

INAUGURATION of the STUDIUM COURSE  
INTERDISCIPLINARY SCHOOL  
FOR FORMATION IN THE ECCLESIAL MAGISTERIUM  
AND CANONICAL NORMS ON CONSECRATED LIFE

**SYNODALITY AND MISSION**

“The world in which we live,  
and which we are called to love and serve  
even with its contradictions,  
demands that the Church strengthen cooperation  
in all areas of her mission.  
It is precisely this path of synodality  
which God expects of the  
Church of the third millennium”<sup>1</sup>

**1. A SYNODAL CHURCH IN MISSION**

At the conclusion of the first session of the Sixteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, whose theme is: *For a Synodal Church: Communion, participation and mission*, the *Synthesis Report* was published on October 28, 2023, gathering reflections, convergences, issues to be addressed and proposals on the theme of *synodality*. The title of the *Synthesis Report*, significantly, is: *A Synodal Church in mission*. On December 11, 2023, the Synod Secretary issued a document in view of the continuation of the synod process toward the Assembly in October 2024. These are **guidelines** in which **the deepening of synodality in mission** and the broadening of experiences of synodality at the local level are the cornerstones on which local communities are called to reflect.<sup>2</sup>

“The local Churches and the groupings of Churches are firstly invited to contribute by deepening aspects of the *Synthesis Report* that are fundamental to the Synod’s theme. These contributions are guided by the question: “**HOW can we be a synodal Church in mission?**” The objective of these new reflections is to identify **the paths we can follow and the tools we might adopt** in our different contexts and circumstances, in order to enhance the unique contribution of each baptised person and of each Church in the one mission of proclaiming the Risen Lord and his Gospel to the world today. This is not, therefore, a request that limits you to a plan of technical or procedural improvements to make the Church’s structures more efficient, but rather an invitation for reflection on the concrete forms of the missionary commitment to which we are called, that express the dynamism between unity and diversity proper to a synodal Church. In this regard, it will be helpful to reread no. 27 of the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*: “I dream of a missionary option, that is a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation. The renewal of structures demanded by pastoral conversion can only be understood in this light: as part of an effort to make them more mission-oriented, to make ordinary pastoral activity on every level more inclusive and open, to inspire in pastoral workers a constant desire to

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<sup>1</sup> FRANCIS, *Address during the Commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops*, Vatican October 17, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. <https://www.synod.va/it/news/come-essere-chiesa-sinodale-in-missione.html>

“go forth” and in this way to elicit a positive response from all those whom Jesus summons to friendship with himself. As John Paul II once said to the Bishops of Oceania: “all renewal in the Church must have mission as its goal if it is not to fall prey to a kind of ecclesial introversion”. The horizon towards which the in-depth work identified in the guiding question is oriented, is a reform animated by the dynamic of mission that Christ has entrusted to us. In this we are sustained by the pastoral conversion that the Spirit who, according to the Lord’s promise never leaves us alone, invites us to accomplish and makes possible”.<sup>3</sup>

Consecrated men and women play an undoubtedly important role in fermenting a synodal and missionary reform in the Church. The *Synthesis Report* states:

“The Church’s charismatic dimension is made manifest in the rich and varied forms of consecrated life. This testimony has contributed to renewing the life of the ecclesial community in every age and provides an antidote to the perennial temptation towards worldliness. The diverse families that compose religious life demonstrate the beauty of discipleship and holiness in Christ, whether in their distinctive forms of prayer, their service among the people, whether through forms of community life, the solitude of the contemplative life or at the frontier of new cultures. Those in consecrated life have often been the first to sense important historical changes and to heed the promptings of the Spirit. Today, too, the Church needs their prophetic voice and action. The Christian community also recognises and wishes to be attentive to the practices of synodal life and discernment that have been tried and tested in communities of consecrated life, maturing over the centuries. We know that we can learn from them wisdom in how to walk the synodal path.”<sup>4</sup>

## **2. THREE BIBLICAL ICONS**

I propose that we allow ourselves to be accompanied by the contemplation of some biblical icons. These are three Lucan scenes that I think can stimulate us and offer suggestions for the fermentation of a missionary synodal journey.

