



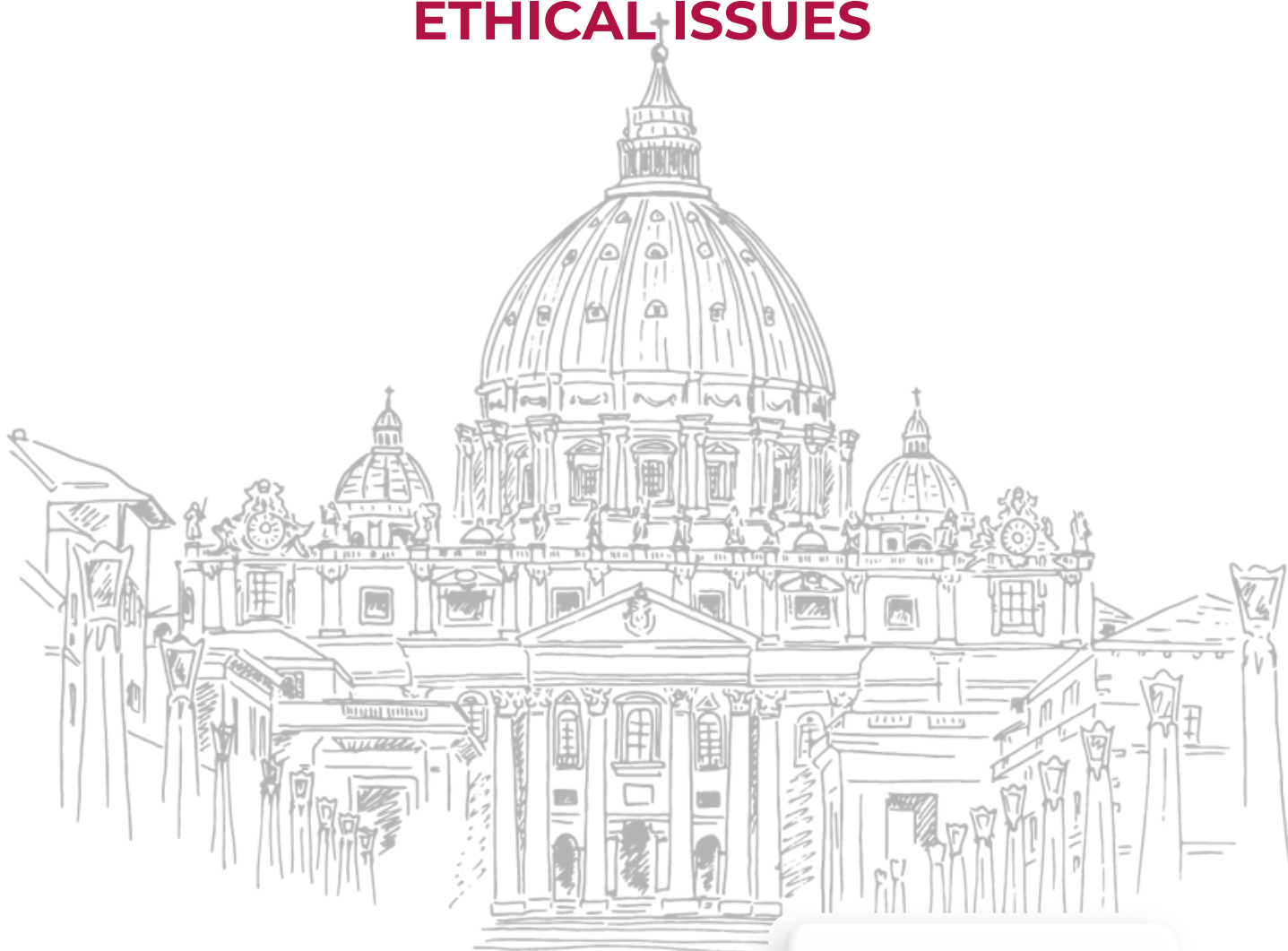
STUDY GROUPS

on relevant questions from the *Synthesis' Report* of the First Session of the XVI General Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops

FOR A SYNODAL CHURCH:
COMMUNION, PARTICIPATION, MISSION

STUDY GROUP N. 9

THEOLOGICAL CRITERIA AND SYNODAL METHODOLOGIES FOR SHARED DISCERNMENT OF EMERGING DOCTRINAL, PASTORAL, AND ETHICAL ISSUES



FINAL REPORT

[Original text: Italian. Working translation]

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List of abbreviations:

AL *Amoris laetitia*

DV *Dei Verbum*

EG *Evangelii gaudium*

FD *Final Document of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops*

GS *Gaudium et spes*

VG *Veritatis gaudium*

INTRODUCTORY NOTES:

THE JOURNEY UNDERTAKEN AND THE METHODOLOGICAL CHOICES MADE

1. What is at stake in the synodal process

First and foremost, we believe it is important, to account for the journey we have undertaken, having sought to conduct it as a practice of synodal learning. This experience has gradually fostered in us a commitment to address the subject at hand with *parrhesia* and radicality, to the best of our ability, in the conviction that this topic touches upon a defining dimension of the Church's mission.

The synodal process, in reality, calls for a conversion of heart and mind as well as a transformation of practices so that we may walk with fidelity and renewed vigour, as the People of God, along the path traced out in history by the Gospel of Jesus.

The Gospel, in fact, is “the same yesterday and today and forever” (*Heb.* 13:8). Precisely for this reason, it is the source of inexhaustible richness and beauty (cf. EG 11) which calls us forth today, amid the change of era that we are experiencing, with the urgency of Christ's love (cf. *2 Cor.* 5:14) – which reveals the face of God who is Father (cf. *Jn.* 1:18; 14:9) – in order to take on the questions that challenge us as a Church in a new and even prophetic way. The aim is to discern, with God's grace and the contribution of all, “what the Spirit is saying the churches” (*Rev.* 2:7), listening for what is true and good by attending to questions that not just theoretical but emerge from the reality of lived experience.

As our meetings progressed, we realised that the topic entrusted to us, even in the way it was formulated, raises a related set of issues that call for careful consideration and a courageous commitment. In this light, we have noted the inadequacy of our current categories and operational paradigms. There is a persistent resistance – whether or not its underlying reasons are consciously recognized – to changing our usual mental and behavioural *habitus*. Consequently, there is a risk of deadlock, driven by the persistence and intensification of tensions regarding the practical steps needed to achieve shared objectives.

For these reasons, we have invested time in clarifying the methodological choices appropriate to the research. We have, in fact, experienced first-hand the objective difficulty of reconciling differences in sensibilities, expertise, viewpoints, and languages: the clarification of the concepts and terms, brought into play from time to time, has fostered dialogue, exchange, and the interweaving of perspectives, and has enabled us to converge on a proposal for a reformulation of the theme. Ultimately, we realised that this commitment could prove fruitful not only in fulfilling our task, but also in raising awareness of the ecclesial significance and strategic importance of the learning process fostered by the synodal path for the mission of the Church.

Once we had arrived at a first draft of this document, we initiated a dialogue with people engaged in different ecclesial contexts and with diverse areas of expertise. This process of listening and dialogue was an integral part of our group's work. During a dialogue seminar, a number of specific contributions from different cultural areas emerged: for example, the positive relationship between

the African practice of *palaver* and the synodal practices of communal discernment experienced in the churches of Africa; and the public relevance of the exercise of synodality in relation to the spread of a democratic culture of legality and transparency in the churches of Asia.

2. The main points of reference

This process brought to light several crucial points of reference. They have inspired and guided our work, leading, among other things, to a shift in terminology from ‘controversial’ issues to ‘emerging’ issues. This shift will be explained and explored in greater depth in the paragraphs that follow.

- 2.1 First of all, we considered that the reference, in the proposed title of our group and this report,¹ to “*doctrinal, pastoral, and ethical issues*” might give the impression that we are dealing with three separate spheres rather than recognising that these distinct areas are connected in a circular manner, since that they are always mutually interrelated within the mission of the Church. Similarly, we considered that the suggestion to address the theme within the framework of the relationship between love and truth could also lend itself to a similar misunderstanding, unless presented in a manner that is both evangelically relevant and rigorous: at first glance, if taken simplistically, it risks giving the impression that the two concepts are in a relationship of inverse proportionality.
- 2.2 Whilst we also agree that priority should be given to the question of ‘*how?*’ rather than ‘*what?*’, (as emphasised by the reference, in the proposed title, to the “criteria” for discerning issues), we nevertheless felt that there remains a risk of favouring an approach based on abstract theoretical assumptions, regarded as definitively established, rather than on the account of the lived experience of the People of God, read and interpreted ecclesially in the light of Revelation. The commitment to designing a comprehensive synodal *modus procedendi*, in keeping with the vital dynamic that springs from the Gospel, has therefore been the subject of explicit and constant attention.
- 2.3 In accordance with this logic, we have applied the normative reference to the Word of God – which resounds as relevant and effective within the living context of the Church’s dynamic Tradition – not by simply resorting to isolated quotations from Sacred Scripture, but by seeking to embrace the generative kerygmatic impulse of the Gospel in relation to the experience of the Paschal Christ, lived out in the Church throughout the course of history.² The aim has been to pay attention to the way in which Jesus himself and the early Christian communities, in following him crucified and risen, relate to people in their diverse situations and life experiences. This approach allows us to discover gradually, through synodal

¹ The title refers to AL 3, cited by Francis in the Accompanying Note to the Final Document of the Synod of Bishops: “[N]ot all discussions of doctrinal, moral or pastoral issues need to be settled by interventions of the magisterium. Unity of teaching and practice is certainly necessary in the Church, but this does not preclude various ways of interpreting some aspects of that teaching or drawing certain consequences from it. This will always be the case as the Spirit guides us towards the entire truth (cf. *Jn.* 16:13), until he leads us fully into the mystery of Christ and enables us to see all things as he does. Each country or region, moreover, can seek solutions better suited to its culture and sensitive to its traditions and local needs.” (AL 3).

