**LEADERSHIP AND SYNODALITY**

**Biblical Dimension**

**III Congress of the Region Interamerica, August 11-14 of 2022**

The International Theological Commission on March 2nd, 2018, clarifies that with a specific meaning, since the 1st and 2nd CENTURIES they are designated with the word Synod, to the ecclesiastical Assemblies convened at various levels, to discern in the light of the Word of God and in listening to the Holy Spirit, doctrinal, liturgical, canonical and pastoral issues that arise gradually. (The Synodality in the life and mission of the Church, No. 4)

Thus, synodality is a biblical category, and is related to the fact of walking together, of doing things together, and expresses the physical proximity and intentions of those who accompany each other on the journey.

At this point we ask ourselves: is there a biblical basis for synodality as an expression of ecclesial action? Can we find pages in the Bible in which believers come together and question the meaning of the journey as a people gathered by the Lord? The answer to these questions seems to us to be positive.

In the reflections we are about to offer, we will dwell on the nature of these meetings, the actors involved and the dynamics that mark the synodal journeys.

Starting from the realization that there can be no synodality without an authentic exercise of responsibility, we will read some stories from the Old and New Testament and raise the critical questions of a leadership that, locked in the selfish pursuit of its own interests, is incapable of constructing ways of sharing power.

The Abimelech’s coup to assume absolute power in the book of Judges: we will focus both on his fatigue to assume the others and their needs, and on the withdrawal within the framework of his own interests.

Listening to St. Paul:

We will next focus on shared authority and overcoming conflicts. Listening to St. Paul, we will ask ourselves about the positive dynamics and processes that can be unleashed to overcome divisions in the community.

Synodal leadership: CRITICAL Aspects: To speak of synodality is to speak of leadership, because there is no synodal path if there are no leaders who promote a sense of responsibility in the community, and who encourage those involved in formation by stimulating their paths of growth.

We begin with a definition of a leader, and for that purpose, we are going to use it from the sociology, so let’s look it into, for the purpose of our meeting, the New Sociology Dictionary of 1987 (p. 1109). *"He is one who, in the course of his membership in the life of a social organism, influences other members and, in general, the activities that the organism performs or carries out.*

The Bible seems to have a certain resistance to one-man leadership and to the concentration of power in the hands of a "leader", while stressing the importance of belonging to the community (social body).

In God's plan, the journey, that is, the activities that the body undertakes are done by all together, sharing the way with the other brothers and sisters that He has chosen.

The OT offers valuable indications in this regard, highlighting successes and weaknesses, and showing the personal and communal processes through which Israel is called to become God's people, faithful to his Will.

The criticality of leadership: Abimelech's Coup - Denial of the common good.

The Scripture is familiar with the slips of the men of the providence, who claim to be interpreters of the good of the people. These lapses turn out to be real attacks against the community, and are stigmatized as inadequate and dangerous initiatives, because they essentially express the thirst for power and personal self-satisfaction.

We are inserted in the times of the government of the Judges in Israel (around the 12th century B.C.), they are charismatic and military figures that ensure a certain political stability to the people.

Among the Judges, Gideon stood out, because he led Israel for 40 years ensuring peace, and because of it he earned to be a "nomination for the monarchy". The Israelites, in fact, officially asked him to assume all power because of his military successes: *"The Israelites said to Gideon: you rule, your son and your son's son, because you have saved us from the hand of Midian."*

But Gideon answered them: "I will not rule you, nor will my son rule you: the Lord will rule you" (Jk 8:22-23).

He wisely rejects kingship, for YHWH alone is the ruler of Israel.

Upon his death, Abimelech, one of his 70 sons, attempted a coup and tried to be elected as monarch. Abimelech kills all his brothers and seeks the favor of the notables of Shechem and all Beth Millo gathered and went to proclaim Abimelech king (Gdc 9:6).

Everything seems to be going according to plan until Jonathan, Gideon's youngest son, appears and interrupts the ceremony with a bang. He becomes the narrator of a little story that seems harmless and trivial, but which in the end is revealed as the oracle of a curse, (Jk 7:9-15) Neither the olive tree, nor the fig tree, nor the vine are willing to take on the responsibility of government, but they would have good fruit to offer. The only one who accepts the task is the bramble: it agrees to the request because it has nothing to lose, since it has no fruit to offer but only thorns.

The Shechemites are warned that the czar (Abimelech) has no plans for peace but for violence. In fact, the end of the ninth chapter of the book of Judges tells how, after a three-year honeymoon, the Shechemites rebel against Abimelech and try to kill him.

