



GREETING AND INTRODUCTION OF THE SUPERIOR GENERAL AT THE CIRCUMSCRIPTION SUPERIORS' MEETING

Dear Brothers,

I greet each one of you and I thank you, also on behalf of the members of the General Government, for your presence at this *Meeting of the Superiors of the Circumscription*, which has two fundamental objectives: to give continuity to the synodal journey in preparation for the XI General Chapter and to exchange information about the different bodies and services of the General Government.

In this introduction I wish to emphasize precisely the “synodal journey” that we began on May 16 in connection with the preparation of the XI General Chapter: this meeting is intended to be an integral part of this synodal process. As you can see in the program of these days, among the activities that we will be called to carry out, there are: a) the in-depth study of the interpretative reading, by the *pre-preparatory Commission*, of the questionnaires sent to all our confreres, which will shed light on the reality of our Congregation; b) the drafting of a summary of the main challenges that emerged in this research and, in the light of all these elements, c) the suggestion, by the Superiors of the Circumscription, to the General Government of themes for the next General Chapter. We believe that in this process it is essential to deepen the theme of “synodality”, which is not only the method we have chosen to follow in our journey towards the XI General Chapter, but which should also become a habitual way of relating, working, and making decisions, that is, a true “style of the Congregation”, whose members walk together, manifesting this attitude in all the dimensions of their lives. In fact, if we start from the origin of the word “synodality”, we find the terms *syn* (“together”) and *odòs* (“path”): hence the meaning of “walking together”, but not in the manner of a parliamentary assembly, but as a community, as a people of God who allow themselves to be inspired by the Holy Spirit.

The following this method of working, in this meeting, is very appropriate, considering that you – together with your councils – are the first animators of the “synodal journey” in your Circumscriptions.

I. Synodality and the Church of the Third Millennium

Pope Francis said that *«the world in which we live, and which we are called to love and serve even in its contradictions, requires the Church to strengthen synergies in all areas of her mission. Precisely the path of synodality is the path that God expects of the Church in the third millennium»*.¹

Obviously synodality is not new a new topic. We know of the many Synods and Councils that have taken place in the Church, from the Council of Jerusalem, at the time of the apostles,

¹ Pope Francis, *Address at the commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops*, 17 October 2015.

to the present day. In any case, we can certainly say that the direction which the present Pontifical Magisterium is trying to offer the Church is “new”, as a specific measure to strengthen synergies in view of the evangelizing mission in the complex world in which we live.

We recall that the theme of synodality was taken up emphatically after Vatican Council II by Pope Paul VI, who with the *Motu Proprio* “*Apostolica Sollicitudo*”, published on 15 September 1965, established the Synod of Bishops for the universal Church. Subsequently, so much John Paul II, Benedict XVI and, most recently, Francis put this document into practice, convening various Synods.

According to Pope Francis it is necessary to take steps forward, always by optimizing more and more the synodal process. In this regard, Paul VI was already aware that the synodal body, with the passing of time, would have to be further improved.² Twenty years later John Paul II himself had stated that this instrument could be further improved so that the collegial pastoral responsibility could be expressed even more fully in the Synod.³ Pope Francis now continues along this path, opening the way to reflection for the whole Church. We, as an integral part of this Church, cannot be on the sidelines of this process. We too are called to wake up to implement a true “synodal exercise” within our Congregation.

2. With Jesus Way, Truth and Life, in the footsteps of Saint Paul

Synodality is not a fashion, but a constitutive dimension of the Church,⁴ already present in the first Christian communities. In fact, when Thomas, in the Gospel of John, asked Jesus: «*Lord, we do not know where you are going, how can we know the way?*» (Jn 14:5), he replied: «*I am the way, the truth and the life*» (Jn 14:6). Jesus is the path (*odòs*) that the first Christian community travels together (*syn*), in a mission that is precisely carried out *together*. To be a disciple of Jesus is to make the decision to accept Him as our only guide. This idea was so strongly rooted in their lives that the first Christians were recognized as followers of the “Way” (cf. Acts 9:1-2; 22:4; 24:14).

The Apostle Paul, after his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, also becomes a follower of the “Way”. From being a persecutor he became a disciple: «*I persecuted this Way to death, chaining men and women and imprisoning them, as the High Priest and the whole College of Elders can also bear me witness*» (Acts 22:4).