² From the perspective outlined in the document by the PONTIFICAL BIBLICAL COMMISSION, “*What is Man?*” (*Ps.* 8:5). *An Itinerary of Biblical Anthropology*, LEV, Vatican City 2019 (https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/pcb_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20190930_cosa-e-luomo_it.html).

discernment, the ways in which the Holy Spirit guides the Church towards encountering the unfolding of the truth of salvation in Christ within the context of each community and in relation to each person. It is a journey undertaken throughout history, leading to the recognition of God's action and the truth and justice of salvation which, ever springing anew from the Risen Christ, progressively manifests itself and is received and realised in the Church's mission.

3. The underlying biblical image: Acts of the Apostles, chapters 10-15

From this perspective, the events recounted in chapters 10-15 of the *Acts of the Apostles* have proved to be of particular significance and relevance to the task entrusted to us. These chapters bear witness to a turning point of enormous importance in the journey of the Church, founded by Jesus upon the roots of Jewish tradition, at the moment when – listening to the voice of the Spirit of the Risen Lord guiding its steps – it opens itself to the world of the Gentiles and begins to take root within it.

The decisive question that arose at that time was as follows: must those who have converted to Christ, not coming from Israel but 'from the Gentiles', be circumcised according to the law of Moses? And how can the experience of the Christian community from the Gentile world be harmonised with that of the Christian community from Israel? This was the 'emerging question' at the time: whether and how two different forms of the experience of faith in Jesus could coexist, which, precisely in deciphering their mutual relationship, were called upon to grasp and express the novelty and significance – not only religious but also socio-cultural – of the Gospel. It was a crucial moment in the Gospel's journey through history. But it is also a question that has recurred over the centuries: how is it possible to value the positive aspects of anthropological and cultural diversity, without inhibiting or even betraying the newness of the Gospel, but rather allowing it to flourish through the exchange of gifts received and cultivated?

Starting from the account of the experiences lived by the Apostles – in particular Peter and Paul with Barnabas, in their ministry of proclamation to the Gentiles – re-read and illuminated in the light of the Word of God, the process of dialogue leads to a progressive and detailed communal discernment of the issue. The decision taken synodally ("it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us"; *Acts* 15:28) expresses the Church's growing awareness of a more mature relationship with its Jewish roots: for in this relationship it learns to discern, by interpreting under the guidance of the Spirit, the experience it is living, what is of permanent significance and finds its fulfilment in Jesus, and what, on the other hand, has only a provisional value. And thus, it opens itself, consciously and definitively, to an evangelisation that reaches out to all peoples, initiating a creative process of inculturation of the faith in diverse contexts.

The issue was undoubtedly significant and, in itself, a source of polarisation and potential conflict: yet it was addressed with courage and *parrhesia*, listening to the voice of the Spirit to actualise the community's performative fidelity to the Gospel of Jesus, discerning in a spirit of communion the experience that was being lived out in concrete terms. A significant *krisis* thus paved the way for a new stage (which, in time, would prove to be of decisive importance) in the Church's journey along the path of the Gospel made available to all.

4. The methodological approach to be adopted moving forward

The reflections that have gradually taken shape, and which are summarised here, have ultimately highlighted an aspect that we consider of fundamental importance for the fulfilment of the task entrusted to us. It is this: the recognition of issues that we today regard as ‘controversial’ can represent, in a positive light, the emergence of experiences that urge the Church to grasp and express, at an unprecedented and deeper level, its own appropriation and articulation in the present moment of history, and within the diversity of contexts and situations, of the timeless message of the Gospel intended for all.

It is in this spirit that synodal discernment of these life experiences must be exercised, starting from their accounts, with attentive and open listening both to the Word of Jesus – made alive and relevant by the Holy Spirit within the space of ecclesial communion and with attention to the “signs of the times” – and to what the People of God have experienced in diverse cultural contexts and in relation to various life situations. Particular care must be given to those who find themselves living on the existential, social, and cultural “peripheries.” It is in this perspective that we consider it more appropriate to describe the issues in question as ‘emerging’ rather than ‘controversial.’ This shift in terminology is not merely superficial, but expresses a proposal for a reformulation linked to a paradigm shift: whilst the phrase “controversial issues” refers primarily to the theoretical level and the need for “problem-solving,” the expression “emerging issues” highlights the holistic nature of the commitment concerning the whole of the ecclesial community and the wholeness of the person, while at the same time pointing to a potential resource to be discerned in “conversation in the Spirit” and “relational conversion,” as indicated in the *Final Document* of the Synod (cf. FD, 45; 105; and Part II).

Listening to these experiences, in order to be authentic and fruitful, requires careful integration and appreciation of what we are able to learn about them thanks to the contribution of the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. Dialogue with their valuable contribution also calls for vigilant discernment: to identify which knowledge and expertise to draw upon regarding the issues under consideration; to navigate the multitude of competing theories; and to critically synthesise the respective discourses of each. The result is thus a genuinely trans-disciplinary approach, “situating and stimulating all disciplines against the backdrop of the Light and Life offered by the Wisdom streaming from God’s Revelation” (VG 4).

5. Limitations and structure of this report

These Introductory Notes highlight the heuristic nature of the document we are presenting as a simple, provisional, and forward-looking summary of the work carried out so far, to be explored further through dialogue and tested in practice. It was not our task to address individual issues in a definitive manner. This Study Group does not have the expertise or, above all, the necessary ecclesiastical authorisation to do so. Moreover, such an approach would not be consistent with the proposal we are putting forward. Rather, the contribution we present is structured in three parts.

The first two parts aim to outline the theological framework and the practical dynamics through which a synodal and missionary Church is called to test the criteria of synodal discernment regarding issues recognised as ‘emerging,’ and which, as such, must be responsibly addressed. These dynamics

concern the various ecclesial levels (local Churches, groupings of Churches, and the universal Church), starting from specific contexts and the experiences concretely lived within them.

In the first section (I), the focus is on the meaning of the “paradigm shift” which, in the wake of the teaching of Vatican II, the Church is called to live out in its mission during this new phase of evangelisation (cf. EG): the FD outlines its implementation through three fundamental practices in the experience of the People of God living the synodal journey.

In the second section (II), the strategic value of the principle of “pastorality” is clarified as the interpretative and generative horizon of the “paradigm shift” currently underway. It also outlines certain procedural approaches that the Christian community can realistically adopt within the context of the highly fruitful experience of “conversation in the Spirit”.

In the third section (III), a number of guidelines and questions are proposed to aid the promotion of pastoral discernment, starting from the concrete context of the local Churches, regarding two emerging issues: the experience of homosexual believers within the Christian community and the commitment of the People of God to a culture and practice of active non-violence. These aim to provide an illustration of the implementation of the theological framework and synodal practices set out in the FD.

I

A PARADIGM SHIFT IN THE CHURCH'S MISSION AND THE SYNODAL DYNAMICS THAT PROMOTE IT

1. Synodal discernment of emerging issues as a promising yet demanding opportunity

The synodal journey stands out as a favourable yet demanding opportunity to set in motion within the Church “a resolute process of discernment, purification and reform” (EG 30), capable of promoting a new phase of its mission. It is a matter of learning how to practise and share “a true evangelical hermeneutic to better understand life, the world and humanity” (VG 3). Discernment of emerging issues raises awareness of this commitment and serves as an important test of it, inviting the People of God to undertake a re-reception of the Gospel of Jesus through an unguarded openness to what the Spirit says to the Churches today (cf. *Rev.* 2:17), aiming that this re-reception might be rooted in the living Tradition of the Church, therefore innovative and creative in listening to “what was from the beginning” (*1 Jn.* 1:1ff).

1.1 A paradigm shift that is faithful to the journey of the Christian experience

In the wake of the historical and dialogical understanding of Revelation proposed by Vatican II in *Dei Verbum*, the commitment to practising the synodal nature of the Church implies the implementation of a “paradigm shift” (cf. VG 3) from the prevalent paradigms of past centuries as regards the way of interpreting and expressing the proclamation of the Gospel and the mission of the Church. This is a shift which, in reality, is a return to the liberating experience of encountering the saving truth of the Gospel as originally presented in Jesus: the reliable testimony of the *agape* of God, who is *Abbà*, present here today for all his sons and daughters, each and every one. Thus, even today, the Gospel invites us first and foremost to respond to the God who loves us and saves us, opening ourselves to “see God in others” and to “go forth from ourselves to seek the good of others” (EG 39).

When we speak today of a paradigm shift, we are rediscovering the biblical conception of the truth of God who reveals himself in history and who, through a story of divine love, leads us to live this story ever more fully, fostering an ongoing process of shared learning within the Christian community.

The process of institutionalisation of the Christian community, the unfolding of the Church's mission, and the interaction with the Greek-Hellenistic philosophical mindset, on the one hand, and with the Roman legal mindset, on the other, have facilitated a tendency to identify the doctrinal and ethical content of Christian teaching (*didaché*) in relation to different worldviews. A path that has always developed through the exercise of illuminating the consistency and vocation inscribed in what is human: *gratia supponit et perficit naturam* – as Saint Thomas Aquinas taught – *et culturam* – as Pope Francis added (cf. EG 115). This process is already documented in the New Testament (e.g. in the ‘Pastoral Epistles’) and then, increasingly, in the *Didache of the Twelve Apostles*, passing through the *Didaskaleïon* of Alexandria to Augustine's *De doctrina christiana*. From this it emerges clearly that the elucidation of the faith and morals in Christian doctrine must always be interpreted in the

light of Sacred Scripture as a normative reference and a living access, in the Holy Spirit, to the event of Jesus Christ as the eschatological fulfilment of humanity. Thus, as Saint Augustine wrote, “those who believe they have understood the divine Scriptures or any part thereof, but in such a way that this understanding does not lead them to cultivate the twofold love of God and neighbour, have in reality not yet understood them.”³

The Church’s mission is not a matter of abstractly proclaiming and deductively applying principles that are set out in an immutable and rigid manner, but of fostering a living encounter with the person of the risen Lord Jesus, by engaging with the lived experience of faith of the People of God in its personal and social relevance, in relation to the diverse situations of life and the many cultural contexts. Only the fruitful tension between what has been established in the Church’s doctrine and Her pastoral practice and the practices of life in which what has been established is verified, in the exercise of personal and communal life in the light of the Gospel, expresses the generative dynamism of Tradition: against the temptation of the sterile and regressive ossification of principles and statements, of norms and rules, regardless of the experience of individuals and communities. As Jesus taught, “the Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath” (*Mk. 2:27*).