He reacts with his army to the uprisings that multiply in the country, but the story ends in tragedy because despite his military might, the despot succumbs ignominiously (at the hands of a woman: Jk 9:53-54).

What is the lesson we can learn from these tragic events? There are men who exercise leadership for themselves, who are not interested in the good of the people and who impose their will by force. God does not want this, and sooner or later, it causes the system to collapse in on itself.

Abimelech had foreseen the effectiveness of a government entrusted to a single leader, because if there is ONE in power, decisions are more agile and public affairs can be better managed.

God's plan will continue to favor the way of the political form expressed in Judges: After Abimelech, Tola arose to save Israel.... after him Lair arose, the Gileadite, who was judge for 22 years.

The God of Israel will not endorse the monarchical institution until the time of Saul, and even when he gives a king, he will continue to warn against abuses of power and against the laws he will impose.

With Abimelech's coup we could even recognize a minimum of personal power sharing with the notables of Sichem who gave him their support. But this exercise of pseudo-sinodality is born of violence, is driven by partisan interests, is based on fear and above all is not inspired by God.

When leaders fail in their mission and instead of being guardians of the flock, vigilant sentinels and promoters of unity, they become the cause of misfortune; only the direct action of God puts the people and their destiny back on track: (click giallo).

If the leaders of the community are totally trapped in a self-referential and selfish movement focused on immediate personal well-being, the word of God offers a far-reaching and long-term project that has an educational purpose: the recovery of the vocation of a chosen people - a people in a state of synodality - called to the recovery of its members removed by bad leadership.

Personal interests, thirst for power, alliances of convenience, desire to stand out and have visibility: these are the traits of the exercise of power in which the will to serve God's people is totally absent. This leadership generates confusion, bewilderment and loss of identity in the community, and turns out to be a real social and religious plague.

Not only is there a lack of the slightest synodal initiative in the actions of the leaders (i.e., sharing responsibility, caring for the common good, attending to the needs of the people), but their incapacity drags the people into the maelstrom of confusion and disarray.

Synodal processes: shared authority and overcoming conflict.

Although the irrepressible instinct for autarchy and self-referentiality marks many pages of the Bible, there are numerous positive examples of leaders who walk with their communities, working responsibly for the good of those to whom they are sent. Sacred Scripture knows formative and virtuous ways that make a synodal journey possible. There are, for example, Joseph and Moses, but for the sake of time we will focus only on the figure of Paul and his pastoral choices. Our gaze will be attentive to enhancing the positive inherent in every experience of leadership and responsibility, and will focus on the processes of overcoming conflicts that involve individuals and communities striving to move in the direction of authentic synodality.

Paul and his pastoral choices

The Apostle Paul is one of the richest and most interesting personalities of the NT. His mission, however, requires great care, delicacy and prudence, because the supreme good of ecclesial communion is at stake.

In the two passages we are analyzing -Paul offering a sacrifice in the temple in Jerusalem and the disagreement with Barnabas in Antioch- the apostle demonstrates that he knows how to modulate pastoral choices skillfully, without dogmatic rigidity and without excessive hostility of character.

Let us begin by reading the Acts of the Apostles 21:18-24: Paul returns to Jerusalem and is invited by James and the elders to offer a sacrifice in the temple.

Two notes: The first concerns Paul directly, who, although he is aware of the relativity of the immolation of an animal in relation to the sacrifice of Christ, will follow the prudential advice of the leader of the Jerusalem community. He adapts himself to this practice in order to save the communion... It is not a matter of going back on one's own convictions, but of reading the contexts, making a wise discernment about the most suitable option and, without prejudice to the heart of the Gospel, RESPECTING THE TIMES OF THE FRATERNITY.

The second annotation comes from the indication of the sacrifices and refers to the attendance to the Temple by the Judeo-Christians. Although the whole sacrificial scaffolding no longer makes sense, since the only and perfect sacrifice is that of Christ on the cross, the members of the mother church of Jerusalem continue to cultivate these practices, evidently deeply rooted in the experience of the community.

Paul submits himself to a custom that he considers OBSOLETE and does so to save fellowship and reputation, and not to feed the "evil tongues" and internal dissensions of the Jerusalem church.

This biblical page reveals a deep pastoral meaning. If in the eyes of the pure and hard believers it may seem an obvious inconsistency with the Christian novelty, in comparison with respect to Judaism, in the consideration of the Jerusalem pastors it is appropriate to continue on this prudential path, because the local church still needs it.

