



*omnem sollicitudinem vestram proicientes in Eum,
quoniam Ipsi cura est de vobis. 1 P. 5:7*

洵湧波濤莫驚怕，平安抵岸全靠祂。

Dear Eminence, Dear Excellency,

I am your confrere Joseph Zen from the far-off island of Hong Kong, a 91-year old man, ordained bishop more than 26 years ago. I write this letter because, conscious of being still in possession of my mental faculties, I feel duty-bound to safeguard, as a member of the College of Successors of the Apostles, the sacred tradition of Catholic faith.

I address this letter to you, members of the coming Synod on Synodality, supposing that you are as worried as I am about the outcome of this Synod.

Synodality is a rather new term; from its etymology we can understand that it is a matter of a certain spirit, of "conversing together and walking together"; for the Catholic Church this term means "communion and participation of all the members of the Church in the mission of evangelization". Understood in this way, the theme of this Synod appears to be useful and ever actual. The Synod will offer the opportunity to clarify how we must live synodality in the Church.

Now there is a very recent document entitled "**Synodality in the life and mission of the Church**". It is the fruit of the labours (in the years 2014-2017) of a sub-commission of the International Theological Commission, whose ex-officio chairman is the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The sub-commission completed its work in 2017; the text was approved by the Commission in its plenary session of that year and was finally signed by the Prefect of the Congregation in 2018, with the favourable assent of Pope Francis.

This document, in its first part, begins with the **historical facts of Synods and Councils** (the meaning of the two terms is convergent), in particular the **Apostolic Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15)**, the paradigmatic figure of the Synods celebrated by the Church.

The description of that Synod in paragraphs 20-21 of that document can be summarized as follows: In the spreading of the Gospel, a problem emerges: whether

non-Hebrews, to become members of the Church of Jesus, should pass or not through the circumcision and the acceptance of the Law of Moses. The problem, acutely felt in Antioch, is referred to the Church in Jerusalem, which in its totality takes part in the development of the Council to solve the problem. "The initial diversity of opinions and the lively discussion, in the light of the prophetic word (see Amos 9:11-12), in the reciprocal listening to the Holy Spirit through the witness to his work (see Acts 15:14-18), reached that consensus and unanimity which is the fruit of community discernment". The Apostles and the Elders communicated the conclusions of the Council to the Churches with a letter in which it is said: "The Holy Spirit and we have decided".

In paragraph 5 of the Commission's document, it is said: "The novelty of the term 'synodality' demands a careful assessment of its theological significance". In paragraph 7, it is said: "While the concept of synodality points to the participation of the whole people of God, [...] the concept of collegiality expresses with precision the theological significance and the form of exercise of the ministry of bishops [...] through the hierarchical communion of the episcopal college with the bishop of Rome". A little later it says: "**Every authentic manifestation of synodality by its very nature demands the exercise of the collegial ministry of bishops**".

In its second part, the document proposes the theological foundations of this doctrine which are found especially in *Lumen gentium*, where Vatican II specifies that, at the service of the people of God, in which all are priests and prophets, **there is an ordained, ministerial priesthood, that serves the people of God, guiding it with the service of authority.**

I have been not a little surprised when, reading the wordy documents emanating from the Synod Secretariat, I have found very few references to the above-mentioned document.

But there is more:

1. I am confounded by the fact that, on the one hand, I am told that synodality is a constitutive element of the Church, but, on the other hand, I am told that this is what God expects from us for this century (as a novelty?). How can God have forgotten to make his Church live out this constitutive element in the 20 centuries of her existence? Do we not confess that the Church is one, holy, catholic, apostolic, intending by this that she has also been all along synodal?

2. Even greater confusion and worry I feel when I see the suggestion being made that finally the day has come to **overturn the pyramid**, that is, with the hierarchy

surmounted by the lay people. In the Preparatory Document, from the very beginning, it is said clearly that, for a synodal Church, it is necessary to re-establish **democracy**.

3. Worry to worry is added for me when I note that, while this Synod (presented as a thing without precedents) was being convoked, there was already under way **In Germany the so-called "synodal path"** in which, with a strangely complacent *mea culpa* for sexual abuses in the Church, the hierarchy and a group of lay people (Central Committee of German Catholics ZdK, it is not clear how representative it is, but we come to know that most of the group are Church employees) propose a **revolutionary change in the constitution of the Church and in the moral teaching about sexuality**. More than a hundred Cardinals and Bishops from all over the world have written a letter of admonishment to the German bishops, but the latter have not acknowledged their error.

The Pope has never ordered that this process of the Church in Germany to stop. On the occasion of their visit *ad limina*, it is known that the Pope dialogued for two hours with the German bishops, but the speech of the Pope, normally published in the *Osservatore Romano* in such visits, was not published. Instead, the *Osservatore Romano* published the speech of Cardinal Marc Ouellet, the Prefect of the Congregation for Bishops, who asked the German bishops not to proceed with their synodal path, but to wait, instead, for the conclusions of the Synod on Synodality. A clear refusal was what he received, "because", they said, "it is pastorally urgent to proceed" (!?)

An alarming symptom is the ongoing numerical decrease of Catholic faithful in Germany. According to official data, the decrease has been of more than half a million in 2022. The Church in Germany is dying.

This reminds us of the painful misadventure of the Church in The Netherlands. From the peak of constituting the 40% of national population, today she has fallen to an almost complete disappearance. It is not difficult to see the cause of this: a movement, almost identical to the one in act in today's Germany, that in Holland began almost immediately after Vatican II.