### **2.1 Mary and Elizabeth (Lk 1:39-56)**

“At that time Mary set out and traveled to the hill country in haste to a town of Judah, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the infant leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, cried out in a loud voice and said, “Most blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And how does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For at the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled.”

And Mary said:

“My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,  
my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
for He has looked with favor on His lowly servant.  
From this day all generations will call me blessed:  
the Almighty has done great things for me,  
and holy is His Name.  
He has mercy on those who fear Him

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<sup>3</sup> SECRETARIAT GENERAL OF THE SYNOD - XVI ORDINARY GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Toward October 2024*, Vatican December 11, 2023, p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> XVI ORDINARY GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS - First Session, Summary Report - *A Synodal Church in mission*, October 28, 2023, 10.b.

in every generation.

He has shown the strength of His arm,  
He has scattered the proud in their conceit.  
He has cast down the mighty from their thrones,  
and has lifted up the lowly.  
He has filled the hungry with good things,  
and the rich he has sent away empty.  
He has come to the help of His servant Israel  
for He has remembered His promise of mercy,  
the promise He made to our fathers,  
to Abraham and his children forever.

Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home”.

It is a picture rich in external and internal movement. Bodies, minds, hearts, inmost parts and souls are moving. Mary and Elizabeth experience the deepest joy of an encounter that involves not only the two women but also the children of the promise, the fruit of their wombs and of a Word that, descended from Heaven, is embodied, in entirely different ways, in the human fabric of ordinary lives of women marked and transfigured by the extraordinariness of the Lord’s advent.

Mary sets out and travels in haste: having become bride and mother, impelled by the Fire of the Spirit that fills her with Himself, Mary does not hold back joy, consolation! Shadowed by God, enveloped in His tenderness, here she runs to Elizabeth to share with her the beneficent Shadow that protects her, the warm Embrace that sustains her. The first effect of Mary’s motherhood is thus to move, to go, to leave Nazareth to share the Joy: “He who loves sets himself in motion, is driven out of himself, is attracted and attracts, gives himself to the other and weaves relationships that generate life”.<sup>5</sup>

Having arrived at Elizabeth’s house, she enters it. How beautiful this very first step of approaching the other! Let us watch as Mary, having become the dwelling place of God, Mother of the Son, enters the other’s house, her world, her life, gently knocking on the door and waiting for permission to enter. Mary enters, she does not call Elizabeth out but enters her home and remains there, becoming part of the family, letting customs, language, traditions, flavors, colors, aromas, secrets of Elizabeth and Zechariah penetrate her soul, enrich her inner baggage as she shares Fullness! To enter, to stay, to taste the material and spiritual food that the other offers me is the first missionary act. Mission is giving but it is also receiving, it is walking together, in mutual exchange of gifts: the Joy that fills Mary, the Son who inhabits her excludes no one and boasts no self-sufficiency, indeed, it expands Mary’s heart to the infinite spaces of God’s welcome, to His humble and passionate thirst for the other!

Joy is contagious, the Spirit is irrepressible: upon hearing Mary’s voice offering her the greeting of peace - *Shalom* - Elizabeth, captivated by the experience of the leap, - she too – becomes a voice. A blessing voice, voice of the blessing that all creation raises to the Mother and the Creator who, in her, loves to enclose, snuggle, hide, reveal Himself: Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb! Mary’s greeting triggers the blessing polyphony of creation, reactivates in Elizabeth the channels through which such polyphony flows, takes on flesh and voice, manifests itself in word and song.

In Elizabeth the astonished amazement of the whole universe finds expression: “And how does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” Mary, having left Nazareth and entered Elizabeth’s house to share the Joy she carries in her womb, receives from her the gift of recognition, of confirmation. Elizabeth is the human echo of the Spirit, repeating in a voice of a woman, who is sister, mother, friend what

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<sup>5</sup> FRANCIS, *Baptized and Sent: Christ’s Church on Mission in the World*, Message for World Mission Day 2019, Vatican June 9, 2019.

