



The 2018 Synod and the gift of young people

Giacomo Costa SJ

An important Vatican meeting last year about young people, faith and vocational discernment was just one stage in a journey in which the whole Church is engaged, says Fr Giacomo Costa SJ. Ahead of the 2018 Synod of Bishops, the Special Secretary outlined his hopes and expectations for the dialogue that would take place; now, he considers the importance for the future of the Church of what was said and heard, and of how the process unfolded.

The 15th General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, on the theme, 'Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment', concluded on 28 October 2018. Nevertheless, the journey that began there is certainly not complete. After two years of preparation, the assembly gathered in the Vatican for nearly one month. The participants were over 250 Synod Fathers from all over the world, 49 auditors (including 34 young people), 23 experts, eight fraternal delegates representing other churches and ecclesial communities, and one special invitee. It was an intense experience of listening and working together, in which I had the joy of participating personally in my role as Special Secretary.

Much more than merely a concluding text, the final document of the synod¹ traces a 'journeying together' and this, in fact, is the etymological meaning of the term 'synod'. The synod experience was so deep and intense that the participants hoped that, 'the "flame" of what we have experienced in these days may spread'. The Church at all levels – the episcopal conferences and local churches – are invited to move forward in the same way, 'committing themselves to processes of communal discernment, including in the discussions some who are not bishops, as this Synod has done.' (Final Document [henceforth FD] §120)

In this light, I will try to identify major milestones on this path and, above all, describe how we journeyed together, with particular ways of proceeding that



struck participants as being at least as important as the topics covered, if not more so.

1. A time for listening

Listening was undoubtedly one of the most significant keys to interpreting the synodal journey, beginning with the synod's very preparation, which included consultation of national bishops' conferences, a group of international experts and, above all, the voices of young

people.

a) Rich meetings

Once the assembly opened, this listening truly came into its own. Much more than a confrontation of ideas, theological approaches and visions of the Church, the synod is first and foremost a meeting of people. The synodal process promoted the exchange of testimonies and reflections, which took place through plenary addresses and discussions in language sub-groups (called *circuli minores*). The words of each participant revealed their passions, their concerns and the issues related to their own context, and the multiplicity of languages and accents manifested the variety of cultures present. It was exciting to hear the passion with which the Church is engaged for and with young people in different parts of the world, trying to make their joys and their hopes, as well as their griefs and anxieties, its own.² While some of these are common to all, others are peculiar to a region or country. Particularly moving were the testimonies from bishops

and young people from places where Christians are persecuted, even to the point of martyrdom.

Mutual listening is the most authentic instrument available to an assembly seeking to ‘journey together’. Listening to each other galvanises and changes those who commit themselves to listen, and it opens them to the full human and even theological richness of the process they are living. ‘Listening transforms the hearts of those who do it, especially when it takes place with an interior disposition of harmony and docility to the Spirit. So it is not just a gathering of information, nor is it a strategy for achieving a goal, but it is the manner in which God himself relates to his people.’ (FD §6)

b) Methods for proceeding together

At the synod, sharing is not an end in itself. Its aim is to reach the widest possible consensus, which the final document is meant to express, built upon and thanks to the participants’ contributions. This depends upon choosing a specific method to achieve authentic listening. Whoever facilitates the synodal process has a particular responsibility in this regard, with a view to promoting unity: they must practise a deep listening, so as to grasp the value of all the positions expressed and the dialogue that unfolds between them, not just summarising or juxtaposing them. Accordingly, the final document is much more than the report of a meeting. Its authors must convey what the group is living and experiencing: the points where there is tension, the points where it is easy to move forward and those where there is a breakthrough, perhaps an unexpected one. The role of the final document writers is to draft an interpretation of the whole process and submit it to the assembly, which can modify it in order to recognise themselves therein.

The experience of this synod has shown that such a process is not only possible but also fruitful. Moreover, everyone can feel included in the variety of and differences between positions articulated in the text, because no one is trying to impose their point of view. It is truly legitimate to affirm, as did the Relator General, Cardinal Sérgio da Rocha, Archbishop of Brasília, that each participant is an author of the final document.

