to all the members of the Church and of attention to the desires and concerns of our contemporaries in order to move forward together in the direction indicated by the Spirit of the Lord, the true protagonist of this process: *“I want to say again that the Synod is not a parliament or an opinion poll; the Synod is an ecclesial event and its protagonist is the Holy Spirit. If the Spirit is not present, there will be no Synod”* (*ibid.*).

Always in search of *unity in plurality*, we all feel involved in this synodal journey, ready to collaborate so that the Church may manifest her identity as an icon of Trinitarian communion, sacrament of the Kingdom of God, and attentive servant of humanity in this world marked by so many challenges and contradictions, advances and setbacks. No one, therefore, can remain on the margins of this common task. *“The words ‘communion’ and ‘mission’ can risk remaining somewhat abstract, unless we cultivate an ecclesial praxis that*

*expresses the concreteness of synodality at every step of our journey and activity, encouraging real involvement on the part of each and all” (ibid.).*

As members of the Congregation of the Mission, how do we place ourselves in this synodal itinerary? What is the contribution we can offer to the Church from the peculiarity of our missionary charism? How does the spirit of synodality affect our personal, community, provincial, and congregational life? Let us allow the Word of God and the experience of Saint Vincent to help us walk with a firm step in that direction.

## **2. JUDGE – A lucid discernment**

### **a) In the light of the Word (read: Romans 12:1-13)**

Exercising ourselves in the art of discernment and disposing ourselves to a sincere conversion and profound renewal, we are invited to listen to one another and to collaborate effectively in order to further the Church’s mission in the face of the legitimate expectations of the contemporary world, animated by the charity that identifies us as members of the body of Christ. As Pope Francis directs us, *“In the Church, everything starts with baptism. Baptism, the source of our life, gives rise to the equal dignity of the children of God, albeit in the diversity of ministries and charisms. Consequently, all the baptized are called to take part in the Church’s life and mission. Without real participation by the People of God, talk about communion risks remaining a devout wish” (ibid.).* The effectiveness of our ecclesial commitment and of our pastoral action is, therefore, intimately related to the rediscovery of Baptism as the primordial sacrament that founds our common dignity and legitimizes the diversity of vocations, charisms, and ministries that energize the life of the People of God (cf., 1 Corinthians 12:12-30). Only in this way can we collaborate in the building up of a *missionary, synodal, and prophetic Church*, decentered from itself, all of it ministerial, nourished by the communion and participation of its members and recognized as a pilgrim servant of humanity, compassionately turned toward the poor. A Church that *“contemplates and imitates the life of the Blessed Trinity, a mystery of communion ad intra and the source of mission ad extra” (ibid.).*

### **b) In the light of the Vincentian charism**

Every charism has a markedly ecclesial orientation. It is born from the perception of the needs of the Church in the world. The Spirit gave Saint Vincent de Paul a special ability to read the signs of the times and interpret them in the light of faith, so that he could intuit and make God’s plan visible in the concrete circumstances in which he lived and acted. The Congregation of the Mission tries to respond to the situations and demands of our times with the lucidity and vigor provided by the charism communicated to it by the Spirit through its founder, updating the mission of Jesus Christ and making visible the Church’s care toward the poor, in a state of ongoing conversion. *“With this purpose in view, the Congregation of the Mission, faithful to the gospel, and always attentive to the signs of the times and the more urgent calls of the Church, should take care to open up new ways and use new means adapted to the circumstances of time and place. Moreover, it should strive to evaluate and plan its works and ministries, and in this way remain in a continual state of renewal” (C 2).*

The *Constitutions* themselves affirm that *“The Church finds the ultimate source of its life and action in the Trinity. The Congregation, within the Church, does the same” (C 20).* This

implies identifying with the mission of the Church and acting in communion with it. It was not without reason, then, that Saint Vincent insisted that his Missionaries be imbued with a profound ecclesial sense, made visible in love for the Church, in effective participation in her mission, and in attention to her legitimate pastors. Vincent de Paul's love for the Church was translated in many ways, especially in his commitment to the reform of ecclesiastical structures, in his vigorous opposition to all forms of corruption and abuse, in his powerful call to pastoral care toward the most abandoned, in his intelligent dedication to the integral formation of the clergy, in his efforts to involve the laity (especially women) in the service of charity, etc. All this titanic ecclesial engagement is reflected in his clear-sighted observations regarding the urgent needs of the Church of his time: *"Her great need is evangelical men who work to purge, enlighten, and unite her to her Divine Spouse"* (CCD III, 204). And this *because*

*"The Church is compared to a great harvest that requires workers, but hardworking ones. Nothing is more in conformity with the Gospel than to gather light and strength for our soul in meditation, reading, and solitude on the one hand, and then to go out and share this spiritual nourishment with others. This is to do as Our Lord did, and His Apostles after Him ... That's what we should do, that's how we should witness to God by our works that we love Him"* (CCD XI, 33).

Moreover, Saint Vincent thus could rejoice in seeing the work that the Spirit accomplishes in the Church with the collaboration of those who place themselves in his hands as docile instruments of his action in favor of the least fortunate: *"What a happiness for our Missioners, ... to verify the guidance of the Holy Spirit on His Church by working, as we do, at the instruction and sanctification of poor persons!"* (CCD XI, 30).

