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FROM SYNODALITY, THE AUTHORITY OF SERVICE.

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Jesus founded the Church by setting at her head the Apostolic College, in which the Apostle Peter is the "rock" (cf. Mt 16:18), the one who must confirm his brethren in the faith (cf. Lk 22:32). But in this Church, as in an inverted pyramid, the top is located beneath the base... It is in serving the people of God that each bishop becomes...the vicar of that Jesus who at the Last Supper bent down to wash the feet of the Apostles (cf. Jn 13:1-15). And in a similar perspective, the Successor of Peter is nothing else if not the servus servorum Dei. Let us never forget this! For the disciples of Jesus, yesterday, today and always, the only authority is the authority of service, the only power is the power of the cross...¹

These words that Pope Francis pronounced in October 2015 on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops immediately had the flavour of an intuition, something that resonated like a turning point, even if I could not quite define its contours. So I am here to tell you what I glimpsed, starting with that expression the only authority is the authority of service.

It is our custom to use another expression, very similar to this one, which is the service of authority. An expression that we can also find in our Constitutions and which was taken as the title of an *Instruction* when, in 2008, the Dicastery dwelt on the authority-obedience relationship, the *Instruction* is addressed to members of institutes of consecrated life who live a community life. However, other consecrated persons, in relation to their type of life, can also cull useful information from it².

Two similar but different expressions: in Italian it might seem almost a play on words. I do not know if it is so in other languages too. It seems to me that between the two expressions *Authority of service* - *service of authority* there is a considerable distance, which opens up a path of conversion, to a change of perspective, represented visually, by the image of the inverted pyramid of which Pope Francis speaks.

In saying *authority of service*, even at the grammatical level, we emphasise that it is the word **service** that is the central reference, the noun; whereas the word **authority** is only its complement. The preposition *of in* fact serves to indicate a specification, a characteristic of the word to which it is linked. This means then that the word with which and about which we are called to deal as disciples is service, a service that is expressed in various actions, attitudes, and situations, including authority.

¹ Francis, *Address on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops*, 17 October 2015, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html

² Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *The Service of Authority and Obedience*, 11 May 2018

In the expression *service of authority*, however, the opposite occurs: it is the concept of **authority** that we place at the centre; that, we might say, lives a life of its own, and that can have *service* as its characteristic.

It is a dynamic reminiscent of Jesus' dialogue with the mother of James and John reported in Matthew's Gospel³ : when Jesus patiently reverses the woman's question and once again reveals the inverted logic of his reign of salvation by repeating 'among you it shall not be so'.

"You know that the rulers of the nations rule over them and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave" (Mt 20:25-27). Among you it shall not be so; in this expression, says Pope Francis⁴ - we reach the very heart of the mystery of the Church - "among you it shall not be so" - and we receive the enlightenment necessary to understand hierarchical service.

That request, that putting oneself first, illuminates an obvious fact: if Jesus had to come to terms with this attitude of the disciples, men who lived with him, followed him, listened to him, saw him, loved him... it is certain that he will have to do so with the disciples of all times. *I do not want a Church that is preoccupied with being the centre and ends up locked in a tangle of obsessions and procedures, the Pope will say at the ecclesial convention in Florence.*

We cannot deny that our great temptation, as a community and as individuals, is precisely that of putting ourselves at the centre, of being visible, of not renouncing an *ego* that all in all tries to replace God. We are often taken with the idea of a God of power, which as Pope Francis says, is nothing but *the projection of human pride and fear*⁵, a God who makes us as powerful as he is (or even more so). From the prestige of authoritativeness to the disease of authoritarianism, the step is short.

