

Methodology of work during the European Continental Assembly

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Prague, 6 February 2023

I. Introduction. Gratitude and hope in the light of the Lord for this Assembly

I would like to begin by expressing my deep gratitude for the possibility of sharing with you at this significant moment in the discernment journey of the Church in Europe. A journey full of history, of identity and of service and mission to this region and to the whole universal Church, but also a journey that faces unprecedented challenges in all dimensions of life in which it is necessary to share with words, and above all with witness, the Good News of Hope in the Lord Jesus who is light, in the Risen Christ who enlightens and calls us so that all may have life and life in abundance.

Light does not remain alone. All around, other lights are flaring up. In their gleam, space acquires contours, so that we can find our bearings. We do not live alone in this world. And it is for the important things of life that we have to rely on other people. Particularly in our faith, then, we do not stand alone, we are links in the great chain of believers.

Pope Benedict XVI. Apostolic Journey to Germany.

Prayer Vigil with young people. Freiburg. Freiburg, September 2011.

For the universal Church, in this synodal process, the contribution of the Church Europe in all its richness as the people of God is fundamental. My gratitude to the entire presidency and general secretariat of the Council of European Bishops' Conferences for the invitation to share this space and to learn together with you as we move forward in this experience filled with a Synodal spirit that is proper to the European ecclesial experience, but which is an unprecedented experience in the framework of a Continental phase for a Universal Synod in which we feel called to walk together.

All of us who are here: in person, virtually, and all those who have participated in the preparatory phases for this Continental Assembly, are called to resolutely seek the light of the Spirit of the Lord through mutual listening, through the celebration of our faith, through welcoming the pains and hopes of the reality of this continent, to offer what we feel God is calling us to, in what there is consensus and in the transparency of affirming honest dissent, to share it in this Synodal process of the whole Church.

Nobody can believe unless he is supported by the faith of others, and conversely, through my faith, I help to strengthen others in their faith.... And we help one another to find our bearings, to work out where we stand in society. Dear friends, the Lord says: "I am the light of the world - you are the light of the world." It is mysterious and wonderful that Jesus applies the same preach to himself and to all of us together, namely "light".

Pope Benedict XVI. Apostolic Journey to Germany.
Prayer Vigil with young people. Freiburg. Freiburg, September 2011.

I ask God to grant us the serenity, discernment and courage to have a common experience of mutual listening, to open ears, hearts and minds so that the Holy Spirit may have the last word, and that we may know how to contribute to an ongoing process, from the rich and complex particularity of Europe, so that the project of Christ may become more alive in our journey together as Church.

II. The Continental Stage of the present Synod. Way and manner of the Continental Assemblies

Looking to the future of the synodal process requires consideration of two very different time horizons. The first is the long-term horizon, in which synodality takes the form of a perennial call to personal conversion and reform of the Church. The second, clearly at the service of the first, is the one that focuses our attention on the Synod 2021-2024 process we are living and, in this moment, more precisely on the meetings of the Continental Stage (DCS 98).

The Document for the Continental Stage (DCS) invites us to take a further step on this spiritual journey "for a synodal Church: communion, participation and mission" and constitutes its point of reference (DCS 104).

Each Continental Assembly is called to carry out a process of discernment on the DCS that is appropriate to its own local context and to draw up a Final Document reporting on it. The Final Documents of the seven Continental Assemblies will serve as the basis for the drafting of the Instrumentum laboris in June 2023 (DCS 107).

Essential keys to this Stage as an aid to entering our European Continental Assembly.

- This Stage is clearly focused on fostering **ecclesial discernment with a continental look**, and the whole experience must be built around the Document for the Continental Stage - DCS.

- In this stage there will be **7 Continental-Regional Assemblies**:

Africa; Latin America and Caribbean; Asia; Europe; Middle East - Eastern Churches; North America; Oceania.

- This stage is designed to 1. receive the contribution of the Diocesan Phase in the Document for the Continental Stage; and 2. To produce, as the fruit of a synodal discernment, a Final document that will help the next Stage for the elaboration of the *Instrumentum Laboris*. It is important to recognise that this Stage does not make sense in isolation; this continental experience has a particular value only insofar as it connects with the previous work and in its contribution to the next phase.

- It is part of the Listening phase of the Synod, i.e. it is not a phase to define specific proposals, to push particular agendas that have been left out, or to make amendments to a document.

- The one question that underpins the whole Synodal process remains the same as the one that drives this Stage:

"How does this 'journeying together,' which takes place today on different levels (from the local level to the universal one), allow the Church to proclaim the Gospel in accordance with the mission entrusted to Her; and what steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow as a synodal Church?" (PD, no. 2).

- Much emphasis has been placed on the importance of keeping in mind at this Continental stage **the voices of people from the margins** (from the broad and particular understanding that each continent identifies as such in its reality), of those who may have been left out in the first stage.