Pope Leo reiterated this when referring to the meaning of the Church’s “social doctrine,” but the description can apply in a more general sense: “[D]octrine appears as the product of research, and hence of hypotheses, discussions, progress and setbacks, all aimed at conveying a reliable, organized and systematic body of knowledge about a given issue. Consequently, a doctrine is not the same as an opinion, but is rather a common, collective and even multidisciplinary pursuit of truth. ‘Indoctrination’ is immoral. It stifles critical judgement and undermines the sacred freedom of conscience, even if erroneous. It resists new notions and rejects movement, change or the evolution of ideas in the face of new problems. ‘Doctrine,’ on the other hand, as a serious, serene, and rigorous discourse, aims to teach us primarily how to approach problems and, even more importantly, how to approach people.”⁴

We could imagine the Christian experience as a journey with two horizons: *ultimate eschatological fulfilment* (God’s universal saving will in Jesus, through the ministry of the Church, in service to the coming of the Kingdom); and the *concrete*, varied, complex, ever-changing reality in which we live (the historical mediation of the Gospel, with its anthropological dimension, ethical significance, and social production). From this perspective, the synodal Church commits itself to answering, within its mission, a question that underlies and illuminates emerging issues: *how* must we articulate this two-fold focus of the journey of the Christian experience, faithful to the Revelation of God, who revealed himself as *Agape* for each and every person “once and for all” in Jesus Christ (cf. 1 *Jn.* 4:8, 16), and at the same time in the concrete daily reality of Christian communities and individuals?

Through the commitment to articulate these two focal points, listening to the voice of the Spirit and being open to his ceaseless action, the horizon of experience and understanding of the saving truth, that shines forth for us in Jesus (cf. DV 2), unfolds and becomes accessible, in the present moment of history and in the diversity of contexts. The way/truth/life of Jesus (cf. *Jn* 14:6), which is

³ SAINT AUGUSTINE, *De doctrina christiana*, L. I, XXXVI, 40.

⁴ Leo XIV, *Address to Members of the “Centesimus Annus Pro Pontifice” Foundation* (17 May 2025), <http://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/speeches/2025/may/documents/20250517-centesimus-annus-pro-pontifice.html>.

the *agape* of God “poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (*Rom* 5:5), a truth that is realised in love (cf. *Eph.* 4:15) and that “sets us free” (cf. *Jn.* 8:32), calls for us, always and in every instance, to embrace the way in which it presents itself and expresses itself from within and from below the concrete, place-bound journey of individuals and communities.

1.2 A shared commitment to a historical, experiential, and practical hermeneutics that is genuinely human

A fundamental aspect for bringing about this paradigm shift is a hermeneutics of the human that embraces its historical, experiential, practical, and contextual nature. This was demonstrated in practice, in an inceptive but decisive manner, by the teaching of Vatican II, particularly in *Gaudium et spes* and *Ad gentes*. This focus is required by the Gospel, since the human is constitutive to the Gospel. The indissoluble relationship between what is human and what is Christian must be conceived and lived by interpreting the human as the anticipation of God’s gift that Jesus brought to fulfilment, making it available to each and every person through the *boundless* outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

The proclamation and the signs of salvation wrought by Jesus are addressed to those who are existentially involved, starting from their life situation, in the decision to entrust themselves freely to the gift of grace offered to them. The proclamation of the Gospel is inseparable from the people it addresses and must take them into account. God’s gift is given only in the response that receives it. The integral and definitive vocation of humanity, implied in the gift of the Gospel, calls for the recognition that the historicity of existence and of the culture in which humanity expresses itself, in all its complexity and richness, is a constitutive moment of the self-giving of the truth of humanity itself in its fulfilment in Christ.

In fidelity to this commitment, the experience of the synodal Church demands that we listen to one another, opening ourselves to “welcome every person and all people.”⁵ Particular attention must be paid to those “who are most vulnerable, or those who are ‘out of the game’ or ‘outside the box,’ with a view to gathering their unique experiences (including those who are sick, people in poverty, those who are civilly divorced and remarried, people with same-sex attractions, people facing discrimination, victims of abuse and injustice, etc.)” This corresponds to an anthropological approach whose fundamental characteristics can be summarised as follows⁶: every person is a singularity, whose wholeness and uniqueness is constituted in relation to the other, to society and to culture, according to a profile that is both temporal and narrative.⁷ It is within all these relationships that each person decides for themselves in their original and foundational relationship with God, whether they are aware of it or not.

Every person, first and foremost, is singular, irreducible, irreplaceable, and original. This is the meaning of the biblical-theological theme of the human being, male and female, created in the image and likeness of God (cf. *Gen.* 1:26). This singularity is not that of an ‘individual’ who exists *without*

⁵ DEPARTMENT OF ETHICS AND MORAL THEOLOGY AT THE FACULTÉS LOYOLA PARIS, *Contribution théologique au processus synodal. En quoi la démarche synodale peut-elle contribuer à résoudre nos questions éthiques controversées?*, n. 2, p. 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ For a more in-depth analysis of the ethical-anthropological paradigm shift, please refer to the Appendix, *Ethics, Anthropology: Conscience, Experience of the Good, and Moral Norm*. Along these lines, the contribution of the French group of scholars from the Department of Ethics and Moral Theology is also instructive: Facultés Loyola Paris, *Contribution théologique au processus synodal. En quoi la démarche synodale peut-elle contribuer à résoudre nos questions éthiques controversées?*

or *prior* to their relationships, but is a self that is constituted *precisely* within relationships, including the relationship with *one's own body*. It is through one's own body that every relationship with the face of *the other* (the 'you') takes place. The first word that children utter is not 'I,' but a response to another person, oftentimes their mother or father, who asks them to say his or her name. It is in the encounter with others that each person exists and becomes who they are.

Furthermore, the individual is not merely in relation to the faces of others (the 'you'), but is immediately embedded within established social and cultural relationships: the individual is called upon to express himself or herself within a wider 'we.' We speak the language in which our family communicates and which is that of the people to whom we belong, with whom we share customs, lifestyles, ways of acting, social roles, prejudices, and cultural understandings. Socio-cultural mediation is not just a sum of individual relationships: it is characterised by complex processes, marked by the plurality of its actors, by a duration that extends over time, and by dialogues and consultations that take place within the public sphere.

Cultural relationships, which are constitutive of personal experience, raise the crucial question of the connection between the universal, the particular and the singular. In reality, we experience that the universality of the human implies the singularity of the person and the particularity of the cultures in which that person lives. No one knows the universal directly, because it is always mediated in a historical-cultural manner, and it is from this *plurality* that the person, in their *singularity*, questions the *universal* truth of the human and gains access to it. The universal truth of the human, in its historical expression, cannot therefore be determined once and for all, but is found in the concrete forms of different cultures, in an unceasing dialogue in which cultures and people are formed through the exchange of gifts with one another, driven by the search for truth and justice in the light of the Gospel.

The singularity of the person also implies their totality and unity. There is no division within the person between different faculties, such as reason, will, emotions and immediate impulses: it is with our whole selves that we think, will, feel, desire and are led to act. And this singularity unfolds in time and history, characterised by its passions (*patico*) and its actions (*pratico*). The self is defined through its actions, and this unfolds in time and history. It is through practical action that each of us determines "who" we wish to be. This action is never absolute, but is rooted in the sensibility of a lived body and in relationships with others, in participation in society with one's own culture, and in inhabiting our common home.

Finally, the temporality of existence implies narration. Precisely because action and practices are spread out over time, the person is capable of narrating themselves, within the fabric of their story. The narrative shapes and gives meaning to the interweaving of lived experiences, articulating the relationship between continuity and discontinuity, between identity and otherness, between subject and culture, between humanity and the world.

1.3 In the service of a relational and dynamic encounter with the kerygma of salvation

In carrying out the Church's mission, the aim is to clarify and verify the relationship between the *kerygma* – in its original, foundational and enduring core, in which "the beauty of the saving love of God made manifest in Jesus Christ who died and rose from the dead" shines forth (EG 36) – and the meaning of salvation and the promotion of the human person that it makes concretely available. This

involves its specific contents as well as its relevance and practicality on an anthropological and ethical level, within diverse life situations and cultural contexts.

This implies taking into account a twofold aspect: that whereby the *kerygma* attests to and makes appreciable God's promise, given and assured in the crucified and risen Jesus, of the blessed eschatological destiny of every person; and that whereby the *kerygma* empowers and commits one to the free and responsible acceptance of the plan of existence offered to each person in accordance with the divine plan of salvation manifested eschatologically in Christ. This involvement can only take place in a way that is tailored to each individual, as it is calibrated to the concrete situation and cultural context in which and of which they live.

