

LET US DREAM

*THE PATH TO
A BETTER FUTURE*

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So we have two temptations: on the one hand, to wrap ourselves in the banner of one side or the other, exacerbating the conflict; on the other, to avoid engaging in conflict altogether, denying the tension involved and washing our hands of it.

The section beginning on the next page talks about 'overflow' so you need the explanation which begins below.

The conflict, fact beyond the surface reality involved to the possibility of a new synthesis, one that does not destroy either pole, but preserves what is good and valid in both in a new perspective.

This breakthrough comes about as a gift in dialogue, when people trust each other and humbly seek the good together, and are willing to learn from each other in a mutual exchange of gifts. At such moments, the solution to an intractable problem comes in ways that are unexpected and unforeseen, the result of a new and greater creativity released, as it were, from the outside. This is what I mean by "overflow" because it breaks the banks that confined our thinking, and causes to pour forth, as if from an overflowing fountain, the answers that formerly the contraposition didn't let us see. We recognize this process as a gift from God because it is the same action of the Spirit described in Scripture and evident in history.

"Overflow" is one possible translation of the Greek *perisseuo*, which is the word used by the psalmist whose cup overflows with God's grace in Psalm 23. *Perisseuo* was what Jesus promises (Luke 6:38) will be poured into our laps when we forgive. It is the noun deployed in John's Gospel (John 10:10) to describe the life that Jesus came to bring, and the adjective Saint Paul uses (2 Corinthians 1:5) to describe God's generosity. It is the very heart of God that overflows in those famous passages of the father rushing out to hug his prodigal son, the

wedding host who gathers guests from the roads and the fields for his banquet, the net-breaking catch of fish at dawn after a night of fruitless trawling, or Jesus washing the feet of his disciples on the night before he died.

Such overflows of love happen, above all, at the crossroads of life, at moments of openness, fragility, and humility, when the ocean of His love bursts the dams of our self-sufficiency, and so allows for a new imagination of the possible.

My concern as Pope has been to encourage such overflows within the Church by reinvigorating the ancient practice of synodality. I have wanted to develop this ancient process not just for the sake of the Church but as a service to a humanity that is so often locked in paralyzed disagreements.

The term comes from the Greek *syn-odos*, "walking together," and this is its goal: not so much to forge agreement as to recognize, honor, and reconcile differences on a higher plane where the best of each can be retained. In the dynamic of a synod, differences are expressed and polished until you reach, if not consensus, a harmony that holds on to the sharp notes of its differences. This is what happens in music: with seven different musical notes with their sharps and flats a harmony is created that allows for the better articulation of the singularities of each note. Therein lies its beauty: the harmony that results can be complex, rich, and unexpected. In the Church the one who brings about that harmony is the Holy Spirit.

I like to see the beginning of ecclesial synodality in the early Church when the apostles gathered to wrestle with a question that divided them: Should non-Jewish people be

bound by Jewish laws and customs such as circumcision when they become Christian? After discussion and prayer and some bitter disagreement, they pondered the way that God had worked signs and wonders among them through the Gentiles, for God is recognized in the experience of real life. They declared that "it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (Acts 15:28) not to impose on non-Jewish Christians the regulations of Jewish law.

It was a new opening that changed the course of history. God had made a covenant of salvation with a single people, the Jewish people, which Christ recovered and offered to all of humanity, irrespective of race, nation, or language. This is why Christianity has never been confined to a particular culture but has been enriched by the cultures of the peoples where it has taken root. Each of these peoples experiences the gift of God according to its own culture, and in each of them the Church expresses its genuine Catholicity, the beauty of its many different faces.

The synod experience allows us to walk together not just in spite of our differences, but seeking the truth and taking on the richness of the polar tensions at stake. Many breakthroughs have happened in councils and assemblies throughout the Church's history. But what matters most is that harmony that enables us to move forward together on the same path, even with all our shades of difference.

