



# Transformation of the Church / Religious Life in light of the Synod on Synodality

## Introduction :

“Il concetto di sinodalità è diventato qualcosa di vago e di indeterminato oppure, se si preferisce, qualcosa di estremamente elastico e omnicomprensivo”<sup>1</sup>.

With this observation, C. Fantappiè reveals that while the Synod on Synodality has garnered much attention, it has also generated much lack of clarity. Part of this could be because the language of “synodality” is both new and abstract. The inclusion of three key realities in the name of this synod help make “synodality” more accessible: communion, participation, mission. They help shed light on synodality even more when they can be unpacked with the help of a reality that is common to all three. “Transformation”, about which you have asked me to speak, is just such a reality. As a result, we will approach the synod on synodality from the standpoint of transformation to perceive what invitations the synod on synodality might be making to contemporary religious life.

## Ecclesial Transformation, Personal Transformation

Since the Church is made up of concrete baptized persons, the Church’s ability to manifest the transformation being worked within her will directly reflect and depend on the way each believer, and then all believers together, live the transformation worked within them by their Baptism. Ecclesial transformation comes down to personal transformation. Even more is this true of consecrated religious who have been received into a public ecclesial way of life and have been consecrated to be living, walking visual icons, if you will, of what baptismal life in Christ “looks like.” To that end, we publicly vow the evangelical counsels which both “seal” and determine our lives; we have undertaken a life in which assiduous prayer and common life are visible priorities.

If the Synod on Synodality is inviting the entire Church to embrace a deepened awareness of our baptismal consecration, even more are vowed religious invited (and even required) to embrace a deepened awareness of our religious consecration which remains rooted in our baptismal consecration.

## Recovering a truly Spiritual understanding of Baptismal life, the Church

As we begin, permit me to make an important observation regarding a common approach to the Church and ecclesial life that still constitutes an obstacle to the transformation Pope Francis is labouring to nourish in the Church. In paragraphs 93-97 of *Evangelii gaudium*, Pope Francis describes (and rejects) what he calls “spiritual worldliness.” At the heart of this vice is an individualist, merely human vision of baptismal life and therefore an individualist, merely human approach to the Church and ecclesial communion. This individualist, merely human approach has led many of the baptized, including the clergy and consecrated religious, to regard realities like “spiritual”, “discernment”,

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<sup>1</sup> C. FANTAPPIÉ, *Metamorfosi della sinodalità. Dal Vaticano II a papa Francesco*, Venezia, 2023, 8.



“charisms”, “baptism”, “sacraments” and even “church” merely as **concepts**, thus emptying them of the life that they communicate.

In response to our “conceptualist” reduction of these realities, we find Jesus’ affirmation in the good shepherd discourse included in the Gospel of John: “I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly / io sono venuto perché abbiano la vita e l'abbiano in abbondanza” (Gv 10.10). When we read this text in its original Greek, we discover that the word the Evangelist uses for LIFE used is not “bios” (physical, material life) nor “psyche” (interior, psychic life). The word John uses for life here is “Zoe”, *divine life*. It is clear, then, that the Lord Jesus did not come in the flesh to teach us key concepts for us to first know and understand and then apply in our lives so that we are able to enter the Kingdom of God. Jesus came so that we might have LIFE, divine life; and life is communicated at the level of experience.

This brings me to the heart of the work we will do together today. In order to recover an *experience* of the above realities, and therefore the transformation that they work, this presentation will offer a reflection that invites us to re-think several of these realities in the key of divinity, that is, in the key of the divine-life they are meant to communicate *at the level of our experience*.

## Recovering Spiritual Experience and Vision

Explicitly this presentation will reflect on “Spiritual”, “Discernment”, “Baptism” and “Charisms.”

### Re-Thinking “Spiritual” in the key of divinity

For many Christians and Catholics, the term “spiritual” is understood as a concept indicating something that “touches on religion” or is “about religious matters”, “about prayer” or “about the church.” For example, the Eucharist is “spiritual” because Jesus commanded that the Apostles repeat this Eucharistic gesture and so it is central to the Catholic religion and our life of prayer. All of this is true, but none of it touches the heart, the *sine qua non* of a “spiritual” reality.