The specific nature of the method probably explains the difficulty in ‘communicating’ the synod to the

outside world, despite the efforts carried out by the team set up for this purpose. It was far from easy to convey this participatory dynamic to those who were outside of its rhythm, just as it is difficult to communicate a shared spiritual process: no one knows the conclusion in advance, and confidentiality is required so that people remain free to speak and to change their minds. The difficulty increases in a media-obsessed society, which favours self-assertion over consensus-building and frantically looks for conflicts, even making them up, giving disproportionate attention to the more sensationalist aspects of events. In fact, on more than one occasion, what was being said in the media really appeared to us as ‘alien’ to the experience we were living inside the synod.

2. Some surprises

The fruitfulness of the method and its sound implementation are indicated by what we might call the ‘turns’: moments when mutual listening allowed people to express more clearly the terms of a question, introducing important new points in a way that could not have been predicted from the preparatory materials. I will give a brief account of two of them, which I find to be particularly significant also for understanding the final document.

a) From a synod for young people to a synod with young people

From the very beginning, the synod's profound intention had been expressed in terms of the Church's desire to take care of all young people – not only those within ecclesial contexts and structures – and to find concrete and effective ways to accompany them on their journey to maturity, especially regarding the choices that define the direction of their lives and their contribution to the building of society. Quite quickly, there also emerged the need to involve young people themselves. This led to launching the online questionnaire and convening the pre-synodal meeting. What would be the point of a synod on young people without them?

The concern for young people also resounded strongly in the synodal assembly, thanks especially to the heartfelt speeches through which the many young people who are living in situations of suffering, isolation, loneliness and abandonment became vividly present to our gathering. Particularly resonant were

the stories of young migrants: their descriptions of the communities from which they departed, which undergo a sort of mutilation in their absence; and accounts of the sense of bewilderment and hostility they suffer in many of their destinations. Their condition is in many ways emblematic of our time, of its many contradictions and faults. But it is also a laboratory of intercultural encounter that indicates what the Church as a whole is called to – that is, a radical change that calls for ‘migrating’ from a traditional culture to the new languages of this globalised and technological world, without, however, losing its identity and the power of its own roots. In response to these young migrants, and to all youth who in so many places feel that their voice is not considered of interest by the adult world, the synod reaffirms that caring for them is ‘a pastoral priority of epoch-making significance, in which to invest time, energy and resources.’ (FD §119)

At the same time, however, thanks also to the presence of 34 young auditors, the Synod Fathers could gain a direct sense of how much young people are already present in the Church and active in carrying out its mission of evangelisation and integral human development. Often they are true pioneers in the struggles against poverty and injustice, for ecology and care of the planet; they are also pioneers in the culture of the digital environment. In short, while the Church has much to offer young people through the adults who play the role of educators and guides, we must also realise that young people and the Church are not strangers to one another. Young people are present in the Church, and these young Catholics ensure the Church’s presence in the heterogeneous and complex world of young people, even from a religious and spiritual point of view. Awareness of this dimension is at the heart of the synodal process: ‘In this Synod we have experienced how co-responsibility lived with young Christians is a source of profound joy for bishops too.’ (FD §119)

This awareness challenges the Church to give adequate space to young people, not least by questioning the way in which it currently is organised and operates. To respond to this need, the synod once again chose a listening approach, this time listening to the Word of God and especially the Gospel accounts that narrate Jesus’s encounters with the men and women of his time, the way in which he received

them, listened to them, accompanied them and finally sent them out into the world.