We might think that these dynamics do not touch us, that we are not like that. But if we look at ourselves with honesty, we cannot deny that in the ecclesial sphere, perhaps even more than in the social one, we know how to disguise our self-importance with justifications with a *religious* foundation and are therefore 'good'. Let us think of when this is us at the centre and not the Other (with a capital O) and the other, is disguised by phrases such as "I respond yes to a call from the Lord that comes to me through the brothers or sisters who elected me". It is also nice, but perhaps we move from one role to another within the community without being able to step aside to let others have space; or 'I take this decision because it is the responsibility of those who are in this role that I now hold' and that is also true, but I forget to listen to people who could help me make that decision to avoid being challenged or having to give up my idea in discussion with the other; or again when we say 'it is God's will that passes through me' and it is certainly so,

³ Mt. 20:20-21: "Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to him with her sons and prostrated herself to ask him for something. He said to her, "What do you want?" She answered him, 'Say that these two sons of mine may sit one at your right hand and one at your left in your kingdom'".

⁴ Francis, *Address on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops*, *ibid.*

⁵ Francis, *Jubilee of the Socially Excluded*, 13 November 2016: "Let us open our eyes to God, purifying the sight of the heart from deceptive and fearful representations, from the god of power and punishment, the projection of human pride and fear".

but we fail to consider that God's will passes through the relationship and that only together can we discern its traits. Many times for it to emerge, it is necessary to let go of the control of everything in the trust that others like me possess a piece of the good that builds the face of God. It is therefore necessary to be very vigilant in order to flush out the temptations that may be hiding within us and accept that the Master also mercifully repeats to us: *it will not be like this among you.*

The alternative then is to *put oneself in first place, even if it is to serve, or to serve, always, even when one is in first place.*

Ontologically, disciples are servants, with all the practical and existential consequences that this means. The model of service is Jesus himself, who does *not consider it a "privilege" to be like God*⁶ and who sums up his entire mission with the category of service⁷ (Mk 10:45).

Consequently, the disciples must also conform to him by becoming servants to the other members of the community and to all people⁸.

The more service inhabits me, the more, when life asks it of me through the expression of a community that elects me, this service will take the form of authority, it will be able to be authority.

I quote the words of the Pope: *'This word, [authority] present already in the Gospel of Saint Mark, is not easy to translate accurately in Italian. The Greek word is "exousia", which etymologically refers to that which "comes from being", from whom one is. It is not something external or imposed, but rather that which comes from within ... It concerns the identity of Jesus, it stems from the realisation of an authority that is different from that of the world, an authority that is not aimed at exercising power over others, but at serving them, at giving them freedom and fullness of life*⁹.

It is a word to which we attribute a range of meanings that are also very far apart, ranging from the legitimate exercise of a function to power, from authoritativeness to authoritarianism.

But if we go to the sources, the word authority derives from the Latin verb *augere* meaning 'to increase', to make grow, to make a development possible. It is in this sense that the Council also used it in *Lumen Gentium*, precisely when speaking of the hierarchy of the Church, it says "Christ the Lord, in order to shepherd and increase the people of God, established various ministries in his Church"¹⁰.

⁶ Phil 2:6-7 *Who, though he was in the form of God, did not consider being equal to God something to be jealously clung to, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, becoming similar to men;*

⁷ Mk 10:45 *For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom price for many.*

⁸ Cf. Mk 9:35; 10:43; Mt 20:26; 23:11; Lk 22:26-27

⁹ Francis, *Letter to those who do not believe*, 4 September 2013,

https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/letters/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130911_eugenio-scalfari.html

¹⁰ *Lumen Gentium* 18: *For the nurturing and constant growth of the People of God, Christ the Lord instituted in His Church a variety of ministries, which work for the good of the whole body. For those ministers, who are endowed with*

And again the Pope writes that Christ *'served the people, he explained things so that the people would understand: he was at the service of the people. He had a servant's attitude, and this gave him authority'*¹¹.

Authority becomes, I would say by definition, that service which makes one grow, which helps others along the way. It would be interesting to read the articles of the constitutions referring to the leaders, presidents and directors of institutes in this light of making one grow, replacing, for example, *is guarantor of the unity of the community with serves the community to make unity, fraternity, fidelity to the charism* and all that is written there grow.