When the world-wide synodal consultation phase of the Synod on Synodality began in 2021, everyone was asked to find ways to employ a method that, at the time, was called “spiritual conversations.” It became clear, however, most everyone understood “spiritual conversations” to mean a respectful conversations about their parish, their diocese, or their experience of the Church in general<sup>2</sup>. Given that even non-believers could have such conversations about the organizations to which they belong, or even about the Church, it became evident that this language was not helpful.

During the work meeting in Spring 2023 to write the *Instrumentum laboris* for the first session of the Synod of Bishops Assembly, a group of theologians suggested that we shift the language regarding this reality: instead of speaking of “spiritual conversations,” it was suggested that we speak of “conversations in the Spirit.” This shift was intended to spur our minds beyond the usual conceptualist understanding of “spiritual” and recover the truly evangelical meaning of this reality: in the Christian tradition, “spiritual” does *not* mean indicate specific conceptual content such as “about religion” or “about prayer”; rather, the specifically Christian meaning for “spiritual” is a reality that is “filled with

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<sup>2</sup> As a result, the first round of input raised issues, questions, challenges and sufferings that the People of God experience in their day-to-day ecclesial life. No one synod could possibly address everything that was mentioned. While the Frascati document was diligent about honoring the wide range of input that was offered, it has also been necessary to gradually narrow the scope of this Synod on Synodality so as to focus the work of the Assembly. The one question that the October 2024 synod assembly will directly touch is “How can we become a more synodal church?”



the Holy Spirit / divinity” or “fully imbued with the Holy Spirit / divinity” or “transformed by the Holy Spirit / divinity.” The language of “conversation in the Spirit” was meant to move us past focusing on the content of our conversations to focusing on the divine presence (or absence) among us as we speak and listen to one another; it was an invitation to become aware of the need for believers to consciously engage conversations in the living presence of the divine Holy Spirit.

Those of us who experienced the first assembly of the Synod of Bishops on Synodality witnessed the transformation of this synod assembly away from being high-level episcopal business meeting to being a truly spiritual encounter. Many, many choices brought this about, but central to them all was the method of “conversation in the Spirit” that was engaged in the *circuli minori*.

As consecrated religious, we have all lived various experiences of general, provincial, or special chapters. Perhaps most of those experiences have been of high-level, business and legislative meetings where we strategize for the future of our various institutes. We certainly do pray before, during and after our chapters, but these “religious acts” do not automatically transform our chapters into truly spiritual encounters that consciously unfold in the presence of the Holy Spirit. Often, we reveal ourselves to be agenda driven and not Spirit-driven.

How might our institutes incorporate the method of “conversation in the Spirit” into our praxes and observances related to our general chapters so that these become an encounter anointed by the Holy Spirit and not merely religious strategic meetings to ensure our future or deal with our diminishment? If need be, what actions can our institutes take against an authoritarian style that might persist in our exercise of governance, whether general or local, to nourish true dialogue (cf. *Relazione di sintesi*, 10-b)?

### Re-thinking “Discernment” in the key of divinity

“Discernment” seems to have suffered the same fate that “spiritual” has suffered<sup>3</sup>. “Discernment” has become a concept that, in the minds of many, if not most, Catholics (including clergy and consecrated religious), means the human weighing of options, choosing x over y, knowing right from wrong, or strategizing for the future. In this logic, the “discernment of spirits” is a “method” used by a group or an institute to ensure that the decisions made are wise, prudent, or perhaps even “according to God’s will” understood in a moralist sense. We might sprinkle these decisions with prayer, but they remain essentially human decisions.

The next thing I am about to say is what I believe to be at the heart of “the new thing” that the Holy Spirit is working, or desires to work, in the People of God in this Synod on Synodality. For the Baptized, discernment is not a concept, nor even a “tool” that we use. Discernment is a reality rooted in human experience and also an *habitus* that is touched with Divinity. Specifically, discernment is a Baptismal gift by which the believer is able to perceive:

- where God IS and where God is NOT;
- where redemption is being welcomed and where redemption is being rejected.

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<sup>3</sup> At the Press Conference revealing the Document for the Continental Phase (Fall 2022), one Catholic journalist actually asked that the General Secretariat of the Synod abandon the language of “discernment” since its meaning had become so unclear.