### 3. ACT – A renewed commitment

In his *reflection for the beginning of the synodal process*, Pope Francis spoke of three *risks* that can threaten the opportunity that the Synod offers us for a *pastoral conversion in a missionary key*. Let us see how these risks affect the life of our Congregation from our concrete realities. In fact, it is not a matter of considering the risks by looking only outwardly. Let us consider how these risks act in us, in our communities and provinces. A critical sense devoid of self-criticism neither can be authentic nor fruitful.

#### a) Formalism

*"The Synod could be reduced to an extraordinary event, but only externally ... on the other hand, [the Synod] is a process of authentic spiritual discernment that we undertake, not to project a good image of ourselves, but to cooperate more effectively with the work of God in history."*

→ In all that concerns our life and mission, are we content with projecting a good appearance or maintaining a good reputation (personal, community, institutional, etc.)? In our ministries, is it enough to fulfill the agenda or to attend punctually to what is prescribed? How is the spiritual and missionary vitality that should inspire our personal conduct, our fraternal living together, our pastoral conversion, and our apostolic dynamism going?

*“... sometimes there can be a certain elitism in the presbyterial order that detaches it from the laity; the priest ultimately becomes more a ‘landlord’ than a pastor of a whole community as it moves forward. This will require changing certain overly vertical, distorted and partial visions of the Church, the priestly ministry, the role of the laity, ecclesial responsibilities, roles of governance and so forth.”*

→ Do we develop an adequate understanding of the mystery and mission of the Church in the light of Vatican II? Does our ecclesiological vision rest on the conciliar notion of the people of God, within which we all have the same dignity in the legitimate diversity of vocations, charisms, and ministries? Do we understand the ordained ministry as what it really is: sacrament of the Good Shepherd’s servant charity? Do we recognize and encourage the protagonism of the laity in the Church and in society? Do we share the decisions and responsibilities that are incumbent on all of us or do we limit ourselves to sharing the burden of the tasks?

## **b) Intellectualism or abstraction**

*“Reality turns into abstraction and we, with our reflections, end up going in the opposite direction. This would turn the Synod into a kind of study group, offering learned but abstract approaches to the problems of the Church and the evils in our world. The usual people saying the usual things, without great depth or spiritual insight, and ending up along familiar and unfruitful ideological and partisan divides, far removed from the reality of the holy People of God and the concrete life of communities around the world.”*

→ How do we situate ourselves in the face of the realities that surround us, especially those that closely touch the poorest and the present moment of the Church, the Congregation, and the Province? Do we give into the temptation of fatalistic pessimism? Do we take refuge in optimism of mere convenience, which keeps us in our comfort zones? Or do we nourish a realism enlightened by faith and full of hope, which knows how to recognize failures, does not tolerate inconsistencies, points out new horizons, and opens new paths? Do we know how to avoid unilateralism and welcome the richness of what is different?

## **c) Complacency**

*“‘We have always done it this way’ (Evangeli Gaudium, 33) and it is better not to change. That expression – ‘We have always done it that way’ – is poison for the life of the Church. Those who think this way, perhaps without even realizing it, make the mistake of not taking seriously the times in which we are living. The danger, in the end, is to apply old solutions to new problems. A patch of rough cloth that ends up creating a worse tear (cf. Mt 9:16). It is important that the synodal process be exactly this: a process of becoming, a process that involves the local Churches, in different phases and from the bottom up, in an exciting and engaging effort that can forge a style of communion and participation directed to mission.”*

→ Are we in favor of “it has always been done this way”? Do we assume personal and community discernment as a criterion for our decisions and options or do we prefer to live in the superficiality of what is most comfortable, allowing ourselves to be swept along by trends and conveniences? Do we limit ourselves to speeches and discussions or do we strive for coherent positions and creative actions?

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The Pope also speaks of three opportunities that characterize this *time of grace*, calling us to be: **a structurally synodal Church**, *“where all can feel at home and participate”*; **a**

**listening Church**, which is ready to *“listen to the Spirit in adoration and prayer,”* as well as to *“listen to our brothers and sisters speak of their hopes and of the crises of faith present in different parts of the world, of the need for a renewed pastoral life and of the signals we are receiving from those on the ground”*; **a Church of closeness**, with attitudes of compassion and tenderness, that is, *“a Church that does not stand aloof from life, but immerses herself in today’s problems and needs, bandaging wounds and healing broken hearts with the balm of God.”*

→ Do we not see there a project of life and mission for us, in this fourth centenary of the foundation of our Congregation?

### **Let us pray with Pope Francis...**

*Come, Holy Spirit! You inspire new tongues and place words of life on our lips: keep us from becoming a “museum Church”, beautiful but mute, with much past and little future. Come among us, so that in this synodal experience we will not lose our enthusiasm, dilute the power of prophecy, or descend into useless and unproductive discussions. Come, Spirit of love, open our hearts to hear your voice! Come, Holy Spirit of holiness, renew the holy and faithful People of God! Come, Creator Spirit, renew the face of the earth! Amen.*