
Synod. Instrumentum laboris: “Make room for women and baptismal ministries”

“How can the identity of the synodal People of God in mission take concrete form in the relationships, paths and places where the everyday life of the Church takes place?”. This is the fundamental question that the Instrumentum laboris for the second session of the Synod of Bishops, to be held next October, intends to answer. “To journey ahead’ the first session, held a year ago, to respond to the guiding question of the document on “how to be a synodal Church in mission.” “Other questions that emerged during the journey are the subject of work that continues in other ways, at the level of the local Churches as well as in the ten Study Groups” instituted by Pope Francis on 22 February last, reads the text, which points out that the two Sessions are part of a broader process which will not cease at the end of October 2024. The Instrumentum laboris starts with a section devoted to the Foundations of the understanding of synodality, fruit of the work of the first session. This is then followed by three parts - Relations, Pathways, Places - each of which will be the object of assembly discussions that will culminate in a final Document, covering the entire process so far, to be presented to the Holy Father.

“To give fuller recognition to the charisms, vocation and role of women, to better honour this reciprocity of relations in all spheres of the Church's life.”

This is one of the themes that emerged most strongly in the first session of the Synod of Bishops, and was confirmed by the Instrumentum laboris of the second session, which, however, specifies that this theme will not be the subject of the works, but of Study Group No. 5. “Reciprocity” between men and women is key to changing attitudes and promoting “a wider participation of women in the processes of ecclesial discernment and all stages of decision-making processes, wider access to positions of responsibility in Dioceses and ecclesiastical institutions, greater recognition and support for the life and charisms of consecrated women and their employment in positions of responsibility, access for women to positions of responsibility in seminaries, institutes and theological faculties; an increase in the number of women judges in all canonical processes.” The various charisms and ministries are the expression of “differentiated co-responsibility of all for the mission”, reads the Instrumentum laboris, that invites to “continue reflecting on how to entrust the baptismal ministries” to the laity “in a more stable form.” Proposals include

to create an instituted “ministry of listening and accompaniment”.

Moreover, it is necessary to “foster a renewed vision of ordained ministry, moving from a pyramidal way of exercising authority to a synodal way”, ultimately realizing a “new way of thinking about and organising pastoral action.”

“Ongoing formation for everyone”,

is the priority, non con piani formativi in astratto, ma “tenendo conto dei contesti, delle culture e delle tradizioni dei diversi luoghi”. The benefits of the method of conversation in the Spirit, that characterised the Synodal discussions, are strongly recognised. Moreover, many Churches report that they “feel unprepared” to carry out the task of listening to people who experience various types of poverty and marginalisation”, and express the need for specific formation. This point is entrusted to Study Group 2. The digital culture and the promotion of relevant formation in this field is the work of Study Group 3, while the formation of candidates for ordained ministry is among the work of Study Group 4. The work of Study Group 9 is dedicated to the preparation of theological criteria and

synodal methodologies for a shared discernment of controversial doctrinal, pastoral, and ethical issues.

“Without tangible changes, the vision of a synodal Church will not be credible”,

is stated in the text, whose last part focuses on the exercise of authority: **“In a synodal Church, the responsibility of the bishop, the College of bishops and the Roman Pontiff to make decisions is inalienable. However, it is not unconditional.”** Opposition between consultation and deliberation is thus inadequate: “in the Church, deliberation takes place with the help of all, never without the pastoral authority that takes decisions by virtue of its office.” For this reason, the formula of a “consultative vote only”, diminishes the value of consultation and should be corrected. **A synodal Church requires both a culture and practice of transparency and accountability**, since “the lack of transparency and accountability fuels clericalism, which is based on the implicit assumption that ordained ministers are accountable to no one for the exercise of the authority vested in them.”

“Transparency and accountability are not limited to sexual and financial abuse”,

the text underlines: “They must also be concerned with pastoral plans, methods of evangelisation, and how the Church respects the dignity of the human person, for example, regarding the working conditions within its institutions.” **As regards the exercise of Petrine ministry, the Instrumentum laboris proposes giving renewed impetus to the perspective of “sound decentralisation”, called for by Pope Francis and requested by numerous Episcopal Conferences.** “The Bishop of Rome is the guarantor of synodality”, we are reminded in the document, but the Apostolic Constitution Praedicate Evangelium suggests “leaving “to the competence of Bishops the authority to resolve those issues with which they are familiar and that do not affect the Church’s unity of doctrine.” In line with the reform process initiated by Bergoglio, “periodic evaluation procedures” on the performance of those exercising any form of ministry and holding any position within the Church, are to take place. The role of the Pontifical Representatives from a synodal missionary perspective and exploring ways of evaluating their work is the task entrusted to the Study Group No.8

M.Michela Nicolais