The mandate received is thus linked to responsibility: the president, the director, the head of an institute who has received a mandate is answerable to those who gave her the mandate and is accountable for the way in which she has fostered the growth of what she has been entrusted with.

If we take this meaning, the term 'authority' cannot be a problem for us.

I am referring to those cultures in which this term is becoming increasingly anachronistic, and this not only because of that typically modern confusion between authority and authoritarianism¹², but above all because of the assertion of the primacy of an 'I' that, expanded out of all proportion, has become the only point of reference for acting, confronting, judging.

And since consecrated life lives in and breathes cultures, in some countries the word authority creates a certain unease with continuing to use it: but how, in 2022, do we still speak of authority? And then what is the point of talking about authority in secular institutes? This topic may concern religious institutes or those that need to regulate a community life, but not secular institutes whose members are adult men and women, trained to take responsibility for their actions!

I think that behind these questions there is an idea of authority understood as power, that is, as the right to command another, to decide for another. Yet already with the new vision of religious life elaborated by the Council, *"there has been a shift from the centrality of the role of authority to the centrality of the dynamic of fraternity"* This is why *confrontation between brothers or sisters and listening to individual persons becomes an essential place for an evangelical service of authority. Recourse to managerial techniques, or to the spiritualising and paternalistic application of methods deemed to be an expression of "God's will", are reductive with respect to a ministry called to confront the expectations of others, daily reality and the values lived and shared in community'*¹³.

These phrases bring us back to the title: From synodality, the authority of service. That preposition **from** indicates provenance, dissolving the title in the light of what has been said so far, we can say the service that makes service grow, authority, is only had if synodality is lived; or put another way, service **also** takes on the guise of authority, if

sacred power, serve their brethren, so that all who are of the People of God, and therefore enjoy a true Christian dignity, working toward a common goal freely and in an orderly way, may arrive at salvation.

¹¹ Francis, Homily Santa Marta, 10 January 2017

¹² Fabio Fiore, *La crisi dell'autorità nel 900*, <http://www.dircost.unito.it/dizionario/pdf/Fiore-Autorita.pdf>

¹³ Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *For New Wine New wineskins*, no. 41

(when?) it is born from an experience of synodality, or we could say it is synodality that can make service, authority.

Synodality: the word of the moment. In fact, already in 2018 it was the subject of study by the International Theological Commission, which then published a document in which it is confirmed that synodality is a constitutive dimension of the Church, specifying that it is articulated on three levels: that of the **style** in which the Church ordinarily lives and operates, that of the **structures** in which the synodal nature of the Church is expressed in an institutional way, and that of the synodal **processes** and events in which the Church is convoked¹⁴.

As is often the case in the church, however, this document remained unknown to most people even when, in the wake of the words of Pope Francis and the process initiated in all the Churches of the world, this word began to bounce around on the lips of many or all of us. It has begun to be used a lot and I would say, at least in my experience, attributing to it meanings other than what it actually is or referring to experiences other than those that this term is intended to express. Fortunately, the tools made available to everyone starting with the Synod's initial document give us the chance to find a common understanding, not taking for granted that it means what we think it means, but making the effort to study the texts we have at our disposal. Even if, as Fr Giacomo Costa, SJ, writes: *"We are not yet able to read transparently its etymological meaning of "walking together", as Pope Francis, who not by chance has made "synod" a key word of his pontificate, is able to do with great naturalness. Walking together immediately conveys two fundamental characteristics, holding them together. The first is the **dynamism of movement**, of a process that aims at change. Those who want everything to remain as it is, do not set out on the journey. The second is expressed by the word 'together' the synodal process stands in the line of **building an 'us'**"*¹⁵.

It seems to me that even today we still very often speak or think of living synodality, understanding it as a synonym for communion, or as a simple sharing of information and decisions taken, or even as a claim to democratic dynamics that override the authority of the service we have mentioned. It is a fact that there is no speech, homily, reflection, proposal in which we do not use this term, sometimes as a slogan. And we know very well how often in ecclesial circles and even in our institutes we allow ourselves to be fascinated by a word that then becomes a slogan.