Ultimately, the anthropological significance of the *kerygma* is expressed with relevance and effectiveness in terms of a dynamic and relational encounter of grace, for each of its recipients, with God's "ever-greater" *agape* in Christ through the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 *Jn.* 3:20). This encounter fosters a journey of progressively embracing the call to conform to the gift of God offered and received and, in this way, to the historically progressive fulfilment of the promised plan of salvation. The encounter with Jesus, on the one hand, ensures the existence and journey of the person and of society as they move towards their full eschatological destiny; and, on the other hand, fosters their historical growth and maturation through the ministry of the Church which – in fidelity to its mission – is called to be attentive, persevering and patient in its care for the situation in which every personal existence concretely unfolds, along the culturally contextualised, and always dramatic, path of its realisation.

For this reason, we must always pay respectful attention to what the person perceives and according by which they orient and shape their existence, listening (even unconsciously) to the Holy Spirit who is poured out 'without measure' upon all flesh through the Paschal Mystery of Christ (cf. GS 22). And this must be done with reference to what is recognisable and appreciable as consonant with what it means to be human, interpreting, expressing, and promoting what is human in the light of the *kerygma* within the specific cultural forms in which human life is experienced and realized. At the same time, it requires a commitment to discern what, in the light of the lived experience of the *kerygma* in the Church, proves to be inconsistent with human flourishing and its promotion.

Without neglecting – at the appropriate time and in the appropriate manner – to propose what is unheard of and paradoxical, as exhibited and demanded (according to the subversive 'logic' of the Beatitudes) by Christ himself in the conscious participation in following him, which commits and enables us to carry, with him, our own cross every day (cf. *Lk.* 9:23).

2. The synodal process as the unfolding of three dynamics promoting a paradigm shift

The Final Document (FD) records the implementation of the described paradigm shift through the adoption of certain practices that are beginning to mark the daily life of the People of God, promoting a fruitful circularity between the practices themselves and the exercise of discernment. Indeed, the process of synodal discernment does not proceed according to an 'applicative' logic (where we first reflect together to identify principles and then apply them to a concrete reality), but rather according to an 'integrative' logic: the ways in which a Church lives the faith and recognizes 'emerging' issues are an integral part of ecclesial discernment. Moving beyond an 'applicative' logic

means not excluding oneself from the need to be converted to that “same mind that was in Christ Jesus” (*Phil. 2:5*), which is the imperative for the life and witness of all disciples.

It is necessary to be aware that theory implies practice, as the former always springs from the latter; conversely, practice is intelligent, intentional, and relational, in a mutual reference that prevents thinking of one before or without the other. In other words, reflection is born from the richness of experience, and experience in turn – both passive and active, with its passions and actions – discloses new ways of understanding.⁸ Recognizing the primacy of experience and the decisive role of practical action does not mean excluding the rigor and method of critical knowledge; rather, it intends to denounce the illusion of a thought that claims to exercise itself *a priori*, without recognizing its radical debt to actual conditions, cultural processes, and the concreteness of experience.

The human being is radically ethical because they are characterized by freedom and its actual, practical, historical, temporal, and narrative conditions. It is within events, relationships, and the affections that the person is called to discern God’s call, responding to the gift of the Gospel which manifests itself as worthy of being believed and lived. The process of freedom involves: the drama of action, dialogue, the risk of encounter with others, a readiness to welcome differences, mutual learning, and forgiveness that is given and received.

The FD implements this paradigm shift that honours the human vocation through the acceptance of the gift of the Gospel. This shift is promoted through the concrete adoption of dynamics proposed to Christian communities in the exercise of synodal practice.

2.1 The dynamic of relational conversion

“To be a synodal Church, we are required to open ourselves to a genuine relational conversion that redirects each person’s priorities, and we must once again learn from the Gospel that attending to relationships is not merely a strategy or a tool for greater organisational effectiveness. Relationships and bonds are the means by which God the Father has revealed Himself in Jesus and the Spirit.” (FD 50)

Relational conversion is a conversion to the logic of ‘correspondence.’ Caring for relationships, in an evangelical sense, does not merely mean having regard for the persons involved in a specific issue upon which one is called to discern and decide. Indeed, the ecclesial care of relationships requires a willingness to ‘remain in the relationship,’ projecting oneself into a history of communication that is ‘to come’ and always capable of being reactivated. It is necessary to manage, with patience and fidelity, not only the ‘intermediate time’ that passes between one moment of the journey and the next, but also the ‘prospective time’ – that is, the promise of a welcoming future that will continue to host their exchange. One who ‘corresponds’ in human relationships must pay attention not only to the *medium* (the means and tools at our disposal to make the relationship possible) but also to the *promise* (the fidelity to a relationship that is always possible, capable of unfolding anew, in turn activating rebirth and flourishing). Ecclesial life is made up of an ongoing succession of developing stages and those who come after us must be given the opportunity to contribute to updating or adjusting relational or institutional configurations that are necessarily transitory.

⁸ As Aristotle noted, “we learn [the virtues] by doing them [...] it is by doing just acts that we come to be just; by doing self-controlled acts, self-controlled; and by doing brave acts, brave” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, II, 1, 1103a.34-1103b.2).

Furthermore, within the dynamism of relational conversion, primacy is given to the quality of relationships, both interpersonal and between the different levels of the Church's mission. The conversion of relationships requires not only that intersubjective rapports be guided by a gaze of benevolence and justice – tilting in favour of the disadvantaged, the marginalized, and the excluded – but it also touches multiple levels of competence (ministries, associations, bodies, etc.) and diverse contexts (cultural, geographical, institutional, etc.). For this reason, the FD entrusts ecclesial communities with the demanding and promising commitment of the *exchange of gifts*: “Synodality invites – and sometimes challenges – pastors of local Churches, as well as those responsible for leadership in consecrated life and in the movements, to strengthen relationships in order to bring to life an exchange of gifts at the service of the common mission” (FD 65).

Ultimately, relational conversion demands learning through experience, seeing the relationship between theory and practice as a virtuous circle. Persons are not merely subjects of specific actions and bearers of individual and collective responsibilities. Every human subject is embedded in a culture, part of a community and a history that influence their disposition to understand and to self-understand. Through practices, human beings do not limit themselves to merely ‘solving problems,’ whether large or small, in their daily lives; rather, they contribute to ‘designing together’ the linguistic, symbolic, and cultural scene within which problems can emerge, be named, and be navigated together. In processes of ecclesial discernment, the logic of practices does not respond to the principle of problem solving, but rather to the dynamics of building something in common. Giving priority to the construction of the common good means adopting a criterion whereby – in those instances where we as Church have sought to resolve problematic issues by resorting exclusively to theoretical solutions – it is also necessary to address problems by building collective bodies, aggregating communities, and convoking them in assembly.

2.2 The dynamic of learning together

Dynamics of learning are evangelically shaped when they place the People of God in a position to read and interpret the words and signs performed by Jesus, to penetrate their contents ever more intensely for today's life, and to open themselves to the voice of the Spirit.

These dispositions are to be considered indispensable *synodal skills* for the life of the Church. Every process of synodal discernment requires that all baptized persons involved be enabled to progress in the *capacity to learn* together with their brothers and sisters. Processes of synodal discernment must provide for formative paths that are not limited to replicating the configuration of ‘school-like’ learning, where many *students* listen to one or more *experts*. The entire People of God grows in the skills of synodal learning when every member is able to learn and reflect starting from the practices in which they are already daily involved, with particular attention to the ways in which practices are questioned by newcomers (children, adult catechumens, migrants, people returning to the practice of faith). In light of these considerations, at least three characteristics can be found in the dynamics of common learning:

- i) The first lies in the fact that learning is always *situated* in a given context. It invites members of a Christian community to focus not only on ‘what we know or do not (yet) know,’ but also on ‘what we can or cannot (yet) do.’ Learning is situated when it values the spirituality of a people, a community, or a family. Indeed, spirituality concerns not only the world of common beliefs, oriented toward the good, but also that of shared customs and habits – the set of

actions that give flesh, signs, gestures, time, and form to the relationship with the Lord Jesus, the living heart of the faith of every disciple and community.

- ii) A second characteristic is that the dynamics of learning together are driven and oriented towards specific issues and concrete realities. Christian communities are well-acquainted with this, as throughout history they have responded, more or less promptly, to different issues as they arose.
- iii) A final characteristic of the dynamics of learning together is that they are *multimodal*: they involve and call upon not only different specific fields of knowledge and expertise (interdisciplinarity) but also solicit the contribution of very diverse functions, skills, and levels of competence. Individual baptized persons are thus required not only to handle various practical skills or technical expertise but to move through different roles, environments, and positions of responsibility throughout their lives in the light of the Gospel (transdisciplinarity).

2.3 The dynamic of transparency

The FD pays particular attention to a “culture of transparency,” pairing it with that of “accountability and evaluation.” This call should prompt diverse and engaging processes of synodal transformation and reform within the churches.

For the People of God, transparency is not merely a ‘value’ (profitably borrowed from the world of corporate and administrative cultures), but has robust biblical and theological roots, though not yet adequately explored. The ecclesial culture of transparency is traceable to the evangelical imperative of “speaking and acting in the truth,” a qualifying aspect of the Church's fidelity to the *kerygma*, as well as to the relationship and trust in the ‘other’ within the community. In this sense, transparency represents a significant element of identity and witness for Christian communities.

Therefore, the call to a culture of transparency, in the context of synodal discernment practices, is an invitation not only to formation (educational and technical) but also to research (ecclesial and academic): “Formation is needed in order to engage in decision-making processes grounded in ecclesial discernment and which reflect a culture of transparency, accountability, and evaluation. The formation required is not only technical; it also needs to explore theological, biblical and spiritual foundations” (FD 80).

II

THE PRINCIPLE OF PASTORALITY AND ITS OPERATIONAL PRACTICES IN A SYNODAL CHURCH

1. The perspective of pastorality

In light of the insights gained thus far, for the implementation of the discernment of emerging issues, rather than defining a completed theory to be applied to various cases (no matter how elaborate or adaptable), it is fundamental to adopt an approach that allows us to set in motion, as a synodal Church, a *process of continuous theorization and implementation*. This involves realigning, according to the described paradigm shift, the resources of practice and critical thinking at our disposal. Indeed, every authentic process of theorizing must be both interpretive and generative.