This synodal approach is something our world now needs badly. Rather than seeking confrontation, declaring war, with each side hoping to defeat the other, we need processes that allow differences to be expressed, heard, and left to mature in such a way that we can walk together without needing to destroy anyone. This is hard work; it needs patience and

commitment—above all to each other. Lasting peace is about creating and maintaining processes of mutual listening. We build a people not with the weapons of war but in the productive tension of walking together.

In this task, mediators matter. Making agreements that prevent rupture and allow all sides to keep walking together is a vital role of law and politics. Mediation is a science, but also an exercise in human wisdom. In law and politics the mediator plays a role analogous, in some ways, to that of the Holy Spirit in the synod, holding together differences until new horizons open up.

At its best, this is what happens, for example, in the European Union: achieving reconciliation in difference. The EU has been through a difficult period. But to watch its members reach agreement on a coronavirus bailout package—all those different agendas and views, the furious trading and negotiation—was an example of this attempt to harmonize differences within an overall effort to seek unity. That is what I mean when I compare this with synodality, and why perhaps our experience within the Church can help our world at large. Let's look at what happens, and perhaps learn some lessons.

There have been three synods during my time as Pope: on the family, on young people, and on Amazonia. At each, more than two hundred bishops and cardinals and laypeople gathered from across the world to carry out a discernment over a period usually of three weeks, at the end of which the bishops voted on the concluding document. This process, instituted by Saint Paul VI, has grown and developed, raising along the way new questions to answer. That is why I would like to see,

in the future, a synod on the topic of synodality. The changes I have introduced so far mean that the synods held every two or three years here in Rome are freer and more dynamic, giving more time for honest discussion and listening.¹⁸

Synodality starts with hearing from the whole People of God. A Church that teaches must be firstly a Church that listens. The Master was a good master because he knew how to be a good disciple (Philippians 2:6-11). Consulting all members of the Church is vital because, as the Second Vatican Council reminded us, the faithful as a whole are anointed by the Holy Spirit and "cannot err in matters of belief."¹⁹

So each of the Synods held in Rome started from wide-ranging discussions and consultations organized in local Churches who gathered up themes and concerns articulated in the "preparatory document" to be discussed. Many different voices and perspectives are included in the assembly itself: lay-people, invited experts, and delegates from other (non-Catholic) Churches, who make vital contributions to the discernment. In this way, we obey a principle that was dear to the Church of the first millennium: *Quod omnes tangit ab omnibus tractari debet* (What affects all should be discussed by all).²⁰

That's why it delights me to see how the Church in different countries is embarking on processes that put the synodal method into practice. In Australia, for example, they have a process going on over several years that involves hundreds of thousands of people, asking how they as a Church can be more inclusive, merciful, and prayerful, and more open to conversion, renewal, and mission.

In speaking of synodality, it's important not to confuse Catholic doctrine and tradition with the Church's norms and practices. What is under discussion at synodal gatherings

are not traditional truths of Christian doctrine. The Synod is concerned mainly with how teaching can be lived and applied in the changing contexts of our time. The three Synods—on the Family (2014 and 2015), on Young People (2018), and on Amazonia (2019)—have played a vital role in opening up new ways of caring for people and places facing particular challenges.

What characterizes a synodal path is the role of the Holy Spirit. We listen, we discuss in groups, but above all we pay attention to what the Spirit has to say to us. That is why I ask everyone to speak frankly and to listen carefully to others because, there, too, the Spirit is speaking. Open to changes and new possibilities, the Synod is for everyone an experience of conversion. Hence one of the changes in the process: periods of silence between speeches to allow those in attendance to be better aware of the motions of the Spirit.

Synods produce intense discussion, which is good: they involve different reactions and responses to those who think differently or have particular positions. We do not all react in the same way. We have also seen in many cases how, faced with disagreement, different groups attempting to interfere in the synodal process try to impose their ideas, either by applying pressure inside the Synod, or outside it, by distorting and discrediting the views of those who do not think as they do.