At the “school of Jesus”, who died and rose again, the Apostle Paul understood that the central message of the Master’s teaching was the love which led the disciples to live in communion with the Father and which was practically reflected in fraternal life. Paul is aware that a community is like a body, whose head is Jesus, and that each member has his own particular function and importance (cfr. Rom 12:4-10).

A community, in Pauline ecclesiology, is not a “uniformity”, but a “unity in the diversity of gifts” offered by the Spirit (cf. 1 Cor 12), not for the merit of individuals, but by pure grace. All the members united in the same project: «*Therefore, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, I exhort you all to be united in your speaking, that there may be no divisions among you, but that you may be in perfect union of thought and judgment*» (1 Cor 1:10).

² Cfr. Paul VI, *Motu proprio* “*Apostolica Sollicitudo*”, 15 settembre 1965, Proemio.

³ Cf. John Paul II, *Address at the conclusion of the Sixth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops*, 29 October 1983.

⁴ Cfr. Pope Francis, *Address at the commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops*, op. cit.

The Apostle Paul was able to involve a network of collaborators in his pastoral work. Despite some conflict along the way, everything was overcome by focusing energies on the proclamation of the Gospel. As Pope Francis recently declared, «*the Apostle Paul, the greatest missionary in the history of the Church, helps us to “make a Synod”, to “walk together”*»⁵. As Paulines, that is, as sons of Saint Paul, we are called to learn from him to work in synergy among ourselves and with our lay collaborators and to walk synodally also with the universal Church and the local Church and with all the Pauline Family... This is not only a pastoral necessity in our times, but also one of the essential conditions if we want to proclaim the Gospel in a credible way in the culture of communication.

3. Synodal Way: discerning, listening and speaking

In addition to studying the meaning of the synodal process on a theoretical level, we must also enter into this process concretely, assuming some practical attitudes. One of these, which we would like to emphasize in a special way, is discernment. As Pope Francis often reminds us, the Church lives, grows and renews itself through discernment. On this journey it is important for us not only to discern on a personal level, but, if we want to discover what the Lord asks of us as a Congregation, especially at the community level.

“Community discernment” is a style and method that helps us to read the signs of God’s presence in our history. It is the very Scripture that suggests this to us, especially in the Acts of the Apostles, when the nascent Church, endowed with the Holy Spirit, is called to make choices and make decisions in the face of the problems that the life of the community posed as priorities to be resolved together.

In any process of discernment, *listening* is a fundamental attitude. In fact, discernment is precisely “listening”. First of all, to listen to God. Recognizing the presence of God in our lives means knowing how to listen to the voice, taking those inspirations that suggest in which direction it is advisable for our Congregation to move forward, to respond to its mission, according to the needs of the time.

In addition to listening to God, we also need to listen to one another. Therefore, «*we need to practice the art of listening, which is more than just listening. The first thing, in communication with others, is the capacity of the heart that makes closeness possible, without which there is no true spiritual encounter. Listening helps us to find the right gesture and the appropriate word that moves us from the silent condition of spectators. Only by listening with respect and compassion can we find ways for authentic growth and reawaken the desire for the Christian ideal, the longing to achieve the best of what God has sown in our lives*».⁶

In the synodal journey – which is a continuous exercise of discernment, in which listening is indispensable – it is also necessary to speak with frankness, courage and openness, integrating freedom, truth and charity in such a way as to foster a constructive dialogue. Only dialogue can make us grow. Honest and transparent criticism is always constructive and helps, while this certainly does not mean useless chatter, rumours, inferences or prejudices.⁷ Listen to each other, everyone trying to understand what the Spirit is asking of the Congregation: this is an essential goal to be reached!

⁵ Pope Francis, *Homily at the Opening Mass of the Synod of Bishops for the Amazon*, October 6, 2019.

⁶ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 171.

⁷ Cfr. Pope Francis, *Opening Address to the Synod of Bishops on Youth*, 3 October 2018.

4. Synodality in the Congregation

The synodal journey is not new in our Congregation. The General and Provincial Chapters and the Regional Assemblies are examples of events in which a certain synodal style has always been present. We must recognize with gratitude that these meetings have always offered a positive experience of synodality. But it is not enough to engage in a synodal journey only in these particular circumstances. We must bring this lifestyle to all areas of our Pauline life.

In this context, we can ask some questions: how do we live synodality in our community and apostolic structures, in the way we govern and administer, in the different sectors of the apostolate, in editorial choices, in vocational ministry and in formation? Do we work in synodal form, as a team? Does our lifestyle seek communion and participation or is it still based on pyramid-like, clerical and individualistic relationships? What space do we give to discernment, to listening, to speaking with openness? What place do we give to the action of the Spirit in our personal, formative, community and apostolic lives?