Mary had heard at the Annunciation. How beautiful is this reciprocity of gift! Announcement arouses announcement, joy arouses joy, life arouses life, in a fruitful, joyful interchange, all human and all divine! And then bursts forth the Magnificat as Mary's song for God, a tender and strong expression of the power of Love.

The scene of the Visitation offers itself to us as a missionary and synodal icon par excellence. Mary becomes mission, "sealed, even branded"<sup>6</sup> by the Spirit, sent with her Son and in her Son! But she does not experience all this alone: the encounter with Elizabeth, the harmony, the communion and the synergy between the two women catalyze the joyful explosion of the Magnificat. The framework of the visitation somehow introduces us to the gestation and birthing of communion and mission, differently embodied in John and in Jesus, in the Forerunner and in the Messiah, in the one who prepares the way and in the one who is the Way, in the one who is voice and in the one who is the Word.

Mary and Elizabeth have so much to offer us as consecrated persons, as communities, as Institutes called to be leaven of a synodal Church in mission!

*I may ask myself:*

- ★ *How do I approach the "home" of the other person, his/her world, life, culture, his/her unique way of perceiving, feeling and understanding the universe?*
- ★ *How do my presence, words, thoughts, feelings and actions convey shalom, peace, blessing?*
- ★ *How open and eager am I to learn from those I meet along life's path, from situations, from nature?*
- ★ *How much do I invest in making grateful memories of what I have received and continually receive from God, from others, from creation?*

## **2.2 The disciples of Emmaus (Lk 24: 13-35)**

"Now that very day two of them were going to a village, some 11 kilometres from Jerusalem, called Emmaus, and they were conversing about all the things that had occurred. And it happened that while they were conversing and debating, Jesus himself drew near and walked with them. But their eyes were prevented from recognizing him. He asked them, "What are you discussing as you walk along?" They stopped, looking downcast; one of them, named Cleopas, said to him in reply, "Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know of the things that have taken place there in these days?" And he replied to them, "What sort of things?" They said to him, "The things that happened to Jesus the Nazarene, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, how our chief priests and rulers both handed him over to a sentence of death and crucified him.

But we were hoping that he would be the one to redeem Israel; and besides all this, it is now the third day since this took place. Some women from our group, however, have astounded us: they were at the tomb early in the morning and did not find his body; they came back and reported that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who announced that he was alive. Then some of those with us went to the tomb and found things just as the women had described, but him they did not see." And he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are! How slow of heart to believe all that the prophets spoke! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them what referred to him in all the scriptures. As they approached the village to which they were going, he gave the impression that he was going on farther. But they urged him, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening and the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them. And it happened that, while he was with them at table, he took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them. With that their eyes were opened and they recognized him, but he vanished from their sight. Then they said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he spoke to us on the way and opened the Scriptures to us?" So they set out at once and returned to Jerusalem where they found gathered together the Eleven and those with

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, Rome 2013, no. 273.

them, who were saying, “The Lord has truly been raised and has appeared to Simon!” Then the two recounted what had taken place on the way and how he was made known to them in the breaking of the bread”.

The scene presents us with a walking together. Indeed, two kinds of walking together, on the day of the Passover <sup>7</sup>. There is a walking together on the road that leads *away from* Jerusalem, away from the community, away from the painful and tiring experience of Friday and Saturday, away from the Cross. It is a path of geographic and inner descent, legs and heart heavy with disappointment, mourning, bitterness, defeat, the two disciples’ steps paced by a myopic conversation that leaves their faces sad: “We hoped that he was the one who would redeem Israel...”

And there is another walking together, that of returning late at night, to Jerusalem, to community, to life. Darkness all around, uphill road but legs flying, eyes sparkling with joy and hearts inflamed by an encounter that frees the inner senses, opens them to the Light and arouses an irrepressible urge to communicate it to others.

Between the two paths, precisely, an encounter. The two wayfarers become three. The third approaches the two in their daytime walking on the road that leads away from life. He does not impose a change of course but gets close, descends with them and into them, listens, until the relational space opens to a question: “What are these conversations you are having with each other along the way?”

