Synod: Key Term #3

The infallible belief of the faithful: What is the *sensus fidei fidelium*?

One of the reasons that Pope Francis has been emphasizing synodality is that he wishes to better recognize and utilize all the gifts of all the people in the Church. Most of us know that the Magisterium of the Church (the teaching office of the Church exercised by the Pope and the bishops), under certain conditions, can teach infallibly. But the faithful members of Christ's Church also have a corresponding gift. We can believe infallibly. Ideally these two gifts should inform and reinforce each other.

This gift of the Holy Spirit is called the *sensus fidei fidelium*: The understanding of the Faith by the Faithful. Everyone who is baptized is anointed with the Holy Spirit, and this anointing is strengthened by the Sacrament of Confirmation. By the grace of the Spirit, the People of God as a whole does not err in faith, even when it cannot adequately explain the faith. The more faithful a Christian is – participating in the Sacraments, building their relationship with God, feeling with the heart of the Church – the better of an instinct they will have for the True Faith. When we are open to Him, God gives us an intuition about divine realities. And when the entire People of God manifests a belief of faith or morals, that belief cannot be wrong, because the Holy Spirit would not allow the entire Church to go into error.

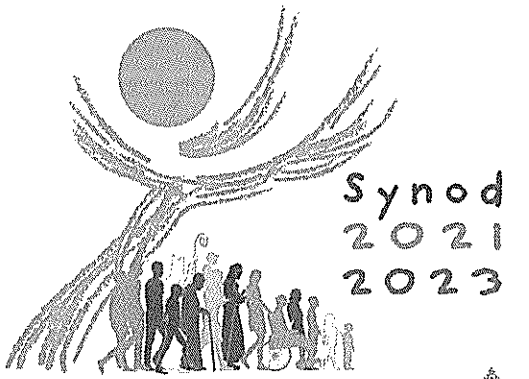
The *sensus fidei* cannot be determined by majority vote. History shows that individuals and groups in the Church, whether members of the faithful or bishops, can very easily fall into error and sin. The more separated a person is from God and His Church, the less likely they will be to instinctively recognize the truths of the Faith — and we have all sinned and fallen short (Romans 3:23). However, if the faithful stubbornly cling to some belief or obstinately refuse to accept another, for a long time and in many places, even in the face of opposition and persecution, that should be a sign to the Magisterium of the *sensus fidei* at work.

What is the Synod on Synodality?

Pope Francis has asked the entire world to participate in a synod on the topic "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission." The central question he asks of everyone is:

> A synodal Church, in announcing the Gospel, "journeys together." How is this "journeying together" happening today in our diocese? What steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow in our "journeying together"?

You may be invited to participate in listening sessions at your local parish, or you may wish to give your input online. Participation in a synod should always involve prayer, listening, discussion, and above all, discerning the way that the Holy Spirit is guiding us. Hopefully these questions and answers can help you as you prepare your input.



Series of articles on the synod by Maria Caulfield
Graduate theology student, Franciscan University of Steubenville
Executive Assistant to the Offices of the Vicar General and the Chancery
Diocese of Erie

Synod: Key Term #4

What is discernment?

Discernment is the process for finding out what we should be doing. It might involve doing research or making a list of pros and cons, as you would for any major decision, but it is more than that. Especially in a religious context, discernment means trying to recognize God's will. Fruitful discernment takes place in a space of prayer and study. It includes sincere conversations with appropriate people, self-reflection, and attempting to read the signs that God may be placing around us.

We often speak of someone "discerning their vocation," which is something every person should do. In a similar way, discernment also happens on a communal level, from the local all the way up to the universal Church. Councils and Synods are always attempting to discern the will of the Holy Spirit, so that what they decide and teach may be what God wishes in that particular context. For communal discernment, dialogue is always more helpful than debate. Discernment should help us to understand our own needs and desires, but the final goal is to accept the will of God.

What is the Synod on Synodality?

Pope Francis has asked the entire world to participate in a synod on the topic "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission." The central question he asks of everyone is:

> A synodal Church, in announcing the Gospel, "journeys together." How is this "journeying together" happening today in our diocese? What steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow in our "journeying together"?

You may be invited to participate in listening sessions at your local parish, or you may wish to give your input online. Participation in a synod should always involve prayer, listening, discussion, and above all, discerning the way that the Holy Spirit is guiding us. Hopefully these questions and answers can help you as you prepare your input.

Series of articles on the synod by Maria Caulfield
Graduate theology student, Franciscan University of Steubenville
Executive Assistant to the Offices of the Vicar General and the Chancery
Diocese of Erie