- Together with the people of God, **the role and participation of the bishops** in a particular way is crucial, as indicated in *Episcopalis Communio*, and as expressed in the *Apostolica Sollicitudo* of St. Paul VI in instituting the Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops. In the letter of January 26th of this year, the General Secretary of the Synod and the General Relator of the current Synod express the importance of the role of the pastors in taking care of the objective of seeking common paths from the contributions of all the people of God. Meetings of the bishops will take place in the context of the Continental Ecclesial Assemblies, to offer their contribution according to their own identity and ministry.

- The method of accompaniment at this stage has been a **"tailor-made" approach**; in other words, each of the 7 continent-regions has been accompanied in a particular way, in such a way that concerns have been taken up, doubts have been clarified, resistance has been addressed, and a specific path has been taken according to the possibilities and needs of each reality, making it an experience to be taken on by each continental Episcopal structure and its commissions or work forces in each continent-region.

- **The most important thing is the experience**, that is to say, that the Continental Stage be an experience that helps to grow in the sense of Synodality in the journey of the Church. The documents and events are very important, insofar as they lead to the greater goal, which is to grow in Synodality from the identity of being Church.

- The specific orientations of this stage are duly expressed in the **Document for the Continental Stage in section 4: Next steps**. The methodological orientations with which it is intended to assist in this European experience, and in all the Assemblies, are in section 4.2, numbers 104 to 109.

- The discernment of the Continental Stage must be underpinned by the central question of the whole process, and the orientations of the stage which invite to search in the Synthesis of the universal Church:

A. INTUITIONS that resonate most strongly;

B. Substantial TENSIONS or DIVERGENCIES; and, starting from what emerges from these two perspectives,

C. PRIORITIES, RECURRENT ISSUES or CALLS TO ACTION.

I would like to conclude this segment with a prayer offered to us by the Holy Father Francis in the Apostolic Constitution *Episcopalis Communio*, which powerfully sums up the spirit and inner freedom with which we are invited to walk during these days.

... the Synod of Bishops must increasingly become a privileged instrument for listening to the People of God: "For the Synod Fathers we ask the Holy Spirit first of all for the gift of listening: to listen to God, that with him we may hear the cry of the people; to listen to the people until breathing in the desire to which God calls us. EC 6.

It is a meditation on the particular role of servants and mediators that we have in this experience, and on the certainty that the main protagonist of this Assembly, and of this whole Synod, must be the Holy Spirit. Otherwise, we will have reduced this discernment to a mere exercise of listing topics in a univocal way and to an attempt to convince others of particular views, where there is surely no room to find ways to walk more synodally as Church, and in the conviction of following Jesus.

III. Methodological guidelines for the experience of the European Continental Assembly

For this stage, and as an instrument for discernment, the Continental Assemblies have been encouraged to develop these meetings under the method of spiritual conversation, adapted to the reality and particularities of each place, given that it was recognized during the first year of consultation as a major aid to facilitate the involvement of all in discernment.

In particular, its three phases should be emphasized: the taking of the floor by each participant (while the others listen!), the resonance of listening to all that was said in the group to help each other hear the voice of the Spirit, and the discernment of the fruits by the group finding the common ground or perspectives.

Listening to the Word of God and life experiences, followed by listening to the inner resonances of fellow travelers, creates that climate of communal discernment that avoids the logic of opposition or superficial debates, allows for the search for true attunement, allowing the voice of the Spirit to resound.

"Meetings in the spirit of the synodal method, in which all members of the congregation or community can openly and honestly express their opinion, as well as meetings with various groups outside the Church, should continue. This kind of cooperation should become one of the 'unwritten laws' of the Church culture, so as to foster rapprochement between Church members and groups in society, thus creating a readiness of people for deeper dialogue" (EC Latvia).

For our experience of common discernment in Prague (and with the participation of those who are connected virtually), a methodological adaptation of the spiritual conversation and its 3 steps has been established:

Step 1. taking of the floor by each participant – while the others listen,

Step 2. the resonance of listening to others (and mainly to the Spirit),

Step 3. the discernment of the fruits by the group – finding the common ground.

so that each moment of the Assembly corresponds to each of these steps.

Following the general programme of this Assembly, the first III working sessions are established in which the space for sharing in groups is associated with each of the questions of the Document for the Continental Stage:

- Session I. Monday

11:00. **Step 1. TAKING OF THE FLOOR BY 13 NATIONAL DELEGATIONS** (two delegates per Conference. 6 minutes in total)

15:00. **Step 2. RESONANCE OF LISTENING TO OTHERS.** Working in groups for community discernment. The groups will be the same throughout the Assembly.

Based on the previous reading of the Document for the Continental Stage and on what was heard in the previous session, groups share around the 1st question of the DCS:

- which intuitions resonate most strongly with the lived experiences and realities of the Church in your continent? Which experiences are new, or illuminating to you?"