Our Founder has many exhortations about the importance of living a community life where there is fraternal help and a constant effort to concentrate our energies in the same direction. It is, precisely, in the perspective of an “eminently communitarian”⁸ apostolate that Father Alberione speaks of “common life”. He explains its meaning in this way: *«It means unity of thought, unity of works, one direction in speaking, unity of feelings, unity of the goal. All must contribute to the principal and secondary objectives: personal sanctification and the apostolate»*.⁹

In this sense Fr Alberione also speaks of the apostolic organization, considering the people involved: *«The Pauline apostolate requires a strong group of editors, technicians and propagandists. All have to work together, as do the artists who perform a beautiful opera. How many disconnected and disorganized efforts and energies are consumed in desires, in attempts, in disappointments! It is necessary that all bake together the bread of spirit and truth»*.¹⁰

This also makes us ask ourselves how authority is exercised among us, in particular, since it plays an important role in the synodal process. We recall that *«Starting with the Vatican Council II, based on many Church documents, the passage from frequently patriarchal, personalist and pyramidal form of authority to another more liberal and fraternal has been fostered. Hence the passage from a model of obedience with strong disciplinary and juridical accents to that having community and apostolic dimension (that is, in view of the mission), with a more attentive giving importance to persons, to dialogue and to co-responsibility»*.¹¹ In practice, how do we live authority? To what extent are those who exercise the service of authority (canonical and delegated) promoters of an effective synodal process in view of the evangelizing mission?

5. Towards the XI General Chapter

Everything we have said so far gives us a glimpse that evangelization is not a solitary activity. Our identity as “communicating and consecrated apostles” and “men of communication” of the Gospel, in the footsteps of Saint Paul, should lead us to be true signs of communion and expert in a synodal journey. In reality we see that this is not always the case! The ecclesiology of communion and participation, which we so often share with our means of communication, does not always become in reality a commitment to live it effectively within our organizations. But

⁸ Cfr. *Constitution and Directory of the Society of Saint Paul*, art. 15.

⁹ James Alberione, *Vademecum*, no. 540.

¹⁰ James Alberione, *UPS I*, 288.

¹¹ *Manual of Service of Authority* no. 011.3

we cannot lose heart. We need a true conversion and all of us should make a sincere effort to take the steps to move ahead! This meeting itself becomes an exercise in this sense.

Dear friends, we are gathered in these days synodally, to observe and study in depth the reality in which we live and to project the Congregation towards the future. In this sense, we will reflect on the interpretative reading of the responses that our Brothers have sent us regarding the first inquiry prepared by the Pre-Preparatory Commission of the XI General Chapter.

Together we want to identify those aspects of our Pauline life that we consider to be really urgent and that need to be addressed at the next General Chapter. The synthesis that will emerge from this work will be indispensable for the next steps of our synodal journey, in which we would like to involve not only individuals, as we have done in this first stage, but also communities through open common discussions.

We believe that such an exercise can certainly be an excellent opportunity to exercise communication among ourselves and also with a view to improving the relationships in our communities. It is therefore necessary for everyone to make an effort to focus on listening, welcoming, dialogue and common discernment in a way that can also transform the lives of those who participate in this process.¹² And, all together, trying to put Jesus at the centre, the One who gives us the strength to move forward, overcoming all types of division.

Together – and letting ourselves be enlightened by the Holy Spirit – we can all, in this journey, read the signs of the times regarding the Church, consecrated life, the Congregation, society, the culture of communication, etc., in such a way as to overcome any kind of temptation to self-preservation. The warning of our Founder is timely when he invited us «*not to think about saying “we have always done like this”. As the years go by, we need to adapt to the conditions of the time in which we live*»¹³

Let us conclude by recalling that there is no synodal journey without prayer, without the Eucharist, moments that help us to enter into the deep communion of love present in the relationship between Jesus, the Father and the Holy Spirit.

May Mary, our Mother, Teacher and Queen - a praying woman who «*knows how to recognize the footsteps of the Spirit of God in great events as well as in those that seem imperceptible*»¹⁴ – accompany us on this journey.

All the best in your work.

Rome, 11 November 2019

Father Valdir José De Castro
Superior General

¹² XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *Youth, Faith and Vocational Discernment, Final Document*, no. 122.

¹³ James Alberione, *Vademecum*, op. cit. no. 347.

¹⁴ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 288.