The actual effect of this listening to the Word progressively changed the understanding of the synod’s key words. For instance, it was understood that accompaniment is primarily an action for which the community as a whole is responsible, ‘precisely because in its heart it develops that drama of relationships that can support the person on his journey and furnish him with points of reference and orientation.’ (FD §92)

The exploration of the term vocation highlighted the need for a renewed understanding in the light of the Word in order to safeguard the interplay between divine choice and human freedom, without one excluding the other. ‘Vocation is neither a pre-composed script that the human being has simply to recite nor is it an unwritten theatrical improvisation.’ (FD §78)

Finally, the maturation of freedom is still the key to a correct understanding of the meaning of authority. It should be understood as something that contributes to growth, which ‘does not express the idea of a directive power, but of a real generative force’ (FD §71), as evidenced by the many episodes in which Jesus exercises his authority by liberating those he meets.

b) The ‘surprise’ of missionary synodality

Mutual listening among the participants, as well as listening together to the Word, led to what can be described as the real surprise of the synod, at least if we compare the final document with the preparatory texts. What was recognised through the lived experience of the assembly was ‘a fruit of the Spirit which continually renews the Church and calls her to practise synodality as a way of being and acting, promoting the participation of all the baptized and of people of good will, each according to his age, state of life and vocation.’ (FD §119) Synodality is therefore not confined to the specific period of synods themselves, but is rather the style that re-orientates and gives shape to the ordinary life of the Church and how it carries out its mission. This is the real ‘innovative content’ of the synod, and it meets the expectations expressed by young people themselves in the preparatory phase: they seek a Church that is genuine, free, fraternal, relational, concrete, transparent and committed.

The challenge of journeying together, witnessing an authentic fraternity, applies to all levels and structures of ecclesial life. The concrete consequences for Christian communities are obvious, and clearly imply the opening of spaces for participation.

A characteristic feature of this style of Church is the valuing of the charisms that the Spirit gives according to the vocation and role of each of her members, through a dynamic of co-responsibility. In order to activate it, conversion of the heart becomes necessary, as well as a readiness for mutual listening, which builds an effective common mind. Animated by this spirit, we can proceed towards a participatory and co-responsible Church, able to value the wealth of the variety of which it is composed, gratefully receiving the contributions of the lay faithful too, including young people and women, female and male consecrated persons as well as groups, associations and movements. (FD §123)

Entering this dynamic certainly requires renewal in the ways of exercising authority, in line with the promotion of the personal growth of each person and the promotion of unity as a communion of differences and not as a uniforming standardisation. But it also requires every Christian to live up to their baptismal vocation, which includes the responsibility to contribute actively to the life and mission of the community. In this way, spaces and paths for participation are opened up that avoid both the deadly trap of clericalism and a formal interpretation of synodality along rigid lines of democratic parliamentary procedures. The collegial style of synodality, and the practice of communal discernment that is the logical consequence of it, become the way to guarantee respect for God's sovereignty: 'No one can manage everything; each one, with humility and honesty, lays his own badge in a mosaic which belongs to God.'³ At the same time, synodality and discernment offer the community a way to recognise itself as a collective subject endowed with its own identity, where all members find their place, in contrast with the individualism that deeply marks so many contemporary cultural contexts.

Finally, the adjective 'missionary' qualifying this synodal form of Church emphasises how the fraternity that distinguishes it does not have a solely intra-ecclesial significance. As the Acts of the Apostles teaches us, it is the quality of the relationships that

makes the community attractive, becoming the main instrument for the action of evangelisation. Obviously, the option for synodality also affects the attitude with which the Church relates to the world.

This fundamental dynamic has precise consequences for the way the mission is conducted jointly with young people, which requires us to engage, frankly and without compromise, in a dialogue with all men and women of good will... In a world marked by diversity of peoples and variety of cultures, 'walking together' is fundamental if the initiatives of solidarity, integration and promotion of justice are to be credible and effective, and to show what is meant by a culture of encounter and gratuitousness. (FD §126)

3. The road ahead

The conversion to synodality is an immense task that an assembly of the Synod of Bishops can launch but certainly not accomplish. Well aware of this, the final document says: 'The ending of the Synodal Assembly and the document which gathers together its fruits do not close the synodal process, but constitute a stage within it.' (FD §120) The text of the final document collects the numerous practical proposals that emerged during the sessions and presents them to the entire Church to act upon. At the same time, the paragraph-by-paragraph approval process, mostly achieved by very wide majorities and always with well above the necessary quorum of two-thirds of voters, revealed the points where the diversity of positions also called for deeper examination – even at the theological level – and for growth in mutual listening. I am referring to those paragraphs in which the number of votes against rose from a handful to a few dozen (out of a total of about 250 voters). They regard different topics, such as the role and contribution of women, sexuality, gender issues, the exercise of authority and governance, transparency in the relationship with economic and financial resources, and finally synodality itself, a term which is difficult to elucidate, especially in some cultural contexts.

