

Leadership in the Synodal Church

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Photo: Chapel of the Immaculate Conception (University of Dayton) - stained glass window, Christ washing Peter's feet (commons.wikimedia.org)

From the *Alfonsiana Academy Blog* (*original text in Spanish*)

The XVII Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops was held in the Vatican from 4 to 29 October 2023, which for the first time saw the participation of women and lay people. The theme "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission" was studied and a summary document was approved that will serve as a basis for reflection that will continue in the local Churches until the next meeting of the Synod, scheduled for October 2024.

This synodal process began on October 9, 2021, with a reflection in the Vatican, and then continued in parishes and dioceses until August 2022 (diocesan phase) and, from October 2022 to March 2023, in episcopal conferences (continental phase).

This synod seeks to listen to the whole Church to find the best way to put into practice the concept of synodality [i]. This requires a review of the way in which leadership is exercised in the ecclesial community.

Three Types of Leadership in Civil Society

The Christian community needs inspired leadership that promotes the participation, creativity, and enthusiastic engagement of all its members in the life of the community. To better understand this important service, let us begin with Simon Sinek's description of leadership in his book *Start with Why* [ii]. He uses an image of three concentric layers, known as "the golden circle." The innermost circle corresponds to the "why," followed by the "how," and finally the "what." For an activity to be rewarding and motivating, the "why" must be a priority. On a personal level, the "why" is linked to one's life journey and experiences.

The inspirational leader has the ability to understand and communicate the "why," that is, the

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that is, the social and existential meaning of their activity. As a result, their actions become alienating for those who participate in them. Without a clear common purpose, members lose intrinsic motivation and easily fall into individualism and the unbridled pursuit of superficial and selfish interests.

The best leader is a skilled, honest, and authentic communicator, able to connect with others and help them define together the purpose and reason for being of their group or organization. In this way, he establishes an emotional bond that pushes people to join his cause, increases mutual trust and builds strong relationships. An example is Martin Luther King, who managed to convey his dream in such a way that many received it and embraced the deep motivations (the "why") that he had [iii].

2. Leadership according to the Synod 2021-2024

In the first letter to Timothy (1 Tim 2-13), St. Paul mentions some fundamental human qualities of the Christian leader, such as honesty, humility, and integrity, as well as good communication, organizational and inspirational skills.

The summary document of the Synod 2021-2024 underlines the need to overcome clericalism and authoritarianism, which understand authority more as power than as service and assume "a style of worldly power that refuses to give reasons" (S23is 11.c), interpreting the divine call as a privilege.

The Synod calls for a review of the exercise of priestly authority, so that it becomes an expression of "closeness to people, of welcoming and listening to all," in imitation of Christ, Shepherd, and Servant (S23is 11.b). More than a teacher, the leader of the Christian community [iv] must be a witness who exercises his leadership as a generous and disinterested service, thus imitating the incarnate Word, who "did not come to be served but to serve" (Mt 20:28). In addition to a solid theological formation, he must be able to inspire others and encourage them to discernment, creativity, and enthusiastic commitment in common life.

The Synod also emphasizes the importance of listening, collaboration, and collegial and participatory decision-making. In particular, it calls for promoting the participation of women and lay people "in decision-making processes" and in "roles of responsibility in pastoral care and ministry." At the same time, it calls for not "clericalizing" them, creating "a sort of elite that perpetuates inequalities and divisions in the people of God" (S23is 8.f).

Local Churches must establish "processes and structures that allow for regular verification of the ways in which priests and deacons exercise their ministry," promoting transparency (S23is 11.k).

The culture of responsibility and co-responsibility also requires "defining structures and processes for the periodic review of the Bishop's task, with reference to the style of his authority" and other aspects of his ecclesial service (S23is 12.j). More specifically, it asks that the Episcopal Council and the Eparchial Diocesan Pastoral Council be mandatory. The Synod also asks that all diocesan bodies of co-responsibility be made more operational and that this be reflected in canon law (S23is 12.k).

Conclusion

The leader of any organization must clearly present his vision, his goals, and his priorities, so that all members know and can own the "why" of their collaboration with it.

reiterate their “why,” that is, their ideal, their dream, to obtain the full involvement of all in the mission to realize it.

Ultimately, the ecclesial leader must be a witness who helps others to discern and listen to the voice of the Spirit. His leadership must be at the service of that interactive and dynamic process that helps each person to become fully himself and together, as the people of God, to walk towards the Father in union with all creation.

Prof. Martin Carbajo Nunez

[i] “Synodality implies coming together in assembly at the various levels of ecclesial life, mutual listening, dialogue, community discernment, and the building of consensus” XI Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “*Synthesis Report*, First Session” (4-29.10.2023), [S23is], 1.h, on the Internet: <https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly/synthesis/spanish/2023.11.20-IT-Synthesis-Report.pdf>

[Sinek Simon, *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Action* , Actova Company, Madrid 2018; Id, *Start with Why. How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Action* , Portfolio, New York, 2009.

[iii] “Dr. King said he had a dream, and he inspired people to follow his dream” (Sinek, 2009, 138).

[iv] Paragraphs taken from the article: Carbajo-Núñez M., “El liderazgo en la Iglesia,” in *Forum Teologiczne* 25 (2024) 197-213; Cfr. Id, “Petrine Primacy and Synodality” (19.05.2023), in *Internet*: <https://www.alfonsiana.org/blog/2023/05/19/petrine-primacy-and-synodality/>