1.1 An interpretive and generative principle

Reflecting on both theological contributions and the ecclesial journeys of various Churches, in harmony with the steps taken so far in the synodal path and the teachings of Pope Francis and Pope Leo, we have identified the principle of pastorality as the interpretive and generative horizon capable of expressing and entrusting future developments of the ongoing paradigm shift.

By “principle of pastorality,”⁹ we mean the Church's implementation of the logic whereby there is no proclamation of the Gospel without taking responsibility for the interlocutor in whom the proclamation is already mysteriously at work, since he or she can recognize it and receive it in freedom. This principle, in fidelity to the Magisterium of Vatican II, derives from taking *Dei Verbum* as the foundational horizon of proclamation, *Gaudium et spes* as the interpretive horizon of its multiple recipients and spheres of incarnation, and *Ad gentes* as the contextualizing horizon of its diverse places and actors. In this way, the synodal process shows itself as the opportunity and commitment to historicise the *fundamental ecclesiology* proposed by *Lumen gentium*. Indeed, by defining the Church as “a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race” (LG 1), the Conciliar Constitution repositions the entire People of God – and within it every disciple in the complementarity of different charisms and ministries – toward its specific service to the mission, in relation to the primacy of the grace of the Risen Lord and the work of the Holy Spirit as God's plan of salvation unfolds here and now for all.

It is in this context that the meaning and scope of the “pastoral” character that John XXIII wished to imprint upon the event and teaching of Vatican II are justified and validated. Through the performative interpretation founded in the *corpus* of its documents and made explicit in the light of the living Tradition of the Church, the Council commits itself – as Pope Francis emphasises – to “overcome this divorce between theology and pastoral care, between faith and life. I dare say that the Council has revolutionized to some extent the status of theology – the believer’s way of doing and thinking” (VG 2). In reality, the quality of pastorality can be framed, and decisively developed, as the recovery (to be implemented through the synodal process), of the intrinsically dynamic, relational,

⁹ This term has notably been developed in the works of Christoph Theobald, for example in Chapter 1 of *Le courage de penser l'avenir. Études oecuméniques de théologie fondamentale et ecclésiologique*, Cerf, Paris 2021.

performative, and historical intentionality of Church teaching, understood in the light of the Gospel, overcoming any doctrinalist or even fundamentalist crystallization.

In this perspective, the FD emphasises that: “The renewal of the Christian community is possible only by recognising the primacy of grace. If spiritual depth at both personal and communal levels is lacking, synodality is reduced to organisational expediency. We are called not only to translate the fruits of a personal spiritual experience into community processes. We are also called *to experience how practising the new commandment of reciprocal love is the place and form of encounter with God*. In this sense, while drawing on the rich spiritual heritage of the Tradition, the synodal perspective contributes to renewing its forms” (FD 44).

The principle of pastorality allows for a fruitful circle of reciprocity between the truth recognized in the precedence of the Spirit’s work in every person and reality – however partial, germinal, or in need of discernment and purification – and the gratuitous and competent exercise of mutual love toward all, nourished by sacramental practice, which the Spirit promotes in the Church and through it in the world.

In this space, the life according to the Spirit of the People of God – in its various expressions, from popular and traditional to intellectually informed – finds its specific mode of development not as a merely individual devotion, but as the supporting axis of a dynamic and communal exercise of the principle of pastorality within the mission. When we say that without a strong personal relationship with the Lord there is no missionary discipleship, this does not refer to a work of grace limited to the depths of the individual conscience: it takes on a structuring and generative role in the journey of the ecclesial ‘we’.

1.2 The *sensus fidei fidelium* and the service of authority

The subject acting upon the principle of pastorality is the People of God as a whole, in the diversity of ministries, charisms, and roles, but also in the different forms of participation that allow for the activation of the dynamics of relational conversion, common learning, and transparency proposed by the FD.

Since the subject of the synodal journey is the People of God, it is first necessary to recognise and promote the performative character of the *sensus fidei fidelium*. This is an indispensable starting point for reaching a qualified and fruitful *consensus* regarding the discernment of emerging issues. Since we are dealing not with *problems to be solved*, but with the *construction of the common good*, primacy should not be given to the correction (at a doctrinal, pastoral, or ethical level) of situations evaluated as problematic in the concrete experience of faith. Rather, we need to prioritise the recognition and discernment of the instances that faith practices express and show in action, often through unthematic knowledge. An emblematic example is that of popular religiosity. The warmth it releases in the life of the Church and in evangelization, and its capacity for resilience, derive from the fact that it expresses a lived and inculturated experience of the faith of the People of God in a specific context: an eloquent sign of the creativity of faith experience capable of operating vital syntheses between the Gospel and the journey of a community.

Along these lines, authority certainly has a specific role to play: first and foremost, that of listening, setting the discernment process in motion, and accompanying it to reach the expression of a consensus – even one that is differentiated – when this contributes to furthering the common good

(cf. *Acts* 15). Thus, the exercise of authority, thanks to its proper character in the mission of the Church, shows itself as a participant in a unitary and plural process (cf. FD 93), taking particular responsibility for guarding and safeguarding the identity and contribution of each person, especially those who are less visible or less able to express their voice. Authority must not sin by omission: in a synodal Church, pastors and those who exercise any form of authority cannot evade the responsibility of “initiating processes” and governing them in fidelity to the Word of God and in rigorous listening to the voice of the Spirit.

In this way, the People of God, living in the midst of peoples with diverse cultures, manifests itself as a “sign and instrument” of coexistence in diversity and of a movement outwards – bestowed by the grace of God – that surpasses the particular configurations in which it lives. Thus, the People of God witnesses, through its very way of proceeding (even before any results are achieved), to the generative superabundance of the Gospel.

The principle of pastorality thus allows for the mobilization of all subjects and takes into account all the elements at play in the emerging issues that are the object of discernment, always referring to what Tradition has vitally and historically transmitted in fidelity to the Gospel, while maintaining the living hope that, when “we shall see Him face to face” (cf. *1 Jn.* 3:2), the complexity of every process will be definitively dissolved in the love of Him who is greater than our heart (cf. *1 Jn.* 3:20).

2. Ways of proceeding for discernment through conversation in the Spirit

In coherence with the principle of pastorality, we can describe certain procedural modes useful for the discernment of emerging issues and for the active participation of the concrete subjects, both personal and communal, who are directly involved. To this end, it is important to recall, first and foremost, the fundamental meaning of the “conversation in the Spirit” experienced during the synodal journey.

2.1 The practice of conversation in the Spirit

The logic of controversy – that is, of dispute and debate on openly divisive themes – can certainly be considered one among the many ways to address problems or significant issues. However, while the logic of *controversy* emphasizes the legitimate need to “solve problems”, the logic of *emergence* emphasizes the capacity of the entire People of God to “stay with the trouble.”¹⁰

This means, above all, to set in place the conditions within the various contexts and spheres of ecclesial life so that issues considered problematic can emerge. These issues truly emerge when they become visible and ‘speakable,’ respecting the persons involved, especially the most vulnerable and disadvantaged. Emerging issues are not necessarily ‘emergency’ issues; they can be revelatory of unprecedented realities, some of which are positive, which do not require a *disputatio* between supporters of different arguments, but rather a broad-reaching ecclesial discernment. By proceeding in this more synodal way, the Christian community may be called to reach a new consensus or commitment in relation to that specific issue.

For example, the growing number of adult catechumens in some Churches, where participation in ecclesial life seemed extinguished or in decline, can be considered an emerging issue for those

¹⁰ This notion has been developed by Donna Haraway, particularly in *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Duke University Press, Durham (NC), 2016.

communities which, through a process of ecclesial discernment, are called to reassemble functions, roles, and habits in light of the newcomers approaching the Church and preparing for baptism.

In this regard, the dynamic wisdom of the ongoing synodal path has suggested a fundamental, indeed indispensable, practice for the ecclesial discernment of emerging issues: “conversation in the Spirit” (cf. FD 45). This practice marks a cornerstone in the acquisition of the paradigm shift inspired by the principle of pastorality and constitutes the appropriate experiential framework for employing the tools and procedural criteria available to ecclesial communities. Therefore, the exercise of conversation in the Spirit must become an ecclesial *habitus* that marks every step in the implementation of discernment processes: not exhausting itself in the solution of a question, but constantly reactivating the listening and learning skills of the People of God, also in function of making decisions of varying degrees of importance, so that the process is transparent and shared.

2.2 Three ways of proceeding

Conversation in the Spirit is a practice of education and learning in which, as the People of God, we grow in the capacity to listen to ourselves, listen to reality, and summon diverse fields of knowledge and expertise. These three fundamental dispositions of a Church on a synodal path represent, at the same time, three procedural modes that Christian communities can utilise in the discernment and pastoral management of emerging issues.

a) *Listening to ourselves*

The first step is the decision to listen to ourselves regarding the issue we wish to discern together: it is a matter of creating the conditions of possibility for issues to surface and be named, so they have a voice and are recognised as matters that concern us all. The method of conversation in the Spirit is of fundamental help in this regard, yet we must establish the ways, places, and times that allow for the participation and involvement of as many as possible – especially for those whose experience and perspective are particularly vital to the discernment at hand.

Particular attention must be paid to identifying *resistances*: often, it is complex and difficult to name and make manifest the doubts and oppositions that arise in the face of certain issues. Resistances, even on a theological level, are normally rooted in the pre-cognitive dimension of cultural internalization, where biographical, psychic, educational, and social themes and issues intertwine with our awareness and choices. When it is said that certain attitudes express, for example, a culture of abuse, patriarchy, or clericalism, it refers exactly to these internalized *habitus* that can be so connected to our identities as to be very difficult to identify and convert. We must therefore pay attention to this dimension that *we all* inhabit, which risks being more operational in deeds and words the less it is recognized.