This, too, is a good sign, because wherever the Spirit of God is present, so, too, are temptations to silence it or distract from it. (If the Spirit weren't present, those forces wouldn't bother.) We saw the bad spirit in some of the "noise" outside the synod hall, as well as within it: in the fear, the panic, the claims that the Synod is a conspiracy to undermine Church doctrine, that the Church is closed to new ways of thinking,

and so on. These are signs of the isolated conscience we were speaking of earlier, and of the frustration of the bad spirit, which, when it fails to seduce, hurls furious accusations (but never, of course, *self*-accusations).

In the synod hall there also exists the temptation to resist what a synodal process involves: arrogating the monopoly of the interpretation of truth, and trying to impose one's ideas on the whole Body through pressure or by discrediting those who feel differently. Some participants were quick to take up hard-line positions that betrayed an obsession with the purity of doctrine, as if it were under threat and they were its guardians. Others insisted on progressive criteria that are not in keeping with the Gospel and Tradition. This is one of the gifts of the Spirit in the synod process: to unmask agendas and hidden ideologies. That is why we cannot speak of synodality unless we accept and live the presence of the Holy Spirit.

The Gospel must be read and interpreted in the light of the history of salvation and Tradition. Other tools can help to grow our understanding by highlighting, identifying, and valuing hitherto unexplored riches from this source of Living Water.

Another temptation that so often confuses people is treating the Synod as a kind of parliament underpinned by a "political battle" in which in order to govern one side must defeat the other. Some people tried to drum up support for their positions as politicians might: by sounding warnings through the media, or appealing to opinion polls. This goes against the spirit of the synod as a protected space of community discernment.

The media have a key role to play in opening the Synod to the People of God, and the wider world, communicating and helping people see the issues and challenges the Church

is facing. But in some cases journalists run the risk of confusing contrapositions with polarizations, reducing the synod dynamic to simplistic yes-no binaries as if the Synod were a dramatic showdown between opposing forces. That is not how it feels inside the synod hall. However, sometimes the media narrative ends up undermining the capacity for discernment.

We saw this in the Synod on the Family, where the aim was to move beyond some of the “casuistic” thinking that prevents the Church from dealing with difficult cases with the nuanced approach of its own healthy Tradition. Jesus condemns the casuistry of the doctors of the law, for example, in chapter 23 of Matthew’s Gospel. Using these kinds of categories to judge situations made it hard, on the one hand, to grasp the complexity of real-life situations, and on the other, hindered the Church’s ability to offer support and guidance to people using Gospel categories.

In the Synod on the Family this was naturally a much broader question than the specific issue of the pastoral care of the divorced or separated and remarried and their access to the sacraments, as many believed. Yet the framing of the synod by media linked to particular groups reduced and simplified the whole work of the Synod to this one issue, as if this synod had been called solely to decide whether or not to allow divorced and remarried people to receive Communion. The narrative was set that the Church should either “relax the rules” or maintain its “strict” stance. In other words, the media frame reflecting that narrative reinforced the very casuistry the Synod was seeking to move beyond.

The bad spirit conditioned the discernment, favoring positions on either side (“for” or “against”) and encouraging debilitating conflicts. The effect was to reduce the spiritual

freedom that is so vital in a synodal process. Each side, entrenched in “their” truth, ended up being imprisoned in their own positions.

Yet the Spirit saved us in the end, in a breakthrough at the close of the second (October 2015) meeting of the Synod on the Family. The overflow, in this case, came above all through those with a deep knowledge of Saint Thomas Aquinas, among them the Archbishop of Vienna, Cardinal Christoph Schönborn. They recovered the true moral doctrine of the authentic scholastic tradition of Saint Thomas, rescuing it from the decadent scholasticism that had led to a casuistic morality.

