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Prot. MG 34/22

DEAREST SISTERS,

"Fraternal life is the sign of the transforming love that the Holy Spirit infuses in our hearts, stronger than the laces of flesh and blood" (Const. 49).

At the beginning of this letter, I have inserted these words present in our Constitutions, because I strongly experienced them last November 1st, through the many messages of closeness, prayer and good wishes that, with such sincere and fraternal affection, you addressed to me for my birthday. In these small but authentic gestures, we can truly experience that the Holy Spirit creates *"stronger laces"* among us, and this is precisely the joy of our consecration and the witness that the world expects from us. Thank you dear Sisters, thank you from the bottom of my heart!

Now I would like to share very briefly the beautiful experience that I have lived, together with Sr. M. Gemma, Provincial Superior of the Italian Province, from the 10th to the 12th of November, participating in the USMI¹ National Assembly. This time they have not been days of exclusive reflection and listening, but above all of *"synodal experimentation"*. We were nearly 400 Major Superiors of Italy, and we experienced a true *"workshop of synodality"*, through the guidance of an expert in methodology and in the Word of God, who guided our reflections and practices of discernment.

I am sure that all of you, in one way or another, are actively involved in the journey of Synodality convened by Pope Francis, participating in the initiatives of your Parishes, Dioceses and of the various Conferences of religious of your country. Though, we are also experiencing, as a Congregation, a strong time of *"synodality"* through the celebrations of the Chapters.

We can say that our Journey of Renewal, over the years, has enabled us, hardly realizing it, to start synodal dynamics at all levels: personal, communitarian, provincial, general. It has also enabled us to put into practice many structures of participation and co-responsibility in the synodal spirit of the Church: communitarian and provincial meetings, planning and evaluation assemblies, consultations and questionnaires, local, provincial and general councils... and many other instances which, who knows, go unnoticed, but which are based on the dynamics of synodality, communion and participation.



Certainly, Sisters, it is not enough to *"talk"* about synodality, it is not enough to have the *"structures"* of synodality, it is not enough to do *"workshops"* of synodality... It is necessary, above all, to have conversion and adhesion of the mind, of the heart, of the spirit, and the adoption of concrete actions and in tune with the synodal spirit.

The Preparatory Document for the Synod says it very well: *"Synodality, in this perspective, is much more than the celebration of ecclesial meetings and Bishops' assemblies, or a matter of simple internal administration within the Church. It is "the specific modus vivendi et operandi of the Church, the People of God, which reveals and gives*

¹ Union of Major Superiors of Italy.

substance to her being as communion when all her members journey together, gather in assembly and take an active part in her evangelizing mission”²

If we are not *"people of communion"*, if we are not *"synodal people"*, reality will not change and we will risk adopting a *"synodality"* only in the form of paint or decoration, but not operational and effective, as *"modus vivendi et operandi"*.

We will surely be able to hear the question resonating within us: how can we embody a personality of communion and synodality? How to *"synodalize"* our life, our Community, our Province, our Congregation and everything we do?

There is only one journey: the deep personal conversion of our mentality in the light of the synodal model par excellence which is the Holy Trinity, not only as a *"devotional"* question, but a practical and transforming one. Our Constitutions say in art. 47: *"our Community is inspired by the Holy Trinity as the most sublime model of communion. Therefore may each of us try to model our own life on those relationships of knowledge and love that exist in the three Divine Persons"*.

The journey towards this synodal conversion, which is, above all, personal, is long. It requires humility, openness, flexibility, the ability to change our schemes and ideas, the courage to *"undress"* ourselves (kenosis), the availability for change, detachment and ability to uninstall ourselves, to make room... to *"enlarge the tent"* of our life, of our mind, of our fraternity, of our mission...

In this time of Advent that we are about to begin, I would like to invite you to look at the Mystery of the Incarnation in the light of this spirit of communion and synodality that is accompanying us as a Church in these years. As ideas for our reflection, I will take some numbers of the Preparatory Document of the Synod³ and the Working Document for the Continental Stage that the Church has proposed to us in recent months⁴.

"TO WALK TOGETHER..."

The deepening of the spirituality of communion proposed by the Second Vatican Council and the renewed awareness of the Trinitarian dynamic that moves history, pushes the Church to be a *"synodal church"*, not as an alternative but as an essence. The synodal Church is, therefore, moved by the dynamics of *"communion, participation and mission"* in a renewed *"walking together"*.