Without claiming to make an in-depth study of synodality, but reading it as a source of the authority of service, I think some clarifications are important:

1. Synodality does not demolish the institution, but transforms it, in particular it transforms the traditional separation and sometimes opposition between charism and institution into a new interweaving, a walking together that generates a creative fidelity to one's own mission. But for this to happen, even in the vocational community, it is important to keep, as the Pope says, the thought incomplete, recognising that the protagonist is the Holy Spirit who works through diversity.

¹⁴ International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, no. 70
https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_synodalita_it.html

¹⁵ Giacomo Costa SJ, *Fare sinodo il coraggio della fecondità*, in Aggiornamenti sociali
<https://www.aggiornamentisociali.it/articoli/fare-sinodo-il-coraggio-della-fecondita/>

The question then becomes: do we want to take this risk, which means abandoning the security of known experience and accepting that we are walking on a road that is new, the one the Lord is asking us to take in this time, and that we can only take these steps together? It is interesting when, continuing the reflection, the Pope warns us by saying all the time that because of "closed knowledge", or because of closed thinking, or because of ambition we believe we already dominate everything, we easily fall into the temptation of total control, the temptation to occupy spaces, to achieve the superficial relevance of those who wish to be the central protagonist, as in a television *show*. *But among you let it not be so....*

2. The foundation of synodality is made explicit in *Evangelii Gaudium*: *All the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization, and it would be insufficient to envisage a plan of evangelization to be carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients*¹⁶. Referring to the vocational community, each member, regardless of the service he or she performs and the degree of education, contributes with his/her life to the unfolding of the incarnation of the charism today. It is not correct, therefore, to think of a charism interpreted by the people elected by the community, thinking of the others as mere receivers of the intuitions and decisions taken by those who have this role at this time. It is therefore a question of recovering the totality of the members as stakeholders who have a contribution to make to the life of the community! And this without denying the authority of those who, for a time, are delegated by the community to serve. Even in the vocational community, we are all active participants. We must not, therefore, make the mistake of entrusting exclusively to a group that we decide on all the insights into community life and mission. It is not only young people who bring the newness of God, but also people who have years of life and vocation lived, those elected to councils and those who have never lived or will live this service. We are all part of it, and in that all there are those who have recently made profession and those who have spent a lifetime in the institute, those who think like me and those who think differently, those who live in the country where the institute originated and those who live in other countries. You too can continue the list and perhaps try to tell yourselves in which members it is difficult for you to recognise this possibility of reading the charism in today's world, for whom you insert a yes but....

3. Communion is not synodality, but a presupposition of it. It seems to me that these are two experiences that complement each other: the Church, understood as the people of God, manifests and realises its being communion by walking together, actively participating in the evangelising mission. This does not mean introducing the thought of a Church that functions like a democracy, and where, moreover, participation is experienced as a claim. The Pope recently made it expressly clear that the term synodality "does not indicate a more or less democratic or even less 'populist' method of the Church, it is not an organisational fashion or a project of

¹⁶ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24 November 2013, n 120

human reinvention of the people of God¹⁷. Synodality is not synonymous with democracy. It is rather a circular, dynamic movement, where there is mutual exchange, where no one is self-sufficient. In fact, the prophetic function of the whole people of God (including pastors) corresponds to the pastors' task of discernment: from what the people of God say, pastors must grasp what the Spirit wants to say to the Church. But it is always from this listening that discernment must begin.

And what happens in our institutes? The law of institutes of consecrated life stipulates that one cannot elect a superior without a council, nor a council without a superior, thus reaffirming that there can be neither only personal nor only collegial responsibility, because those who are called upon to make decisions cannot do so without first listening to others and through them to what the Spirit indicates.