From the pastoral point of view there is still a path to follow and so there may be room for a certain tolerance towards secondary practices that do not affect the fundamentals of the faith.

In fact, Paul, inspired by pastoral prudence, had Timothy circumcised (Acts 16:3); he himself had practiced the vow of nazirite (Acts 18:18), confirming a religious behavior that preserved certain practices considered not discordant with Christianity.

Different but Not Divided: Paul and Barnabas in Legitimate Disagreement

Among the significant episodes on the road to synodality and the processes that make it possible is the disagreement between Paul and Barnabas over pastoral collaborators.

The context is that of the conclusion of the Council of Jerusalem, immediately after Paul, Barnabas, Judas and Silas were sent to Antioch to deliver the missive to the community.

Paul and Barnabas remain in Antioch along with many other co-workers, teaching the Word of the Lord. After some time, Paul makes the decision to leave the community, but Barnabas does not agree with his choice of traveling companions.

The text says: "After a few days, Paul said to Barnabas, 'Let us go back and visit the brethren in all the cities where we have proclaimed the word of the Lord, to see how they are doing. Barnabas also wanted to take John, called Mark, with them, but Paul felt that he should not take one who had gone away from them, to Pamphylia, and had not wanted to participate in their work. The disagreement was such that they that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed to Cyprus. Paul, on the other hand, chose Silas and left....

In fact, in At 13:13 we read that in Perga, Pamphylia, John Mark left the group and returned to Jerusalem, a desertion that Paul did not like at all.

We do not really know the reasons why Barnabas chose John and preferred him. Surely it was not a conflict of principles, but a personal preference. Perhaps he considers him more suitable for the mission, or he simply enjoyed the previous collaboration and therefore chooses him again. We can also hypothesize motives of sympathy for a co-worker to whom he has close ties (remember that he is his cousin - Col 4:10). Or, finally, Barnabas wants to give him another chance after the disappointing start of his pastoral work.

In fact, the tone of the discussion is very strong, to the point that they separate.

Luke thus shows that there is room for dissent and personal preference in the church, also because it is a conflict over minor choices that do not invalidate the essentials of the gospel.

We can conclude by saying that disagreements, on the one hand, do not always represent a TRAGEDY, because they do not automatically imply the slowing down of the mission: on the contrary, it walks with double speed after the separation of the apostles, since it is entrusted to two groups.

BUT, on the other hand, this shows how important pastoral understanding among the missionaries and the sharing of a common vision is, since this leads to fruitful collaboration and new possibilities for evangelization.

Synodality for today's ASSCC

There are virtuous paths that generate mature leaders free from the narcissistic obsessions that agitate the minds of irresponsible pastors (as shown in the examples presented) .

Paternity/maternity, filiation and fraternity are the three areas to work on in order to reach human maturity, which is certainly a long-term goal, but which requires the immediate decision to embark on a path of formation. This path involves hard work, great commitment, unwavering perseverance, the ability to continually question oneself and, above all, the willingness to listen.

And listening is precisely the attitude that marks the difference between a leader who is affectively connoted and focused on the task at hand and one who is in the grip of unresolved conflicts.

1. It requires, in the first place, listening to the Word of God, because if this habitual disposition is lacking, one loses the sense of one's own vocation.

2. But they are also asked to listen to the persons entrusted to them, because the confreres (other SSCCs, young people or persons with whom they live the mission) represent the ultimate meaning of their vocation (to be responsible for the community).

Leadership and synodality

Does not favor synodality: Hardness of heart: a distinctive feature of the stubbornness of those who exclusively follow their own ideas (cf. Ps 81:13-14).

Promotes synodality: Meekness and mercy: These are in the soul of those who intend to govern with wisdom, strive to combine the firmness of the shepherd and the meekness of the lamb, and reject a strict and legalistic morality.

What does not favor synodality: A leader marked by an insensitive ear and a selfish desire for affirmation.

What fosters synodality: A leader who is involved in the needs of others, listens with empathy and knows how to enter into a balanced emotional synergy.

He is neither cold nor distant and becomes a neighbor to the community he accompanies, showing God's pastoral concern through his ability to care and accompany.

Synodality makes its way, therefore, when it finds balanced personalities who wisely guide the community and who know how to favor the human and religious maturation of the community entrusted to them.