Because of the immense variety of situations and circumstances people found themselves in, Aquinas’s teaching that no general rule could apply in every situation allowed the synod to agree on the need for a case-by-case discernment. There was no need to change the Church’s law, only how it was applied. By attending to the specifics of each case, attentive to God’s grace operating in the nitty-gritty of people’s lives, we could move on from the black-and-white moralism that risked closing off paths of grace and growth. It was neither a tightening nor a loosening of the “rules” but an application of them that left room for circumstances that didn’t fit neatly into categories.

This was the great breakthrough the Spirit brought us: a better synthesis of truth and mercy in a fresh understanding drawn from within our own Tradition. Without changing law or doctrine but recovering an authentic meaning of both, the Church is now better able to walk with people who are living together or divorced, to help them see where God’s grace is operating in their lives, and to help them embrace the fullness of Church teaching. Chapter 8 of the post-synod document

I issued in April 2016, *Amoris Laetitia*, draws on the pure doctrine of Aquinas. Yet it's still hard for some to accept this process: a sign of how many remain not only conditioned by casuistic positions, but also of how their intentions, visions, and even ideologies prevent them from recognizing a synodal path safeguarded by the Church's own Tradition.²¹

In the Synod on Amazonia of October 2019, there was a similar polarization over a secondary issue, but this time without, for now, a resolution by overflow.

The synod was called to highlight the challenges facing the region and its peoples, including the destruction of the rain-forest, the murders of indigenous leaders, the marginalization of the indigenous, and the difficulties facing the Church in the region. Yet some people in and through the media again reduced the whole synodal process to the issue of whether or not the Church would be willing to ordain married men, the so-called *virī probati*, even though that question took up a mere three lines in a thirty-page preparatory document.

The fantasy that the synod was "about" this issue minimized and simplified all the region's huge challenges. So that when my apostolic exhortation *Querida Amazonia* came out in February 2020, many felt disappointed or relieved because "the Pope did not open that door." It was as if nobody was interested in the region's ecological, cultural, social, and pastoral dramas; the synod had "failed" because it didn't authorize the ordination of the *virī probati*.

In reality, the synod was a breakthrough in many ways: it gave us a clear mission and a vision to stand with the native peoples, the poor, and the land; and to defend culture and

creation against the powerful forces of death and destruction driven solely by profit. It laid the basis for a Church in Amazonia that is deeply embedded in local culture, and with a strong presence of active laypeople; and it set in motion processes such as the creation of the Amazonian bishops' conference. But little of this progress was reported. Amazonia and its peoples were again ignored and silenced, because some media and pressure groups had decided that the synod had been called to resolve one particular issue.

Yet, while there was no resolution of that question, issues came to the fore that I, at least, had not anticipated, and had not been raised in the preparatory document. This is one of the great gifts of the synod process: sometimes the Spirit acts to show us that we are looking in the wrong direction, that what we think the issue is "about" is not. Walking together, listening to what the Spirit has to say to the Church, means allowing for the apparent purity of our positions to be unmasked, and to detect the tares growing among the wheat (Matthew 13:24-30).

An issue that surfaced was the reluctance of many priests in some of the nine countries that include Amazonia within its borders to be sent as missionaries to the region. They preferred to be sent abroad, to Europe and the United States, where conditions are more comfortable. So the Synod clearly saw a concrete pastoral issue which the bishops of those countries needed to resolve urgently: the lack of solidarity and missionary zeal in the hearts of many of our priests.

In other words, the lack of Sunday celebrations of Mass in some regions—which was the reason given for wanting *virī probati*—was clearly not just due to a lack of ordained ministers, but was also part of a broader lack of missionary

commitment to Amazonia. To characterize the issue simply as an absence of available clergy was to conceal a more complex problem.