Bringing to light the deep, often hidden motives of resistance constitutes a crucial aspect of listening to ourselves: it requires relational and personal conditions, skills and knowledge, a delicate yet determined management of processes, the exercise of faith and entrustment to the work of grace, together with a certain gentleness and hospitality toward the experience of each one of us as human beings, with our limitations and vulnerabilities.

b) *Paying attention to reality*

Listening to reality begins with the recognition of practices already in action, both outside and inside the ecclesial community. What needs do they respond to? What aspects do they privilege and why? What fruits – even germinal and beyond their own intentions – do they show and offer? What risks do they highlight?

Practices must first be known and described with the awareness that no discourse can ever exhaust the life contained within a practice: we must therefore always use them as a sign of a surpassing promise at the service of promoting the life of faith. Under the sign of hope, through listening to practices, we “love what is not yet there” (Charles Péguy). Listening to practices in the light of the Gospel is not judging them according to a canon established once and for all, but recognising the ever-greater power of the Holy Spirit at work in history to give them a performative interpretation.¹¹

A further and indispensable procedural reference in listening to reality is the recognition of the relevance of *contexts*. These are the vital environments in which communities of ecclesial discernment are necessarily situated. They also represent a task and a field of work (of composition and *assemblage*) for those same communities in relation to their edification and journey. There are at least three typologies of these contexts, toward which different and complementary postures can be adopted:

- i) *Geographical Contexts (nations, regions, continents)*: namely those administratively or politically defined realities. In these areas, ecclesial discernment is called, first and foremost, to embrace a sensitivity to pluralism, valuing the specificities and peculiarities of realities with varying degrees of homogeneity and cohesion.
- ii) *Re-aggregative Contexts*¹²: realities that contain, unite, or bring together different peoples and cultures, and which precisely for this reason have a vocation for aggregation. With regard to these comprehensive and transnational contexts, the role of Christian communities is not limited to valuing existing pluralism; rather, it is decisive in defining cohesion and promoting peace and the common good of that very same context.¹³
- iii) *Existential Contexts*: social realities where individuals are united not by geographical or territorial belonging, but by the fact of sharing particular situations of difficulty, disadvantage, or discrimination (e.g., contexts affected by war, migration, or discrimination

¹¹ What was stated in *Veritatis gaudium*, 3, comes to mind here: “The primary need today is for the whole People of God to be ready to embark upon a new stage of ‘Spirit-filled’ evangelization. This calls for a resolute process of discernment, purification and reform. In this process, a fitting renewal of the system of ecclesiastical studies plays a strategic role. These studies, in fact, are called to offer opportunities and processes for the suitable formation of priests, consecrated men and women, and committed lay people. At the same time, they are called to be a sort of providential cultural laboratory in which the Church carries out the performative interpretation of the reality brought about by the Christ event and nourished by the gifts of wisdom and knowledge by which the Holy Spirit enriches the People of God in manifold ways—from the *sensus fidei fidelium* to the magisterium of the bishops, and from the charism of the prophets to that of the doctors and theologians.”

¹² Examples include transnational realities like the Amazon, the Congo River basin, or the Mediterranean Sea: “The exchange of gifts and search for the common good within large transnational and intercultural geographical areas such as the Amazon, the Congo River basin, and the Mediterranean Sea is emerging as an example of newness and hope.” (cf. FD 120).

¹³ The Mediterranean, for example, does not exist as a re-aggregative context without the active work of the religious, political, and civil communities that overlook it.

based on gender, origin, or social class). These socio-existential contexts are by definition transversal and transnational; they can be imagined as “parallel continents” that pierce through political borders, creating not only aggregations of suffering people but also intercultural alliances of people struggling for the affirmation of their rights.

Contextualized practices ultimately define the *levels of relevance* of the issues which, within this process-oriented logic of synodal form, must never be conceived according to pre-established schemes: it is through the assumption of personal responsibility that communities are able to discern the levels of relevance at which to situate themselves. And this cannot be predetermined at the universal level.

c) *Summoning various forms of expertise*

A third step in implementing a procedural logic suited to the discernment of emerging issues is the summoning of different fields of knowledge: no one (as an individual or a group) possesses the necessary skills to understand and manage the full complexity of ourselves and the reality we live in. We must exercise the humility and realism of asking for help. Crucially, once the path of listening has been followed seriously, one can take responsibility for asking experts not for generic insights, but for targeted help with questions that, by this stage, have become clearer and more defined.

Theology possesses neither a magic wand nor the right to the final word, but it can and must help to structure the space for a dialogue conducted in the light of the Gospel. It does this by offering the language needed to understand different positions – their origins and what they seek to safeguard or promote. This is because theology, as a competent intelligence of faith, is called to make available the incomparable heritage of the Word of God and its living Tradition. This heritage is the yardstick against which discernment must be measured, offering a plurality of criteria and critical processes to move forward – even in small, perhaps partial or provisional steps – yet illuminated and sustained by the light and life-giving energy of the Spirit of the Risen Lord, who becomes present on the disciples’ journey (cf. *Lk.* 24:13-34). Theology sets the table at which the People of God are invited to take part in the synodal journey: there, the Word and the Bread are broken, people listen to one another, speak, and share. In the end, issues are not always resolved (indeed, sometimes they have only finally become manifest); but we have become more of a family of brothers and sisters in the one faith, and thus we can face the remaining, challenging questions at the favourable time, with love and in hope.

Men and women of every age and culture produce theoretical and practical knowledge in order to live and to live together, across diverse fields and according to diverse logics. If “all things work together for good for those who love God” (*Rom.* 8:28), we can ask these diverse forms of knowledge to accept the *con-vocation* to the common table, where the most precious good of humanity is shared.

In conclusion

The procedural approaches we have outlined are unsatisfactory in many respects: they do not provide a “handbook” of concrete actions and may seem to insist on dimensions that are either too spiritual or too sociological.

But if it is true, as stated from the beginning, that the ‘*how*’ – correctly understood – is more significant than the ‘*what*’, then this effort finds its justification as a contribution to expressing a form

and style of a Church that walks in history together with all men and women, in fidelity to its vocation/mission as a missionary disciple of the Lord.

Recognizing the authority of the words exchanged and listened to is not a methodological expedient, but a decisive ecclesiological orientation.

III

TOWARDS SYNODAL EXERCISE OF DISCERNMENT IN LOCAL CHURCHES: TWO EMERGING ISSUES TODAY

1. Taking a synodal approach to discernment: A proposal for implementation in local Churches

Within the theological and methodological framework outlined thus far, we have engaged in extensive discussion on the most pertinent and fruitful way to address the specific “emerging issues” proposed by the Synod and mentioned in the documents of the General Secretariat. Regarding these issues, Study Group 9 has received numerous written contributions of various kinds from across the globe.

It would also have been possible to structure our document in the reverse order of what we are presenting: namely, starting from the testimonies of the emerging issues, followed by a re-reading of them, then showing *how* to proceed in synodal discernment, and finally describing the theological frame of reference. However, aware of the circularity between listening and criteria, and between theological reflection and pastoral practices, we decided to let the foundational theological framework come first, drawing inspiration from the methodological criteria formulated by the FD of the Synod. The objective remains to offer a theological deepening that helps implement the synodal and missionary logic fostered by the FD, in the awareness that the subjects directly involved at the level of the local Churches will be the ones called to carry out this exercise.

Proposing a reflection merely “in the abstract” and/or “in general” would have caused the document to fall back into a *problem-solving* perspective, or that of those who presume to deduce action from the simple application of norms, or those who take sides in a controversy – precisely the perspectives our document seeks to overcome. On the other hand, we do not want this document to run the risk of being interpreted as an expression of some form of authority; it is solely the presentation of the fruit of work requested from a Study Group, during the synodal process, to examine the subject matter in order to foster a pertinent exercise of discernment in the local Churches.

We therefore asked ourselves by what right we could reflect on some of the emerging issues proposed to us, both to test the validity of the path we are proposing and, at the same time, to offer examples of how to implement a paradigm that cannot and must not be merely theoretical. Our aim is not to offer a generalisable solution to the issues examined, but to propose concrete ways to initiate a process. In this light, we have chosen to present two “cases of listening” through the stories of real people. Our aim is to practice an exercise of discernment upon these stories – despite the limitation of not having the individuals present as live interlocutors – identifying the stages of development within these stories. This allows us to offer reflections and, above all, questions that can assist the practical implementation of synodal discernment in various ecclesial contexts.

2. Experiences of people of faith with same-sex attractions

In order to offer useful insights for synodal discernment regarding the lived experience of believers with same-sex attractions within the Christian community, it is essential first to clarify what is at stake. With this in mind – and aware of the established paradigm for addressing this issue, which is undoubtedly of fundamental importance in the life and ministry of the Church – we have placed ourselves in a position of listening to two testimonies (cf. Annexes A, 1 and 2). These are two deeply personal stories, selected from the numerous contributions that we received regarding this emerging issue.

2.1 Listening to two testimonies

The two testimonies, while very different from one another and reflecting the cultural context of Western societies, present several common features. In these, one can detect the emergence of “experiences of goodness” in the form of successive stages of development in the individuals involved, alongside the establishment of good practices within Christian communities

The first testimony, from Portugal, begins with a personal drama: the “secret” discovery of one’s own difference during adolescence, resulting in a profound sense of solitude and isolation within both society and the Church. Against this backdrop, the personal relationship with Christ, who loves us all in our *totality and integrity*, proves decisive.