Do we live this dynamic of governance in a full sense? Or do we make the council a single decision-making body, effectively nullifying a personal responsibility that requires listening? Or do we make the chairperson the one who decides by proposing dynamics in the relationship with the council for which no real dialogue is activated? And in any case, are we willing to recognise that the entire community is called to live this circularity that never leaves things as they are, because it is a vital movement and therefore capable of generating the new of the Spirit? What are the situations that can facilitate this dynamism? And if there are none, are we willing to try to invent them, in the conviction that it is absolutely necessary for our life as a community, as a Church, as persons?

4. Synodality implies diversity, because the people on the way are not a uniform reality, but rather requires confronting different problems, languages and ways of dealing with reality. International institutes know this well: the culture in which we live, the relationship with history and life experiences are *fundamental* in living out the vocation, but they can create divergence. Concretely, a mode or approach that is valid for the United States is not valid for Albania. It is only in the light of this consideration that we can say that synodality can only be realised if it starts from listening, to foster discernment. Hence, listening to differences is necessary so that then those who have to make a decision can take them into account. It is not a matter of carrying out a sociological enquiry that brings out the prevailing data, but of putting oneself in a deep disposition of welcoming the different approaches to the question that each person can bring and then deciding within this listening. As the Pope says, *this discernment is what makes a Synod a true Synod, in which the most important figure – let's say – is the Holy Spirit, and not a parliament or a survey of opinions, which the media can do* ¹⁸.

¹⁷ Francesco, Videomessaggio in occasione della Plenaria della Pontificia Commissione per l'America Latina, 24-27 maggio 2022, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/messages/pont-messages/2022/documents/20220526-videomessaggio-plenaria-pcal.html>

¹⁸ Francis, *Address to Participants in the Plenary Assembly of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith*, 22 January 2022, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2022/january/documents/20220121-plenaria-cdf.html>

It is because of this ontological diversity that we must see that synodal dialogue implies courage to speak as much as to listen. *I also recommend, in a special way, the capacity for dialogue and encounter.* Pope Francis says in *Evangelii gaudium* that *Dialogue is not negotiation. To negotiate is to try to get one's 'slice' of the common pie. That is not what I mean. But it is seeking the common good for all. To discuss together, to think of the best solutions for all. Many times the encounter is caught up in the conflict. Conflict arises in dialogue: it is logical and predictable that it should. And we should neither fear it nor ignore it but accept it. "It is the willingness to face conflict head on, to resolve it and to make it a link in the chain of a new process."*¹⁹ .

Therefore, it is not a matter of engaging in a debate in which someone tries to be right instead of the others or to counter their positions with overwhelming arguments, it is a matter of respectfully expressing what one feels in conscience is suggested by the Holy Spirit as useful in view of community discernment, open at the same time to grasping what in the positions of others is suggested by the same Spirit 'for the common good'²⁰ and ready to leave one's own conviction in the certainty that building together is the greatest good.

But to experience all this there is a dimension that is essential and constitutive: freedom. Inner freedom of those who are called to express themselves even when they know they are saying something different from the majority. But also the inner freedom of those who are called upon to listen without judgement or, worse still, prejudice. I find symbolic what the Pope said: *"After the last Consistory, in which the family was discussed, a cardinal wrote to me saying: it is a pity that some cardinals did not have the courage to say certain things out of respect for the Pope, believing that the Pope thought something different. "This is not good, this is not synodality," Francis admonished, "because you have to say everything that you feel you have to say in the Lord: without human respect, without cowardice. And, at the same time, one must listen with humility and welcome with an open heart what one's brothers say". "With these two attitudes one exercises synodality,"*²¹ the Pope explained.

I wonder if you too, like the Pope, have had similar confidences, if anyone has told you of silences determined by respect, or more often by fear of... hurting, of not being considered, of then being marginalised because of a different opinion... If you have not had similar confidences, allow me to tell you that... these silences in our communities exist and are also frequent because we often register a lack of freedom, determined by different motivations. In some contexts, for example, the relationship with authority is such that it is not felt good to express different positions. Or it also happens elsewhere that opportunities for conflict are avoided because of a false idea of fraternity that is false, because then the difference remains under the radar and becomes divisive.