During the synod assembly itself I saw there were some areas where we can move ahead and yet which are paralyzed. Again, this is a gift of the Spirit in the Synod: to show blockages that are preventing us from taking advantage of the grace of God that is already being offered to us. Why, for example, aren't there enough permanent deacons in the Amazon region? Permanent deacons are vital in reflecting a domestic Church that finds its greatest expression in the Word and in service. In Amazonia a family—a husband and wife, their children—can be a missionary community at the center of a network of relationships.²²

The Synod showed that to stand with the people, defending their cultures and the natural world, the Church in Amazonia must grow its grassroots presence throughout the region. This can happen only if laypeople are given a decisive role. It is the lay teachers of the faith (catechists) who primarily carry out the task of spreading the Good News of the Gospel, and in the language and customs of the people they serve. That's why I believe it is crucial to trust the lay people, and especially the women who run so many of the communities in the area, to bring forth a distinctively Amazonian holiness that will bear many future fruits. This, in my reading of the synod's discernment, is where the Spirit is pointing.

The danger of becoming trapped in conflict is that we lose perspective. Our horizons shrink and we close off paths the Spirit is showing us. Sometimes walking together means continuing

to endure the disagreements, leaving them to be transcended on a higher level at a later time. Time is superior to space and the whole is greater than the parts. This was my own interior discernment, which was confirmed by the discouragement that greeted the exhortation. Let me explain.

Within the synod process, disappointment and a sense of defeat are not signs of the Good Spirit, because they are born of unfulfilled promises, and the Lord always keeps His promises. Outside the synod process, of course, disappointment may be of the Good Spirit, the Lord showing us that a particular path we've chosen is not the right way to go, the kind of disappointment we feel after doing something we thought was enjoyable but later realized was a waste of time or worse. But in the synod process, such disappointment is more likely to reveal an agenda: you came wanting to achieve something, and when you didn't get it, you feel deflated. You may be right (or not), but these are processes that take time, that demand maturity, perseverance, and decision. They call for sowing seeds that others will be able to harvest. In other words, you remain trapped within your desires, rather than allowing yourself to be touched by the grace on offer.

When I hear some say they were disappointed by the Amazonia synod, I think: Didn't we open new pastoral paths? Did the Spirit not show us the need to trust in and allow the growth of a specific church culture in the area that is distinctively lay? For wherever there is a particular need in the Church, the Spirit has already poured out the gifts that can meet it, gifts that need to be received. As *Querida Amazonia* says (#94), we need to be open to bold new possibilities, including the need formally to recognize the remarkable leadership of women in church communities in the region. All of

these signs of the Spirit could easily be eclipsed by the narrow focus on the disputed question of broadening the priesthood to include married men.

In walking together, reading the signs of the times, open to the new things of the Spirit, we might take some lessons from this ancient church experience of synodality which I have sought to revive.

First: We need a respectful, mutual listening, free of ideology and predetermined agendas. The aim is not to reach agreement by means of a contest between opposing positions, but to journey together to seek God's will, allowing differences to harmonize. Most important of all is the synodal spirit: to meet each other with respect and trust, to believe in our shared unity, and to receive the new thing that the Spirit wishes to reveal to us.

Second: Sometimes this new thing means resolving disputed questions through overflow. Breakthroughs happen, often at the last minute, leading to a meeting of the minds that allows us to move forward. But the overflow might equally mean an invitation to change our way of thinking and our lenses, to shed our rigidity and our agendas, and look in places we never noticed before. Ours is a God of Surprises, who is always ahead of us.

Third: This is a patient process, which does not come easily to our impatient age. But perhaps, in lockdown, we have learned better how to approach it.

In nineteenth-century Argentina, at a time of frequent wars between strong local governors known as *caudillos*, the story is told of a *caudillo* who was beating a retreat in the midst of a torrential downpour. He gave the order to pitch camp until the skies cleared. But as it was passed from mouth to mouth

the order took on a deeper meaning, a wisdom that expressed what his people were living through, wise counsel for times of tribulation and conflict.

Discerning in the midst of conflict requires us sometimes to pitch camp together, waiting for the skies to clear.

Time belongs to the Lord. Trusting in Him, we move forward with courage, building unity through discernment, to discover and implement God's dream for us, and the paths of action ahead.