It is a chance to free the heart from the pain that weighs it down, that prevents sight though it is day. The road now runs fast underfoot, the journey away from Jerusalem reaches its destiny but the hearts, now kindled, melt their longing into a warm, insistent invitation: “Stay with us, for it is nearly evening and the day is almost over”. God enters and remains. He stays right there, with them, far away from Jerusalem. And right there, far away, the two disciples find themselves reached, sought, warmed, fed, healed by Jesus, who descended with them in their anguish, their affliction, their escape. Refreshed by the broken Bread, freed from the darkness of their hearts, they no longer have any fear of the outer night: Jesus is now in them, an inner presence, and the mission is urgent! Returning immediately to Jerusalem, to the community of disciples has become urgent. There is an urgent need for communion, an urgent need to gather, to gather, to walk together and to communicate to all that the night is now bright.

There is a walking together far from God, an introverted, self-referential walking together, during which we are closed to the light, brooding together over our burdens, our labors and our illnesses, prisoners of desolation. It is a walking together that extinguishes the inner senses, that makes the heart incapable of recognizing the good, burdened by a pain that degenerates into evil, an evil that is contagious, that infects. Yes, there is a walking together, an alliance, a solidarity in evil, a “sick synodality,” folded in on itself, producing a regressive movement, away from life, from Love, from God.

And there is a walking together toward God, a missionary, outbound walk, “hearts on fire, feet on the move” <sup>8</sup>, which can be tiring, nocturnal, but is animated by the joy of an encounter that gives wings to the feet and the heart, that frees, heals, impassions, ignites our desire to be with Jesus, to welcome him in ourselves, to be his, to become also bread broken, to communicate him to others, to everyone. This is christian synodality, which is missionary.

*We can ask ourselves:*

- ★ *In our walking together, as communities, as Institutes, as Consecrated Life, as Church, towards where are we going?*
- ★ *What are the conversations we have with each other along the way?*

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. FRANCIS, *Regina Caeli*, April 26, 2020

<sup>8</sup> Cf. FRANCIS, *Burning Hearts, Walking Feet*, Message for the 97<sup>th</sup> World Mission Day 2023, Rome January 6, 2023 22.

### 2.3 Paul and Lydia (Acts 16: 11-15)

“We set sail from Troas, making a straight run for Samothrace, and on the next day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, a leading city in that district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We spent some time in that city. On the sabbath we went outside the city gate along the river where we thought there would be a place of prayer. We sat and spoke with the women who had gathered there. One of them, a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth, from the city of Thyatira, a worshiper of God, listened. And the Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what Paul was saying. After she and her household had been baptized, she offered us an invitation, “If you consider me a believer in the Lord, come and stay at my home,” and she prevailed on us”.

The episode tells the entry of the Gospel into Europe. The Spirit causes Paul and Silas to “change course” and, leaving aside plans to evangelize Mysia, they descend to Troas. Paul senses the call to go to Macedonia and sets out. Here begins the “we” section of Acts, in which the author makes himself part of the journey. A “synodal” section, after the disagreement between Paul and Barnabas about the presence of young Mark.

“There had just been the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15), the ways of the Gospel began to radiate outside the land of Israel, not without **rough paths**. (...) We have to imagine a process of strenuous understanding. **Differences - even to the point of conflict - however necessary and fruitful in the church, nevertheless differs** from quarrelsome and poisoned disagreement because it never demonizes the opponent, but makes room for him. Having separated paths, Paul with his co-workers are later faced with **unforeseen obstacles** (...). Pope Francis reminded us in the opening homily of the Synod Assembly, “So many missionary itineraries land on alleys that appear blind, in reality the crisis opens new visions of church.” (...) And the church lands in Europe, and it does so in a surprising, new form: starting from the margins, from the banks of the river, just outside the rich Romanized city. “... women had gathered there for prayer.” Strangely, a liturgy outside the ritual, female, open-air, welcomes Paul. The apostle, here, does not start, as is his usual, from the synagogue (probably in Philippi, a Roman colony, not even existing). He inserts himself into an “irritual” female liturgy, bursting into it with the word of the Gospel. (...) The movement of the Gospel in Europe thus begins. In Philippi, the mission comes out of a limited territory, and finds new spaces. New languages inaugurated by women, whom Paul does not disdain, indeed he seizes as a *kairos*: he announces to them, he enters into dialogue. Lydia, a humble worshiper of God and a dealer in purple cloth, will become the first believer on the European soil”<sup>9</sup>.