The Preparatory document says: *"synodality represents the main road for the Church, called to renew herself under the action of the Spirit and by listening to the Word. The ability to imagine a different future for the Church and her institutions, in keeping with the mission she has received, depends largely on the decision to initiate processes of listening, dialogue, and community discernment, in which each and every person can participate and contribute. At the same time, the decision to "journey together" is a prophetic sign for the human family, which needs a shared project capable of pursuing the good of all. A Church capable of communion and fraternity, of participation and subsidiarity, in fidelity to what she proclaims, will be able to stand beside the poor and the least and lend them her own voice. In order to "journey together," we need to let ourselves be educated by the Spirit to a truly synodal mentality, entering with courage and freedom of heart into a conversion process that is indispensable for the "continual reformation of which [the Church] always has need, in so far as she is a human institution"*⁵.



² Preparatory document of Synod 2023: For a Synodal Church, n. 10.

³ The Preparatory document of Synod 2024 can be found in the different languages here:

<https://www.synod.va/it/resources/documenti-ufficiali.html>

⁴ The Document of Work for the Continental Stage can be found complete and in the different languages here:

<https://www.synod.va/it/synodal-process/la-tappa-continentale.html>

⁵ Preparatory document n. 9.

- Let us stop a little on some expressions of this rich text that we have just quoted:
 - to renew ourselves under the action of the Spirit...
 - to listen to the Word...
 - to imagine the future...
 - to listen, dialogue and discern as a community...
 - to participate and contribute...
 - to "walk together" as a prophecy...
 - to stand beside the poor and the least...
 - to let ourselves be educated by the Spirit to a truly synodal mentality...
 - to enter into a conversion process...
- Let us pause in reading, taking these expressions one by one and ask ourselves:

Personally: to what extent do I feel involved in each one of these expressions? To what extent do I allow myself to be "*educated*" in a synodal mentality? How am I responding to these provocations of the Spirit within my Community, in the climate of fraternity, in "*walking together*" and in the mission or Work that I am carrying out?

As a community: how are we authentic witnesses to these provocations of the Spirit as a Community? In which aspects can we say that we are a "*synodal community*" and in which aspects we are not? How do we profit from the synodal structures that the Congregation is offering us?

"ENLARGE THE SPACE OF YOUR TENT..."

These words that certainly resonate in our hearts, because we have heard them many times in the readings, especially of the Old Testament, evoke the sense of "*home*", of "*family*", of the place where God lives and calls us together. We certainly remember the "*tent of the meeting*" in which God accompanied his people into the desert, an image of God's presence in the midst of the life and history of his people and also an image of a pilgrim God who summons and walks with his people.

We read in the Working Document of the Continental Stage: "*it is to a people living the experience of exile that the prophet addresses words that help us today to focus on what the Lord is calling us to through the experience of lived synodality: "Enlarge the space of your tent, spread out your tent cloths unsparingly, lengthen your ropes and make firm your pegs"* (Is 54:2)"⁶.



"Enlarge the space of your tent!": these words are addressed today to us who want to embrace together with the whole Church a journey of synodal conversion, who want to "*synodalize*" our life and that of our Communities. The tent is, therefore, a space of communion, a place of participation and a basis for mission:

*"Listened to today, these words of Isaiah invite us to imagine the Church similarly as a tent, indeed as the tent of meeting, which accompanied the people on their journey through the desert: called to stretch out, therefore, but also to move (...). This is how many reports envision the Church: an expansive, but not homogeneous dwelling, capable of sheltering all, but open, letting in and out, and moving toward embracing the Father and all of humanity. Enlarging the tent requires welcoming others into it, making room for their diversity. It thus entails a willingness to die to self out of love, finding oneself again in and through relationship with Christ and one's neighbour"*⁷.

- Let us stop a little on some expressions of these beautiful texts that we have just quoted:
 - to experience exile...
 - to imagine the Church as a tent...

⁶ Working document for the Continental Stage of the Synod, n. 25.

⁷ Idem, n. 27 and 28.

- to be a large but not homogeneous dwelling...
- to give shelter to everyone...
- to be open, letting in and out...
- to move towards the Father and all of humanity...
- to welcome others and make room for their diversity...
- to be willing to die to self out of love...

- Let us pause in reading, taking these expressions one by one and ask ourselves:

Personally: in which of these expressions do I feel more involved and in which I am not? What obstacles (mental, psychological, cultural, generational ...) do I find in me for a real availability to openness, to welcome every diversity, to make room and to know how to die for love, to be on the move and in permanent exile (of ideas, of styles, of consolidated habits, of forms, of fears of the new...)?

As a community: what capacity do we have as a community to "*enlarge the space of our tent*"? How many rigidities, comforts, closures keep us "*safe*" and not "*on the move*"? What things can we purify in order to become a "*synodal community*", an "*enlarged tent*" that knows how to live peacefully with diversity both inside and outside the Community?