I think it is not out of place to mention here the great schism that is threatening the Anglican Communion. The archbishops of the Global Anglican Future Conference (GAFCON) have written a letter to the Archbishop of Canterbury, telling him that, unless he converts (the Church of England has approved homosexual marriage), they (who constitute the 85% of all the Anglicans in the world) will no longer accept his leadership (as *primus inter pares*).

4. The documents of the Synod Secretariat quote the Gospel, but not always to the point. They speak at length of the episode of Peter and Cornelius (in Acts 10-11), as

if this proved that the Lord can order any kind of change in the behaviour of the faithful. But the narrative of the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15) shows that the change involved is not any change whatever. It is a development that implies different phases in the realization of salvation. The universalist phase of salvation, already prefigured in the Old Testament, is now finally realized after the resurrection of Jesus. In a similar vein, **Jesus says that he has come not to abolish the Law, but to bring it to fulfillment. The Holy Spirit proceeds gradually, but never falls into self-contradiction.** Saint Henry Newman used to say that the true development of doctrine is homogeneous.

I think that I need not say anything more on the reasons why you should face your Synod work with deep worry. I feel, instead, the importance of bringing to your notice certain **problems of procedure** of the Synod. The Synod Secretariat is very efficient at the art of manipulation.

Because of what I am going to say, I can be easily accused of "conspiracy theory", but I see clearly a whole plan of manipulation.

They begin by saying that **we must listen to all**. Little by little they make us understand that among these "all" there are **especially those whom we have "excluded"**. Finally, we understand that what they mean are people **who opt for a sexual morality different from that of Catholic tradition**.

In the small groups of dialogue of the continental phase, they often insist that **"we must leave empty a chair for those who are absent, who have been emarginated by us"**. They also say: "The Synod must conclude with a universal inclusion, **must enlarge the tent**, all welcome, without judging them, without inviting them to conversion".

Often they claim not to have any agenda. This is truly an offense to our intelligence. Anybody can see which conclusions they are aiming at.

They speak of "conversation in the Spirit" as if it were a magical formula. And they invite all to expect "surprises" from the Spirit (evidently they are already informed which surprises to expect). "Conversation, **no discussion!** Discussions create divisions!" Does this mean that consensus and unanimity happen miraculously? It seems to me that at Vatican II, before reaching an almost unanimous conclusion, they devoted a lot of time to spirited discussions. It was there that the Holy Spirit worked. To avoid discussions is to avoid the truth.

You must not obey them, when they tell you to go and pray, interrupting the sessions of the Synod. Tell them that it is ridiculous to think that the Holy Spirit is waiting for these your prayers offered at the last moment. Before the Synod, you and your faithful must already have accumulated a mountain of prayers, as Pope John XXIII did before Vatican II, making pilgrimages to various churches, praying for the Council.

During the Synod, the Holy Spirit will be busy working in your hearts, hoping that you all accept his inspirations.

"Let us begin", they say, "with small groups". This way of proceeding is clearly wrong. What is needed is, first, to let all speak and to let all hear in the Assembly. In this way, the most controversial problems emerge, problems in need of an adequate discussion.

In the small "language groups", then, it is possible, using one's own language, to deeply probe into the problems at ease, concluding with the formulation of concise deliberations. We should insist on the procedure followed in so many Synods, not because "it has always been like that", but because it is the reasonable thing to do (to want to proceed differently justifies the suspicion that what is wanted is to avoid the discovery of the true inspiration of the Holy Spirit).

On the Internet I see a lot of talk about "yes to voting, no to voting". But if no vote is taken, how can one know the fruit of so much dialogue? To avoid voting is also to avoid truth.

The voting. Without any consultation, in the proximity of the beginning of the Synod, the Holy Father adds a number of lay members with right of voting. If I were one of the members of the Synod, I would place a strong protest, because this decision radically changes the nature of the Synod, which Pope Paul VI had intended as an instrument of episcopal collegiality, even if, in the spirit of synodality, lay observers were admitted with the possibility to speak out. To you I do not suggest a protest, but at least a sweet lament with a request: that at least the votes of the Bishops and the votes of the lay people be counted separately (this has been granted to the bishops even by the "synodal path" of Germany). To give the vote to lay people could appear to mean that respect is shown for the *sensus fidelium*, but are they sure that these lay people who have been invited are *fideles*? That these lay people at least still go to church? As a matter of fact, these lay people have not been elected by the Christian people.

There has been no explanation at all for the addition (half way through) of another synodal session for 2024. My malicious suspicion is that the organizers, not sure to be able to reach during this session their goals, are opting for more time to maneuver. But, if what the Holy Spirit has wanted to say is clarified through the voting of the bishops, what is the need of another session?

This letter that I am writing I intend as confidential, but it will not be easy to keep it out of the hands of the mass media. Old as I am, I have nothing to gain and nothing to lose. I will be happy to have done what I feel is my duty to do.

I am aware that in the Synod on the Family, the Holy Father rejected suggestions presented by several Cardinals and Bishops precisely regarding the procedure. If you, however, respectfully present a petition supported by numerous signatories, perhaps this will be accepted. In any case, you will have done your duty. To accept an unreasonable procedure is to condemn the Synod to failure.

I ask your pardon for the delay with which I have sent you this letter. It may be already too late to present its requests, before the beginning of the Synod, to the organizers.

I wish you a fruitful and, if necessary, courageous participation to this Synod that, in any case, will be without precedents.

I am, your humble brother,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Joseph Zen", with a small cross symbol to the left of the first letter.

Joseph Zen

21 September 2023

Feast of St. Matthew Apostle ("miserando et eligendo")

I attach the list of the names to whom I have sent this letter. If you think that there be other members of the Synod who would like to support my modest ideas, please, feel free to share my letter with them.