It is as if the Baptized are given the eyes of the Holy Spirit so that we can discern God’s presence and God’s absence<sup>4</sup>. The first, and perhaps most important, place we exercise this ability is within ourselves when we sift our thoughts and our emotions to know which of our thoughts or emotions breathe God and which breathe forth only ourselves.

There is no synodality without discernment, and there is no discernment without the Holy Spirit. The single principle of governance in the Church is, in fact, listening to the voice of the Holy Spirit. This is why the *Instrumentum laboris* affirmed: “La formazione alla conversazione nello Spirito è formazione a essere Chiesa sinodale”<sup>5</sup>.

Returning to our experience of general, provincial or special chapters: Are our chapters places of baptismal, ecclesial discernment where we sift ourselves, our thoughts, our feelings and our plans before the living God? Or are they merely places of human, religious strategizing? What steps might we take to strengthen the former and eliminate the latter?

### Re-thinking “Baptism” in the key of divinity

St. Paul teaches us that we have been baptized into Christ (cf. Rom 6. 4-6; Gal 2. 19b-20). The second letter of St. Peter reveals that through the promises bestowed on us we have become “partecipi della natura divina” (1.4).

Instead of taking this revelation seriously, we have tended to view baptism as our religious ritual giving us entry into the Church. The Church, then, requires that we live a certain moral way of life if we hope to inherit eternal life. In particular, we must love in the same way the Lord Jesus loved. We contemplate the crucifix and try to imagine ourselves laying down our lives in the same way . . . or forgiving the enemies who have killed us in the same way . . . Well, as for me, I get stuck here because I realize that I simply am not able to WANT to love in that way, much less actually love in that way. I simply do not have the power to love in that way. And so, if I am honest with myself, my baptism becomes either a burden OR a point of pride, if I am one of those disciplined ascetic, perfectionist religious who manage to be all things for all people.

As women religious, can we receive the Synod on Synodality as an invitation to recover our awareness of ourselves as having been invested with divinity by our baptism? We have been Christiformed: we have been transfigured into a unique instance of Christ-life; we have been “divinized” to use the term dear to our eastern catholic brothers and sisters. We are truly an epicletic people, having transformed by the grace of the Holy Spirit into what Jesus is by nature. If we ask for the grace to experience an awareness of this transformation already worked in us, we realize that in sharing Himself with us, Jesus has also shared with us *the power with which HE loved us unto death*. If Jesus lives *His life* within us, then the command to love as Jesus loved is not a burden: it simply requires us to surrender so that *He* can be and live *His* love within us. Can we, as women religious, ask for the grace to surrender to His divine life and love already present within us? It is not easy to surrender ourselves, but at least if we live in the awareness that this is the fundamental call, we might receive the grace to stop exhausting ourselves and those around us with all our striving.

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<sup>4</sup> Perhaps the most radical “place” where we exercise this gift is in our contemplation of Christ Crucified: the non-believer sees only violence, death, and defeat, while the believer is able to discern the presence of divine love within the violent and tragic death we behold.

<sup>5</sup> Paragrafo 42.



## Re-thinking “Charisms” in the key of divinity

The *Relazione di Sintesi* from the first Synod of Bishops assembly in October 2023 includes an entire section on Consecrated religious and members of lay associations and movements. The subtitle for this section is “A charismatic sign.” There were, however, several theologians at the assembly who questioned the wisdom of narrowing the conversation around “charisms” to institutes of consecrated religious life or associations of apostolic life.

The human focus that we have given to the realities of “spiritual”, “discernment”, “baptism” and even the Church and our participation in the Church’s mission has also meant that we have tended to focus on charisms at the human level as gifts or talents. We might *call* them gifts of the Holy Spirit that are meant for building up the entire People of God, but in reality, we understand them to be human gifts or talents that we strategically use for the good of the Church. The truth of this observation redounds in the following: if, as a religious, someone asks me for the charism of my community, they are essentially asking me to tell them the WORK that my community does in and for the Church. The following statement taken from the *Relazione di Sintesi* (October 2023) can also be read as understanding “charism” as “works”, even though it ends by mentioning holiness and prophetic presence.