To build a path towards synodality, which makes the ecclesial community able to deal constructively with these problematic issues, I believe that we need to consider three elements in particular.

The first concerns the fact that the Church is present in social, cultural and political contexts that are very

diverse, within a world where radical differences coexist with the standardising dynamics of globalisation. This means that the same words do not have the same resonance for everyone, especially when translated from one language into another; this can explain many fears and oppositions. It cannot be taken as a given that everyone understands every expression in exactly the same way; some may find it difficult to recognise themselves in certain words and phrases, perhaps because they relate to situations and struggles in which they are not involved. Thus synodality also challenges the link between the local dimension of the Church (at the national and, above all, regional level) and the universal one. Authentic mutual listening is essential, among those who highlight bonds and links (the universal) and those who focus on local characteristics (the particular). Both are valid; and when they are combined rather than polarised, in mutual listening, it becomes possible to develop responses that can be meaningful in different contexts and therefore will necessarily be diverse.

There were steps in this direction, starting precisely from the specific invitations that the final document extends to local churches. Nevertheless, the impression remains that much more can be done.

A second reflection concerns the fact that synodality can and must be learned, and therefore requires specific formation and training. In particular, all those tasked in their various capacities to manage synodal processes must be trained to guide them without taking them over, and to recognise the authenticity and quality of the conclusions, defending them from the opposition and resistance that will undoubtedly arise. The key point is the formation of conscience, in which individuals experience their own freedom and the responsibility that derives from it, as well as the transcendence alive in them that can never be put under control. In order to be faithful to reality, this conscience must see itself as limited and partial, in dialogue with other consciences with whom it is invited to journey. This formation should therefore also aim specifically at dialogue between consciences involved in collective decision-making processes, grounded in the faith that the Spirit is at work not only in each one of the participants but also in the dynamics of the community. Precisely this is the task of formation: to ensure that the synodal perspective, which values the contribution of every person, does not fall into relativism.

Finally, the third element to keep under consideration is that synodality, if we want to make it the shared style of the Church, needs appropriate structures to become real. This demands a willingness to examine thoroughly the habitual approach that says, 'we have always done it this way'. The innovations of Vatican II in its conception of the participation of the faithful in the life of the Church are beginning to feed a process that must surely lead to the reform of ecclesial structures, which are still linked to the framework formulated by the Council of Trent. We are called to rethink the structures so as to make them capable of accompanying the men and women of today, whose lives are lived in spaces and times very different from the late Renaissance. The final document has various proposals in this direction for all ecclesial communities regarding, for example, the parish (§18), liturgy (§47), ministry (§17) and participation in decision-making processes, and in particular regarding the involvement of women (§148).

The prospects are challenging, and this one synod is no substitute for the work of communities and of the whole Church. But its final document reminds us of how valuable in this regard was the contribution of all the young people: 'Journeying with them..., we experienced how coming together in this way creates the conditions for the Church to become a space for dialogue and a witness to a life-giving fraternity. The strength of this experience overcomes all weariness and weakness.' (FD §1)

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¹ Final Document of the Synod of Bishops on Young People Faith and Discernment: <http://www.synod2018.va/content/synod2018/en/fede-discernimento-vocazione/final-document-of-the-synod-of-bishops-on-young-people-faith-an.html>

² Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, §1.

³ Pope Francis, 'Address to a Meeting of the Congregation for Bishops' (27 February 2014), §5: https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/february/documents/papa-francesco_20140227_riuione-congregazione-vescovi.html