A region (province, center...) directed by an authoritarian and centralizing leader does not go very far. This is the lesson we can draw from the aforementioned biblical experiences of failure

It does not make synodality: Concentration of authority and responsibility: that makes everything coincide with the individual (I), it does not call to co-responsibility to the whole Region, Province or Center, and does not generate a state of continuous missionary conversion.

It presents an insufficient valuation of the gifts of others; scarce valuation of the specific and qualified contribution of his confreres.

Fosters synodality: It is placed in the line of sharing, generates paths of adult faith and fully realized humanity, proceeds constantly guided by the breath of the Spirit, triggering processes of human and spiritual maturation. We can say that when the SSCC community forgets to proclaim Christ with its life, it loses its freedom and vocation, falling into the dangerous trap of self-referential narcissism: it proclaims itself and its needs, generating a power structure called clericalism.

The one who exercises leadership walks with the Region, the Province or the Center; beside the people entrusted to him, and behind them. Sometimes the leader will be at the front to show the way and support the hope of the group; at other times he will simply be in the midst of everyone with a simple and merciful closeness, and in some circumstances he will have to walk behind the group to help those who have been left behind, and above all because the community has its own sense of smell to identify new paths.

Leadership of communion and participation

Leadership for a church of communion and participation, therefore, for a church that walks taking into account what counts without forgetting those who have a slower pace, because the important thing is not to walk alone, always counting on the brothers in a wise and realistic spiritual discernment.

1. Triggering processes instead of preserving spaces

Triggering processes... and open to the realism imposed by reality. It is an invitation to assume the tension between fullness and limit, prioritizing time. Prioritizing space leads to going crazy to solve everything in the present moment, to try to take possession of all the spaces of power and self-affirmation. It means crystallizing processes and trying to stop them.

Prioritizing time means dealing with initiation processes, that is, dealing with contexts that are still evolving.

2. The churches of the first century are imbued with a strong vivacity and animated by great creativity, they allow themselves to be challenged by the needs of the believers, they make decisions by measuring themselves against the women and men they meet along the way.

Pastoral flexibility makes it possible to grasp the relativity of certain behaviors, which only in the long run will reveal their specific weight with regard to salvation (for example, circumcision, the presentation of sacrifices in the temple, not eating certain types of meat, ablutions...).

3. Without anxiety and through the active leadership of the believers, the Spirit moves history forward and makes the right choices. It is precisely these choices that do not generate hasty and clumsy responses, but authentic paths of maturation that lead to the fullness of personal and community life.

Time and the Spirit show reasons that frenetic activism does not allow us to glimpse.

As in the parable of the wheat and the tares, only at the end it does the good show itself with its own vigor (cf. Mt 13:24-30). Anticipating the cleansing operation not only entails the risk of uprooting the good plant with the weeds, but also the depowering of the good plant, which has not had the time and opportunity to strengthen itself and recover the space occupied by the "Enemy" and his weeds (Mt 13:25).

Leadership and formation: NOT EVERYTHING... NOT IMMEDIATELY

I find a close relationship between "formation" and the hierarchy of truths, according to which some truths are more important than others, even though they all come from the one divine source.

1. Applied to formation, we can say that it is perfectible insofar as it walks with the feet of its SSCC and knows an evolution. In the case of faith, we find SSCCs who have an incomplete, partial initial faith. There is room for an imperfect faith, in which the SC has grasped the salvific value of the encounter with Christ, but has not yet grasped all the articles of the Creed. In the Acts of the Apostles, Luke is not overly concerned with orthodoxy of faith (this is the case of Apollos, who can successfully teach in the synagogue at Ephesus even though he has a partial knowledge of the Gospel. What is appreciated is not so much the integrity of the deposit of faith, but the genuine motives and passion with which the Word is served).

2. In Scripture, the ethical imperative follows the indicative of proclamation: first one listens and then chooses, not the other way around.

3. But the ethical imperative (be converted) must not be inverted with the kerygmatic indicative (Christ died and rose again for you). St. Thomas Aquinas says that in the moral message offered by the Church there is a hierarchy in the virtues and the acts that proceed from it. The greatest virtue, the one that makes men like God, is mercy. He says that a virtue is all the better the more it resembles God, but this is achieved especially with mercy, and his mercy (says Scripture) extends over all creatures (Ps 144:9).

The heart of mercy is giving to others and lifting up the miseries of others, a trait that is proper to God.

The dynamic and progressive dimension of formation (and, therefore, of faith) also affects the moral aspect.