Paul and his companions enter into dialogue with women. Lydia, a woman of prayer and an enterprising purple cloth merchant, opens her heart to the Word and her home, that is, her life, her relationships, her world, are enlightened and enriched by the Gospel. She welcomes Christ, but she also welcomes those who are Christ's: Paul and his companions are housed in her house<sup>10</sup>, that is, they become part of a network of bonds that guard, repair, fortify and nourish. “After she and her household had been baptized, she offered us an invitation, “If you consider me a believer in the Lord, come and stay at my home.” And she prevailed on us “. We find it hard to imagine how it is possible to force someone like Paul to do anything... We are facing a transformation. Not only of Lydia's heart, but also of Paul's heart. Paul, the intrepid apostle who does not like to eat other people's bread for free and works night and day to be a burden to no one (cf. 2 Thess 3:7-8), opens his heart **to receive** the warmth and consolation of Lydia's home, to which he will later want to return after his imprisonment (cf. Acts 16:40). Lydia welcomes the Gospel; Paul learns to let himself

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<sup>9</sup> M. I. ANGELINI, *Spiritual insights*, XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, General Congregation VIII, Rome October 13, 2023. <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/info/2023/10/13/synod23---ottava-congregazione-generale---spunto-spirituale-le-d.html>

<sup>10</sup> Cf. FRANCIS, *General Audience*, October 30, 2019.

be welcomed and to receive with gratitude and humility the material, spiritual, relational gifts of Lydia and her cultural horizon.

*We can ask ourselves:*

- ★ *How do we experience differences among ourselves?*
- ★ *How do we handle dissent?*
- ★ *How do we welcome the voice of the Spirit who, in the most diverse ways, invites us to change course?*
- ★ *How do we open ourselves to recognize the voice of the Spirit speaking as He wills, where He wills and through whom He wills, within and outside the confines of acquired mental patterns?*

### **3. SOWING AND REAPING**

Sowing and reaping represent, for every farmer, the hopeful beginning and grateful celebration of the agricultural cycle. The two movements are inseparably connected and derive meaning and livelihood from each other. It would make no sense to sow without hoping for the harvest. And there would be no reaping without the confident tenacity of sowing. The path of a synodal Church in mission can draw inspiration and light from the fruitful interaction of these two movements, which also represent two inclusive and complementary paradigms of mission. While the gospels present the image of sowing (e.g. Mt 13:1-23; Mk 4:3-9; Lk 8:5-8), there is no lack of reference to the harvest (e.g. Mt 9:37-38; Lk 10:1-2; Jn 4:35-38;) <sup>11</sup>. The missionary disciples are sent, together, to sow the Gospel. But they are also sent, together, to reap the harvest sown and made to grow by Another. In the land of Samaria, after his encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus addresses these words to the disciples, "Lift up your eyes and see the fields that are ripe for the harvest. (...) I sent you to reap what you have not worked for" (Jn 4:35, 38). The paradigm of the harvest opens the mission to the dimension of being receptive - which also manifests itself in a contemplative gaze and active, humble and profound listening - that calls us to discern, recognize, celebrate and harvest with joy the gifts that God has already sown in full measure beyond all geographical, cultural, ethnic, social, mental and religious boundaries.

Come, Lord Jesus and make all of us, consecrated men and women, ever more living leaven of a missionary synodal Church; come, Lord Jesus and transform us into very meek and tenacious sowers of the Word, in whatever soil we find ourselves; come, Lord Jesus and send us, very humble and passionate gleaners of the harvest that God has made to grow in the heart of the person, in peoples, in creation.

Sr. Simona Brambilla, MC  
Rome, December 20, 2023

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<sup>11</sup> For an in-depth study of the missionary paradigm of reaping in the Lucan texts, see the work of G. FRIZZI, *Luke theorist and mission witness*, Urbaniana University Press, Rome 2013.