This testimony, after highlighting the initial difficulty of finding groups – even at a social and civil level – that did not cause further isolation, describes the joyful discovery of a Christian community centred on Ignatian spirituality (Christian Life Community, or CLC). Yet, the positivity of this journey coexists with significant difficulties, as seen in the devastating effects of reparative therapies aimed at recovering heterosexuality, and in the contradictory advice received: from those who suggest marriage to a woman in order to “find peace” to those who instead invite the person not to leave “dark or hidden areas” in their relationship with Christ.

Within this struggle, yet simultaneously as a path toward its resolution, the account bears witness to the discovery that sin, at its root, does not consist in the (same-sex) couple relationship, but in a lack of faith in a God who desires our fulfilment. This new awareness becomes the starting point for moving beyond a conception of the Christian community merely as a place of welcome and compassion, to arriving at the experience of the Christian community as a place where we are all loved.

The second testimony, from the United States, highlights how the protagonist’s current “arrival point” is the fruit of a long journey of faith that has articulated “prayer, therapy, and a community capable of providing support.” The presence of the Christian community, in this case, is marked by both light and shadow, yet it has proven decisive.

The testimony first describes the problematic membership in a Catholic group (*Courage*) which, by pushing for “reparative therapy,” had the effect of separating faith and sexuality. On the other hand, it recounts how the study of theology allowed for the opening of new horizons for a contextual interpretation of the Bible, moving beyond traditionalist or even fundamentalist readings. It then bears witness to the decisive nature of the encounter with Christian communities and hospitable priests, who contributed to the promotion of practices that took shape in a commitment to pastoral service – caring for the sick, the elderly, the lonely and depressed, as well as those rejected for belonging to

the LGBTQ community. However, it also brings to light the many misunderstandings within the Christian community, rooted in attitudes of homophobia and transphobia.

Ultimately, this testimony emphasizes how the Christian community, at all levels – local and universal – can represent a decisive place of “healing and inclusion” through practices of welcome and hospitality.

2.2 The challenge: Experiences, practices, and expertise

The personal testimonies we have gathered reveal both lacerations and longings, hope and pain. In the brief re-reading we offer here, it appears to us that, alongside resistances and difficulties linked to the perpetuation of pre-established and reductive frameworks, there are also signs of subtle yet significant initial stages of development and changes. These, linked to new practices, are capable of “instituting” entirely new perspectives. All of this allows for a deeper discernment of the faith experience of persons with same-sex attractions.

Regarding the resistances – limiting ourselves to those emerging from the lived experiences shared with us – we wish to highlight the following: the solitude, anguish, and stigma that accompany persons with same-sex attractions and their families, not only in society but also within the Church; this is often linked to the temptation to hide in a “double life.” Within this problematic outlook lie the positions expressed in the pressure to undergo reparative therapies or, even more gravely, in the simplistic advice to enter the sacrament of marriage.

From all this emerges the question of the roots of such attitudes, which resist acknowledging the actual condition of individuals (solitude, lack of hope, or even depression). Another element of difficulty found in the experiences we heard is the disintegrating separation between faith and sexuality.

Turning to some of the positive points that foreshadow a shift in perspective and establish themselves as initial stages, capable of fostering further developments in both practices and expertise. Here, we would like to emphasise the following key aspects: the stability of a healthy affective relationship, which allows for the sharing of life perspectives, ethical convictions, and faith; the recognition of the importance of sexuality, which nevertheless does not justify considering it the sole aspect of life; the liberating power of a personal encounter with Christ, who loves us just as we are; self-acceptance linked to the deepening of faith and to active participation and service within the life of the Christian community; and the specific contribution of a theology capable of opening up a contextual and hermeneutic reading of the Bible.

2.3 The tension between pastoral practices and doctrine: How to move beyond an impasse?

At the root of both the emerging openings and the persisting resistances, it seems possible to identify a difficulty in coordinating *pastoral practice and the doctrinal approach*. Other testimonies received by our Study Group from believers with same-sex attractions further confirm how arduous it is for individuals and Christian communities to reconcile “doctrinal firmness” with “pastoral welcome.”

These polarised positions, often deemed irreconcilable, result on one hand in profound suffering, personal lacerations, and experiences of marginalisation or “double lives” for believers with same-sex attractions; on the other hand, within the life of the Church, they trigger conflicts, oppositions,

and seemingly incurable controversies between those who reaffirm non-negotiable principles in the name of truth and those who, albeit in different ways, emphasise the demands of understanding and merciful love. These conflicts, though often hushed up, do not cease to be actively at work. How can we get beyond this *impasse*?

It is not a matter of devising a strategy to hide real difficulties or of forcing the issue to assert a new doctrine: it is a matter of starting from the listening to experiences and fostering pastoral and ecclesial practices of mutual knowledge, collaboration, inclusion, and dialogue among believers. For it is only in this way – in the light of the lived and shared experience of the Gospel within the Christian community – that one can come to discern and promote the “good” inscribed in experiences and practices. What is at stake, as is clearly understood, is the overcoming of the theoretical model that derives praxis from a “pre-packaged” doctrine, “applying” general and abstract principles to the concrete and personal situations of life. The task, therefore, is to rediscover a fruitful circularity between theory and praxis, between thought and experience, recognising that theological reflection itself proceeds from the experiences of “good” inscribed in the *sensus fidei fidelium*.

The questions that follow are intended to foster the practices of synodal discernment that need to be enacted within Christian communities – the outcomes of which cannot be anticipated with pre-established formulas.

2.4 Possible pathways and questions for synodal discernment

- Recognizing the centrality of the Word of God in the life of the Church, it is important first of all to dedicate time to deepening our understanding of the biblical passages that – directly or indirectly – are proposed in interpreting the meaning of homosexuality from the perspective of biblical anthropology. It is necessary to go beyond a mere repetition of their current presentation and take into account the insights gained from diverse exegetical readings. To accompany this reflection, we suggest the authoritative pages of the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s 2019 document entitled, *What is Man? (Ps 8:5): An Itinerary of Biblical Anthropology* (in particular, pages 160-170).
- Regarding the recent Magisterium of the Church, it is worth noting that the two documents from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith concerning the homosexual condition – *Persona Humana* (1975; PH) and *Homosexualitatis Problema* (1986; HP) – despite differences in nuance, both firmly deplored “that homosexual persons have been and are the object of violent malice in speech or in action” (HP 10). For this reason, *Homosexualitatis Problema*, which is specifically dedicated – as its subtitle indicates – to the pastoral care of homosexual persons, called upon bishops “to provide pastoral care in full accord with the teaching of the Church for homosexual persons of their dioceses” (HP 15), grounded in Scripture and the living Tradition of the Church.
- Furthermore, it should be duly noted that *Persona Humana* formulates, for the first time, the *distinction between homosexual acts and the homosexual condition or tendency* (PH 8), incorporating an insight from the psychological sciences. In this light, the Christian community is invited to ask: how can we more deeply understand the human and moral experience of believers with same-sex attractions, drawing not only on the light of the Word of God but also on a transdisciplinary approach?

- And further: how are our communities called to address, in concrete terms, situations of polarization and division regarding believers with same-sex attractions, as well as attitudes of rejection or fear? If we agree that pretending the question does not exist is not a “good practice,” how can we learn to listen to each other’s difficulties, fears, and resistances, recognising their presence and their underlying reasons?
- In this perspective, we must ask ourselves whether, to what extent, and in what forms the current pastoral practices in our communities are truly capable of welcoming the life stories of believers with same-sex attractions – sharing in the faith experience they carry and accompanying their journey in the light of the Gospel. In a word, how can we conceive and manage a pastoral ministry that allows itself to be challenged by this testimony? How can we propose the demands contained in the Church’s proclamation and teaching, actualizing them with evangelical relevance?
- The stories we have heard do not lack a critical awareness of the impact – not only personal but communal, both social and ecclesial – of the experiences witnessed. In this regard, what does the experience of suffering, solitude, and exclusion recounted in these stories say to and bring to the Christian community? Is it merely a matter of “non-conformity” to conventional ecclesial and social *standards* to which the person must be realigned, or does this “suffering” speak of something deeper?
- Finally, while listening to the Word of God lived in the Church, it is necessary to address with *parrhesia* the currently recurring question of whether one can speak of “marriage” in relation to persons with same-sex attractions, equating their relationship to heterosexual conjugal union without recognizing the differences. These include, primarily, the evident impossibility of procreation *per se* linked to sexual difference, regarding which techniques of medically assisted procreation pose further difficulties. Consequently, we must ask how the Christian community is called to interpret and address questions relating to the educational commitments toward children within family, ecclesial, and social life, in relation to the *de facto* unions between believers of the same sex.

3. An experience of active non-violence

Faced with the tragic nature of the conflicts tearing peoples apart in the current historical juncture and the global increase in military spending,¹⁴ our Study Group considered it important to address *active nonviolence* as an emerging issue. This theme appears in several places within the documents approved by the Synod in 2023 and 2024 (*Synthesis Report*, 15.b; *Final Document*, 2.47.54) and was evoked by Pope Leo XIV from his very first greeting following his election. In wishing the peace of the Risen Christ to the crowd gathered in St. Peter’s Square, he described it as “disarmed and disarming” – an expression that aligns with the logic of nonviolence, further reaffirmed and developed in his message for the World Day of Peace that took place on 1 January 2026.

However, this is a subject on which judgment within the Synod – as, indeed, within the diverse Catholic world as a whole – is not (and has not been) unanimous. Our Study Group received only one

¹⁴ “Global military expenditure increased by 9.4% in 2024 compared to the previous year.” See Leo XIV, *Message for the LIX World Day of Peace* (1 January 2026), <https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/messages/peace/documents/20251208-messaggio-pace.html>.

contribution,¹⁵ but we consider it crucial: both because it addresses a theme central to the life and death of Jesus regarding the logic by which he carried out his mission, and because, continuing a line attested in the Church since its origins, it documents decades of work by an extensive international network of organizations.