17:00. **Step 3. THE DISCERNMENT OF THE FRUITS BY THE GROUP.** In this plenary space:

A. each group (face-to-face) shares in 4 minutes the synthesis of their community discernment on the question about INTUITIONS, and NEW and ENLIGHTENING experiences.

B. Free interventions and guest interventions, 3 minutes each, in resonance with what was shared by the groups and looking for where the Lord's invitations are in what was heard.

Session II. Tuesday

9:00. **Step 1.** TAKING OF THE FLOOR BY OTHER 13 NATIONAL DELEGATIONS (two delegates per Conference. 6 minutes total)

11:00. **Step 2.** RESONANCE OF LISTENING TO OTHERS. Group work for community discernment.

From the previous reading of the Document for the Continental Stage and from what we heard in the previous session, we share in groups around the 2nd Question of the DCS:

- what substantial tensions or divergences emerge as particularly important in your continent's perspective? Consequently, what are the questions or issues that should be addressed and considered in the next steps of the process?

15:00. **Step 3.** THE DISCERNMENT OF THE FRUITS BY THE GROUP. In this plenary space:

A. each group (face-to-face) shares in 4 minutes the synthesis of their community discernment on the question on TENSIONS or DIVERGENCES, and QUESTIONS to be considered.

B. Free interventions and guest interventions, 3 minutes each, in resonance with what was shared by the groups and looking for where the Lord's invitations are in what was heard.

Session III. Tuesday evening and Wednesday morning

Tuesday 17:00. **Step 1.** TAKING OF THE FLOOR BY THE LAST 13 NATIONAL DELEGATIONS (two delegates per Conference. 6 minutes total).

Wednesday 9:00. **Step 2.** RESONANCE OF LISTENING TO OTHERS. Group work for community discernment.

From the previous reading of the Document for the Continental Stage and from what was heard in the previous session, sharing in groups around the 3rd (last) question of the DCS:

- Looking at what emerges from the previous two questions, what are the priorities, recurring themes and calls to action that can be shared with other local Churches around the world and discussed during the First Session of the Synodal Assembly in October 2023?

Wednesday 11:00. **Step 3. THE DISCERNMENT OF THE FRUITS BY THE GROUP.**

In this plenary space:

A. each group (face-to-face) shares in 4 minutes the synthesis of their communal discernment on the question on **PRIORITIES, RECURRENT ISSUES and CALLS TO ACTION** to be worked on by the next phase of the Synod.

B. Free interventions and guest interventions, 3 minutes each, in resonance with what was shared by the groups and looking for where the Lord's invitations are in what was heard.

Session IV. Wednesday afternoon

15:00. **Plenary session** for:

A. Listen to the fruits of the virtual working groups. According to the number of groups (3 minutes).

C. Free interventions in resonance with what was shared by the groups and looking for where the Lord's invitations are in what was heard.

Session V. Thursday morning

9:00 Presentation and discussion of the **draft of the Final Document** of the Assembly.

11:00 **Approval session** of the Final Document.

12:30 **Conclusions.**

IV. Final thoughts. A request to the Lord for this Assembly

To close this intervention, I would like to insist that this whole method only makes sense if we recognise that the Holy Spirit is the main protagonist of discernment, and the fruit must always guide us to a greater sense of belonging to the project of the Lord Jesus and following him.

It is very important, during these days, to make a permanent exercise of purifying the intention and to constantly repeat the question: ***in whatever I share, do I leave space for the Holy Spirit to emerge through my discernment, and do I allow this presence to lead me in the listening and sharing of these days?*** If we do not ask ourselves this question throughout each stage of this experience, and if we do not seek what the call of the Lord is for us as Church at this stage of the Synod, we will have missed a wonderful opportunity to allow ourselves to be led by what God is asking of us at this time.

Pope Francis has offered us in his recent catechesis on discernment very valuable guidelines for this Synodal process. Among many things he has expressed to us that:

"genuine consolation is a sort of confirmation that we are doing what God wants of us, that we are walking on his paths, that is, on the paths of life, joy, and

peace... Another good sign of confirmation, for example, is the fact of remaining free with regard to what has been decided, being willing to question it, even to give it up in the face of possible denials, trying to find in them a possible teaching from the Lord."

Pope Francis. Catechesis on discernment 10 and 11 (2022).

May the words of today's 1st reading from the book of Genesis (1, 1-19) be a permanent call for us as the European Continental Assembly to be able to recognise the way in which God himself is making his plan of life, offering us the way towards the light, separating it from the shadows, knowing that we are called to be part of a discernment that creates life, that always opens up new possibilities, and that recognises what is good and what gives more meaning in the Lord. May external and internal noise not prevent us from opening ourselves to find what the Spirit wants to offer us through mutual listening and discernment. The Lord says to our hearts, as in Mark's Gospel: "***Ephphatha***", "**be opened!**".