"HE PLACED HIS TENT IN THE MIDST OF US"

Thus, in our reflection, we arrive at the encounter with the "*Mystery*", with God, who chooses the journey of "*synodality*". He chooses the family: the Family of Nazareth, in which the Lord "*placed his tent*" and came "*to live in the midst of us*".

It is nice to note how in our Constitutions, after the article above mentioned, another model of communion is immediately proposed to us, sometimes closer to our human experience, and the same expression is used again: "*relationships that exist*". Art. 48 says: "*our communitarian life is also inspired by the Virgin in the house of Nazareth ... [her example] helps us to realize those relationships that existed between the members of the Holy Family*".

In this time that prepares us for Christmas, we will put ourselves in all our homes to prepare the "*crib*", taking care that there may be all the characters and elements that represent that day of glory as faithfully as possible. We will prepare the "*tent of the meeting*" in which God wanted to place "*his dwelling among us*".



In the Holy Family, in the Crib, we will contemplate the place of communion and love, the place where all synodal attitudes are present and embodied: dialogue, listening, welcoming diversity, dignity, respect, freedom, responsibility, commitment, discernment, decision making together... Joseph, Mary and Jesus are the "*first synodal Church*" which was able to "*enlarge his tent*" to welcome everyone! At the "*tent of Bethlehem*" everyone felt "*at home*", welcomed. No one was excluded from the joy of discovering Jesus inside, in the centre, with arms open to embrace and welcome.

The Working Document continues: "*the biblical imagery of the tent... relates to the image of the family and that of home, the place to which people wish to belong, and to which they wish to return. "The Church-home does not have doors that close, but a perimeter that continually widens" ... We thus perceive "the dream of a global and synodal Church that lives unity in diversity. God is preparing something new, and we must collaborate"*"⁸.

The "*tent of Bethlehem*" was the new "*tent of the meeting*", the first school of communion, synodality and fraternal love, but also the first school of missionary spirit from which one comes out to let others in, thus making this "*tent*" wider and wider.

⁸ Working document for the Continental Stage of the Synod, n. 29.

- Let us stop a little again on some expressions of these beautiful texts that we have just quoted:
 - relationships that exist in the Holy Family...
 - everyone feels "at home", "in the family" ...
 - wishing to belong and wishing to return...
 - doors that do not close... perimeter that continually widens...
 - divine dream of a global and synodal Church...
 - live unity in diversity...
 - a future in which we must collaborate...
- Let us make a last stop in reading, let us take these expressions one by one and ask ourselves:

Personally: looking at the Crib, how do I identify myself with the synodal attitudes of each of the characters? How much do I feel the Community as "my home", as "my family"? Looking at the Holy Family, what little synodal attitudes do I still need to purify in my fraternal and apostolic relationships (individualism, selfishness, self-referentiality, isolation, laziness, lack of ability to work together synodally, etc.)?

As a community: How much is our Community an "enlarged tent" where you want to belong and return? How do people see us? How much space do we give for God to "place his tent among us" today? How missionary do we feel and how much are we really so?

Dearest Sisters, Advent is the propitious time to evaluate our personal life and our communitarian capacity to embody the synodal spirit, in the light of what the Holy Spirit asks of the Church today and of how much our Congregation wants to live in tune with the Church.

Let us try to place ourselves in the light of the Mystery of the Incarnation and do not fear the "pruning" and the "stripping" that today is requiring us to be synodal and persons of communion. The old model is no longer supported, it no longer says anything and it does not make people happy, starting with ourselves. True joy comes from incarnating in us the sentiments that are in the Heart of Christ and that He wants them to burn in his Church. We, as consecrated women, are in the best conditions to live and commit ourselves to building a new civilization of love where everyone is welcomed. May it be a civilization that "enlarges his tent", so that many can know and experience the extreme love of a God who has made himself a small newborn, a trembling child, fragility and tenderness, strength and humility, so that no one feels excluded.

It will then be Christmas, a Christmas in communion. Our Community will once again be the "epiphany" of communion, of synodality. Our house, our Community will renew the Mystery because now we will be the ones to give "space" and "enlarge the tent" so that God may come again "among us".

I wish you an Advent in communion, participation and mission, which may make our presence in the Church fruitful and prophetic, from the Hand of Mary, of Joseph, of the Child Jesus and in the footsteps of our Father Don Orione and the Saints of the Charismatic Family who have taught us with their lives that "being holy" is possible!

Happy Advent, Merry Christmas and Happy New Year 2023, this is what I wish you personally and also on behalf of the Sisters of the General Council.

Fraternally,



Sr. Mabel Spagnuolo

Sr M. Mabel Spagnuolo
Superior general

R

ome, Generalate House, November 15th, 2022.