3.1 Listening to first-hand experiences of global events

Thus, also responding to the appeal of Leo XIV,¹⁶ we sought to listen to the experiences of individuals belonging to groups who, finding themselves in zones of armed conflict, responded through the perspective of active nonviolence. These are accounts that cannot be immediately universalised or transposed onto today's warfare scenarios. The face of war has tragically transformed, both due to the complexity of international political relations and the disturbing innovations in the field of armaments. Consider nuclear warheads, chemical and biological weapons, digital technologies, and autonomous weapon systems.

Since war can no longer be confined to military targets but overflows into civilian life, taking on new forms (hybrid, asymmetrical, etc.), the recourse to frameworks used in the past for legitimate defence – and even more so for “just war” – appears increasingly inadequate. What is of primary interest is to highlight the underlying dynamics that sustain these experiences and make them fruitful for the synodal journey of the Church.

3.2 From protest to sharing

The youth movement *OTPOR* ("Resistance") played a decisive role in Serbia in the fall of President Slobodan Milošević. One member of the movement begins his testimony by describing his deep sense of unease and opposition toward a nationalist and expansionist policy imposed through violence. Driven by these feelings, he made the personal choice to refuse military conscription, unwilling to cooperate in what he judged an iniquitous and despotic enterprise. Alongside this act of defiance, he committed himself to continuing his studies and enrolling in university. The informal encounter with other students within the university environment (described as an “institutional buzz”) allowed for the recognition that these same concerns were more widely shared than previously perceived.

Thus, a shared decision matured among the students to undertake various actions of nonviolent protest. These gestures were inspired by other experiences which, in different historical situations, triumphed over oppressive regimes precisely through a strategic choice of nonviolence: Gandhi (India), Martin Luther King Jr. (USA), People Power (Philippines), and *Solidarność* (Poland). Reference was also made to the example of the early Christians, who excluded the recourse to violence, refusing both to cooperate with the Roman Emperor's militias and to violently oppose the persecution to which they were subjected. These were choices that challenged and helped to overturn a power based on the logic of arrogance and oppression.

¹⁵ THE CATHOLIC NONVIOLENCE INITIATIVE, *Managing Conflict in a Nonviolent Way* and *Nonviolence and Legitimate Self-Defense* (a program of Pax Christi International).

¹⁶ “For, as has been suggested, ‘the best way to dominate and gain control over people is to spread despair and discouragement, even under the guise of defending certain values’ (FT 14). Against this strategy, we must promote self-awareness in civil societies, forms of responsible association, experiences of nonviolent participation, and practices of restorative justice on both a small and large scale” (Leo XIV, *Message for the LIX World Day of Peace*).

3.3 Processing failure, new partnerships, and learning together

This protest, though generous, proved incapable of either weakening the system in power or mobilising the population, which remained apathetic and sceptical. The lack of an effective strategic vision led to the failure of the project as it was initially set up. However, this failure became an object of reflection and led to a reformulation of the question. It became clearer that people's "resistance" to participating hid a deeper fear: rather than hoping and committing to a project destined for repression, it felt safer to resign oneself to the *status quo*. Yet, communal reflection on the lived experience brought to light new possibilities that were previously invisible.

From this came the intuition to shift attention from the capital city's centre to the peripheries and small towns, to the places of ordinary life where people habitually gather (markets, squares, etc.): "speaking to people, rather than shouting at institutions." A new understanding of the *context* (from the centre to the peripheries) was accompanied by a new understanding of self. They moved beyond the binary logic of "us *versus* them" ("we are good, Milosevic is bad: support us"). The question addressed to the people was reformulated, placing individual responsibility at the centre: "How do we, as citizens, perpetuate this situation through our actions or omissions? What can we do to change?" These are questions valid for every age and institutional context, inspired by Gandhi's synthesis: "The British govern India for their own benefit; why should we help them?"

New and surprising ways of aggregation (*re-assembling*) emerged around this plea. Collaboration involved a diverse social body, finding fertile ground not only among students but also among retirees, who were well-integrated into local communities and available to spread the message. Eventually, even adults in their prime working years became interested in participating.

As these arrangements consolidated – taking the form of a true "constituent praxis" – one can easily identify three dynamics of *collective learning*: it was always situated and linked to what each person could do; oriented toward concrete issues; and multimodal, as it valued diverse skills in a dynamic of mutual enrichment. Consequently, the movement *established* itself in a more solid and transversal way. It is interesting to note that no official *leader* emerges from the account, unlike the movements cited as sources of inspiration (from Gandhi to Wałęsa).

3.4 The practice of active non-violence and political effectiveness

When the regime realised it was facing not an insignificant youth clique, but an organization that had *established itself* by acting collaboratively and integrating diverse skills, *OTPOR* was declared a terrorist organization. Yet the repression failed for two reasons: its widespread, grassroots presence and its strict adherence to the practice of nonviolence, which meant the public knew that those being persecuted were not terrorists. This nonviolent style also informed the practical way in which movement members interacted with the police officers tasked with arresting them. On one hand, they demonstrated sincere respect for the officers' duty and empathy for the situation in which they found themselves – having enlisted to arrest criminals and maintain public order, they were now receiving orders to capture unarmed students. On the other hand, they maintained a nonviolent response, accepting the officers' actions without resistance or resentment.

This led to a progressive shift in the position of those on the opposing side. Embracing the Gospel invitation not to return evil with mirror symmetry, but to overcome evil with good, the adversary was recognised in his own humanity. A new network of interactions was formed, based on a kind of mutual pact; starting from partial agreements, it spread gradually in concentric circles with a

disruptive outcome: the police officers became increasingly unwilling to execute the orders they received. This gave rise to a new climate of participation and nonviolent monitoring of the political elections, leading to a massive voter turnout and the bloodless defeat of the dictator.

It is noteworthy that the *OTPOR* movement became a source of inspiration for other movements through the communication of its experience, a process in which various studies and publications played a significant role.¹⁷

3.5 Possible pathways and questions for synodal discernment

Recognising the fruitfulness of practices such as these, lived out in multiple scenarios, the various Christian communities are offered the opportunity to make them explicit and to interpret them in a shared and contextual way in the light of the Word of God. To promote a conversation in the Spirit regarding the emerging issue of active nonviolence, we formulate several lines of reflection and questions as a starting point.

- How do we interpret the practices of active nonviolence and forgiveness exemplified here – realized by people of goodwill, believers of different Christian denominations and religions, and non-believers alike – which took place in a specific context of conflict but have proven fruitful in other situations as well? Can we relegate them to the realm of naive and irrelevant initiatives, separating prophecy from real life?
- What are our reactions to the biblical passages that show Jesus' attitudes toward unjust aggression and violence? Pope Francis recalled several of these passages to indicate that evil is to be faced neither with violence nor with passivity, but with the force of good. Quoting Benedict XVI, Francis reminded us that Jesus' command to love our enemies "does not consist in succumbing to evil..., but in responding to evil with good (cf. *Rom.* 12:17-21), and thereby breaking the chain of injustice."¹⁸ Francis likewise declared that: "Faced with too much violence spreading throughout the world, we are called to a *greater* nonviolence, which does not mean passivity, but active promotion of the good."¹⁹ In a powerful text which has also been cited by Leo XIV, Francis reflected on Jesus' call to non-violence: "'Put your sword back into its sheath.' [...] In Luke's version of the Gospel, Jesus says to his disciples: 'No more of this!' Jesus' painful and powerful 'no more' echoes through the centuries and reaches us. It is a commandment we cannot avoid. No more swords, weapons, violence, and war!"²⁰

¹⁷ See, for example: SOMBATPOONSIRI J., *Humor and Nonviolent Struggle in Serbia*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse (NY), 2015; NIKOLAYENKO O. *et al.*, "Origins of the movement's strategy: The case of the Serbian youth movement Otpor," in *International Political Science Review* 34/2 (2012); WAISANEN D., "(Trans)National Advocacy in the Ousting of Milošević: The Otpor Movement's Glocal Recursions," in *Communication Studies* 64/2 (2013), 158-177; POPOVIC S. - DJINOVIC S. - MUJKIC E., "Nonviolent Struggle and Effective Tactics: A Comprehensive Analysis of the Otpor Movement," in *International Criminal Law Review* 24/4 (2024), 494-511.

¹⁸ FRANCIS, *Message for the Celebration of the Fiftieth World Day of Peace* (1 January 2017), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/peace/documents/papa-francesco_20161208_messaggio-l-giornata-mondiale-pace-2017.html.

¹⁹ FRANCIS, *Address to the Delegation of the "Anti-Defamation League"* (9 February 2017), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/february/documents/papa-francesco_20170209_anti-defamation-league.html.

²⁰ See FRANCESCO, *Pace in terra. La fraternità è possibile*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City 2021.

- Are we aware that the process of forgiveness is not about forgetting, remaining silent, or succumbing to the violence of injustice, but rather involves an act of remembrance that leads to a new relationship with the memory, as a liberating exodus from the snares of the past?
- Are we aware of situations – in personal, social, national, and international relations – where the effectiveness of alternative methods to the use of (armed) force in addressing situations of injustice and violence has been demonstrated?
- The Church’s history of holiness often bears witness to the Gospel way of navigating conflict, yet it also painfully reveals the community’s resistance to the Lord’s call. In light of this, what proposals can we imagine within our own contexts to root out violence and its underlying causes, so that we may face conflicts with attitudes that are more closely aligned with the Gospel? Are there actions or omissions through which we contribute to perpetuating situations of injustice or violence in the context where we live?
- *OTPOR*’s way of proceeding is rich with possibilities that could inspire actions to be undertaken in a synodal Church: which steps could be intentionally adopted to consolidate, in our specific context, practices capable of integrating different skills and perspectives in a collaborative way?