¹⁹ Francesco, *Incontro con i rappresentanti del V convegno nazionale della Chiesa Italiana, 10 novembre 2015*, in: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2015/november/documents/papa-francesco_20151110_firenze-convegno-chiesa-italiana.html

²⁰ 1 Cor 12:7: Now to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

²¹ Francesco al sinodo, in Archivio radio vaticana, 6 ottobre 2014, http://www.archivioradiovaticana.va/storico/2014/10/06/francesco_al_sinodo_lavorare_con_franchezza_e_umilt%C3%A0_per_il_bene/it-1107967

We touch here on one of the focal points of the training in our institutes: is ours a training that supports the path towards that inner freedom that allows us to live our belonging to this time in a responsible manner, or is it a training that keeps us in a safe niche, sheltered from confrontation with those who are different from us or, worse still, that gives us certainties that close us off from listening to and confronting diversity?

Obviously freedom is not doing what one wants, but being authentically oneself, while being aware of the inner and outer constraints that always inhabit us; preserving our unrepeatable uniqueness, desiring to realise our life in a fruitful and joyful way, according to God's desire for each one of us, and at the same time being willing to discover and welcome that uniqueness that exists in the other, and being willing to change, to take different steps from those we thought, in the certainty that the relationship also continues to reveal the meaning of my sense of self and of existence and to indicate mission paths; not making our feeling of being loved, the awareness of our place in the world and in the Church depend on what others think of us or on the good will we collect, but remaining steadfast in the gratuitous Love of the Father that always precedes and accompanies us, leaving behind that which uselessly burdens us and welcoming the truth that the relationship with those who are different helps us to live in peace.

As Pope Francis says: "Freedom means being able to think about what we do, being able to assess what is good and what is bad, these are the types of conduct that lead to development; it means always opting for the good. Let us be free for goodness. And in this do not be afraid to go against the tide, even if it is not easy! Always being free to choose goodness is demanding but it will make you into people with a backbone who can face life, people with courage and patience (parrhesia and ypomoné)"²².

But then this freedom can only be evangelically conjugated with the word truth. For it is truth that sets us free (Jn 8:32). We must, however, understand what this truth is, which in its fullness is Christ whose fragment every man and woman bears, making him or her a seeker and a witness.

There is the more immediate meaning of truth which is the opposite of lies, which asks us not to be untrue, but also not to say only part of what we feel to be true because this too is a trap into which we risk falling. But one cannot be half-true. Being half-true is another way of being false... Again: it is a meaning that calls for authenticity in life, for living an existence that says through our words and actions who we are, who we believe in, what we think.

This content of the word truth refers to the Latin term *veritas*, which indicates the conformity of an assertion to reality.

But there is also another meaning of truth that the Greek term *aletheia* gives us instead, and which helps us to enrich our gaze and go even deeper. Here truth means 'to remove the veil'. And it is really beautiful because here truth is delivered to us as an unexpected gift. Truth is that thing you discover: you pull back the cover and see what is underneath. Maybe it is not what you thought, maybe it is not what you wanted, maybe it forces you to

²² Francis, Address to the students of Jesuit-run schools in Italy and Albania, 7 June 2013, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2013/june/documents/papa-francesco_20130607_scuole-gesuiti.html

change, maybe it upsets you, maybe it is difficult to accept, maybe it is painful. But it is what is handed over to you so that you can walk together with everyone in the good and for the good. To follow in the Master's footsteps, we need this willingness to accept his Word, we need to ask in prayer that our resistance and the filters we activate to continue on our path instead of walking on his are removed. To listen to Jesus, who brings the truth, one must have the courage of the truth.

The invitation we address to each other is to live 'according to the truth in charity, [seeking] to grow in all things toward him who is the head, Christ, from whom the whole body, well put together and connected, through the cooperation of every joint, according to the energy proper to each member, receives strength to grow so as to build itself up in charity'²³ .

²³ Eph. 4:15-16