Characteristics that should animate the formative dialogue with those who are on the way (faith, morals...): the first aspect that arises is the question of language, an aspect of fundamental importance in the search for communion among SSCCs, there can be a formation or proclamation that is correct in terms of orthodoxy, but incomprehensible to the listener because of the inability of the receiver to grasp the meaning of the formulas.

The second aspect refers to the relationship between the truths, since dogmatic correctness alone is not enough: it is necessary to provide the offer to the receiver, intercepting his faith/formation paths and speaking an understandable language.

Criteria for concretizing the principle of the hierarchy of truths.

1. Pope Francis, in Evangelii Gaudium, nn. 36-37, offers some criteria to concretize the importance of the principle of the hierarchy of truths. In the first place, it is necessary to simplify the message, where simplifying does not mean cutting back, but offering what is essential, that is, the proclamation of the Gospel/formation must capture the core and not get lost in secondary aspects that, out of context, can be incomplete, lacking a solid foundation and obfuscate its beauty.

2. Proportionality: for example, if in a Center over the course of a year one speaks 10 times about membership dues or similar topics, and only two or three times about identity and charism, a disproportion occurs, so that what is obscured are precisely the topics that should be present in the formation. A similar imbalance occurs when more is said about sin than about grace, more about the Church than about Jesus Christ, or more about the Pope than about the Word of God.

3. Organicity: the hierarchy of truths does not consist in the omission of one truth: the obscuring of one formative dimension has negative consequences on all the others, since they illuminate and support each other.

Catholic morality does not consist in a path of self-perfection; it is not an ideology, nor a mere philanthropic practice. It arises from a vital relationship with Christ and finds meaning only if it breathes deeply the "fragrance of the Gospel." (n.39)

When Jesus gives the missionary mandate to the disciples, he says: "As you go on your way, go and preach, saying that the kingdom of heaven is at hand". Synodality is not decided at the dinner table, nor is it given by remaining within the perimeter of the community. .

Synodality is dynamic and is only offered when it meets the concrete persons to whom it is sent and listens to them, when it makes an impact on their history, often marked by the fragility and weariness of daily life.

Synodality takes place in discernment because not everything is planned, even the initiative that was not originally "on the agenda" can be inspired by God and placed within a broader plan, which requires a healthy communal discernment: it arises from a deep interior freedom, a careful reading of the signs of the times, together with prayer, reflection and the study necessary to listen to the voice of the Spirit.

Let us say a word about discernment. Discernment is born and develops in sincere, serene and objective dialogue with our brothers and sisters; in attention to the real experiences and problems of each situation; in the exchange of gifts and in the convergence of all energies in view of building up the Body of Christ and announcing the Gospel to young people and vulnerable persons....

Let us return to the final argument: "While we are on the way" calls for an inclusive journey because the people on the road are diverse in terms of social origin, culture, gender, marital status, geographical origin. Let us recall that Peter and the other apostles do manual labor and have little training; Paul is a learned Jew, totally dedicated to preaching; Apollos has behind him a solid formation received in Alexandria; Lydia has a good economic position; Priscilla and Aquila live in Rome and seem to enjoy a good economic condition.

On the other hand, the centralization of power (=clericalism) generates an elitist community that is, by definition, elective and non-vocational, anti-synodal in following an exclusive and non-inclusive movement.

When a leader adopts "clerical" and therefore anti-synodal attitudes, he boycotts listening to the other; he absolutizes himself and his own convictions, as if they were the only reasons to have the stamp of legitimacy.

"It requires offering support, because not all members of the community mature in the same way, it requires matching one's own steps with those of others, an attitude that is exhausting to cultivate because of the different speeds.

Often conflicts in the Regions, or in the Provinces and Centers, arise from the difficulty of knowing how to accept the slowness of others, and from the presumption of thinking that one can do it better and faster on one's own. The spirit of tolerance, which is a modulation of the spirit of charity, is required of the SC (and of the Christian). The ability to bear with one another enables one to support (=carry) the other according to the Pauline dictum: "bearing with one another in love, caring for the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace (Eph 4:1-3).

"While we are on our way," presupposes the humility that fosters the obedience of all to God's will. There are two temptations that undermine communion: the spirit of partisanship and vainglory. The attitude to have instead is humility: both to consider others superior to oneself and to put the good and the common interest first.

Visible synodality makes the style of the believers concrete and palpable, becoming itself the first form through which the proclamation of the Gospel passes, and it will undoubtedly be the most convincing way of doing vocation ministry so that new members feel attracted and eager to be part of the SSCC Association.

Thank you!

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Sr Lucrecia Uribe Duque

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Panama, August 2022