Occorre approfondire in che modo la vita consacrata, le associazioni laicali, i movimenti ecclesiali e le nuove comunità possano mettere i loro carismi a servizio della comunione e missione nelle Chiese locali, contribuendo a far progredire verso santità grazie a una presenza che è profetica. (*RdS*, 10-f)

At the level of human fact, we must remember that each one of us has received many human gifts, talents or abilities that are not necessarily charisms<sup>6</sup>. When we focus only on our gifts and talents, we reduce the Church’s mission to our human ability. The Synod on Synodality provides the occasion for all of us to upgrade our understanding of charisms. This will require much theological work. Permit me here to merely suggest two Gospel texts, perhaps unusual for this theme<sup>7</sup>, that could provide a beginning for this important theological work:

“ogni buon regalo e ogni dono perfetto viene dall'alto e discende dal Padre della luce” (Gc 1.17)

“Come il Padre ha amato me, così anch'io ho amato voi. Rimanete nel mio amore” (Gv 15.9).

The gifts we receive come from the Father as manifestations of the Father’s unique love *for the unique person*<sup>8</sup>. It might be helpful to connect our understanding of charism to this love. Through the Holy Spirit, the Father showers each one of us with unique gifts that inhere in within us and Christi-form us. By way of these gifts we are transformed into unique instances of Christ-life so that we might *communicate* this Christ-life in a way that reflects our uniqueness. What I mean to suggest is that a charism touches our existence, or our existential status within the Church, giving us a particular place and relationships that are then manifest in tasks or functions. To take Mary as an example, she was

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<sup>6</sup> For example, there are persons who are humanly talented in sizing up concrete situations (i.e. are good at “reading the signs of the times”). Marketers and political strategists must both, in some way or another, possess this human talent, but this does not mean that it is a charism. For one, the marketer is about building an income with his or her talent; the political strategists is about winning a political election. The believer, however, is about building the Kingdom of God.

<sup>7</sup> The usual “charism” texts come from the Pauline epistles and, in the chronological order of their writing, are: 1 Corinthians 12-14, Romans 12.3-10, and Ephesians 4. 7-16.

<sup>8</sup> This means that any conversation about religious institutes as re-presenting the Church’s charismatic dimension must be rooted in a conversation about the charismatic dimension of baptismal life as such.





not merely enlisted by God to serve biological, emotional, or social functions in the life of Jesus. The overshadowing of the Holy Spirit transformed her into *mother*. Mary did *exercised* certain functions, but these were organically connected to the way she had been loved by God. The Father’s love for her placed in a unique relationship not only with her Son (and the Father and Holy Spirit), but also with all believers, indeed all of humanity.

As with Mary, so with us. God does not merely “give” us a charism (a talent) so that we can “do” a particular task for him. God is not a utilitarian. Keeping Mary in mind, it could be helpful for us to perceive our charisms as manifestations of God’s divine, redeeming love *for me / for our institute*, a love that establishes me (or our institute) in a certain “relational place” with God and “ecclesial place” in the Church. From this ecclesial place, we are invited to pay God’s love for us forward in the concrete love that I lavish on my brothers and sisters that *reflects* the love we have received from God.

From this, the questions that we might be invited to ask ourselves about our charisms moving forward are NOT work or apostolate related. Rather, they are love-related, and because they are love-related, they are rooted in our experience of God’s presence and action in our lives. How has God loved each one / our institute in the past? How IS God loving each one / our institute in the here and the now? In what ecclesial place has the Holy Spirit established us today? And how is the Holy Spirit inviting our institute to pay this love forward? You can see how these questions could have an impact even on the way we perceive and communicate our “identity” as religious institutes.

## Conclusion

The renewed vision of religious life present at Vatican II has resulted in a way of life that has already offered a prophetic witness to synodality alive and at work in the Church. Many, many religious institutes have become places where synodality is lived in areas of governance and fraternity / sorority. And yet, the Synod on Synodality constitutes an invitation specifically to religious men and women to, once again, read the signs of the times present within the world, our institutes and the Church as a whole; to read them with the eyes of the Gospel to discern the specific transformations to which the Holy Spirit is inviting each consecrated religious, our congregations and the Church as a whole. The Synod on Synodality is inviting consecrated religious to embrace, in a renewed way, the transformation worked in us at our baptism and of which, by our religious consecration, we have become living icons for the sake of Jesus’ mission.