

SYNODALITY IN THE MONTFORTIAN FAMILY

(by Brother Jean-Claude Lavigne, O.P. on 7 August 2023)

The word Synod comes from 2 Greek words *sin* (together) and (*oidos*) a path, a path to be taken together. Therefore, to reflect on synodality in the Montfortian Spiritual Family means reviewing the journey made together, and considering the easiest and free-flowing traffic route (if we want to use the image of a highway).

Synodality in the Montfortian family is first and foremost a questioning of the way in which you are Missionaries together. We know very well that the history of the Church has left us with a deficit in relations between men and women, priests and non-priests... today, those problems are called clericalism and/or machismo / macho culture. Synodality is, therefore, a way of imagining new ways of being together for the sake of the mission, by bringing together strengths and sensitivities/perceptions of the different members of the family. Synodality is about participation in decision-making, giving everyone a voice, discovering together new challenges of evangelisation, and taking joint action. Engaging in a Synodal path means acknowledging that charism does not private priority to a few but to all faithful.

The society that LMG de Montfort and Marie Louise Trichet knew was not a very democratic one (Louis XIV), nor was it really any more so at the time of Gabriel Deshayes, and it is not possible for us to speak in this context of synodality, but we remain struck by LMG de M's desire to involve all social groups in the missions, to create associations that lived their baptism together in an original way, to involve lay people in missionary activity... In the cultural and social context of the time, there is a desire to share the mission with others, which is developed with concrete examples in Luiz Stefani's Letter of May 2021 on lay associates. This letter also emphasises the mission to the poorest and the concern to proclaim the Good News to the humblest members of society. Fr Luiz also emphasises the team aspect of the mission. We could also highlight the councils of congregation that exist in the different branches and which are internal places of synodality, as well as your inter-branch meetings of your spiritual family.

This synodality is a feature of the whole Church and not just a questioning of the place of the laity, which the Church has already recalled in various documents (*Christifideles laici*, 1988...) but which remains largely a dead letter in the field. It is a way of mobilising all Christians in a common effort. All Christians as the people of God, as Vatican II said (*Lumen gentium*). A general mobilisation, then, to challenge ourselves and seek to become involved together in the mission. The encyclical "*Ecclesiam suam*" (August 1964) wrote: it is by conversing that believers make the Church. Synodality is therefore a great movement to converse with one another, to dialogue, to share points of view based on different experiences, to imagine a Christian way of life that is a bearer of hope for all humanity, and this is what builds the Church and gives it vitality.

During the chapter of Fathers of the Company of Mary in Rome in May this year, the emphasis was placed on the mission TOGETHER (the triette, PE 18), which colours synodality in a concrete way. But the same concern runs through the whole Montfortian family.

TOGETHER in a society that preaches individualism and makes it the key to dynamism. This is where synodality is prophetic: denunciation/annunciation/visitation to propose another way of being happy in the contemporary world where rivalry and unbridled competition reign.

TOGETHER not in a confusion between states of life that leads to the domination of the most powerful and the despotic triumph of one state over the others... hence an organisation so that this work together is productive (cf. the associations founded by Montfort) and a constant dialogue to adjust in a complementary way with a view to the mission at a time when the Church is going through crises and the Catholic faith is in decline (29%).

TOGETHER to promote the common good and not just the majority of the general interest, with a universal dimension. The bc is the horizon of Christian life; it is the fruit of the work of the ES and of the intelligence of each individual, which is deployed both in listening to the arguments of others and in discerning what serves everyone; it aims at the good of each individual AND of everyone, and generates solutions and organisations conducive to true happiness.

There is no single model of the family, especially today, but there are a few common elements: solidarity and concern for others, and a place where people can speak out in confidence (but also within known and protective frameworks).

Solidarity: becoming strong. This is the project of sharing the spiritual treasure that is the charism (cf. CIC) with everyone, in the diversity of cultures. With the opportunity and challenge of internationality, an essential element in the face of identity-based divisions. Standing together to face adversity in all its forms:

- by showing concern for the happiness of others, for the development of their dignity, by rejecting indifference in the face of the suffering of others, by including their unique journey in our own human adventure and in our choices, including our daily choices and our prayers, our confessions of faith.

- A place where words can be risked in the confidence that they will be understood (or at least with an apriori benevolence). A place where we can say what lives inside us, makes us dream, helps us to hold on... not really fully implemented, alas! A place where fear is reduced (never totally absent) which allows us to see others better as they are with their potential.

So synodality is more than a forum for discussion or even a search for a common strategy or action; it is a genuine spiritual process that places the encounter with others at the centre of its life. It puts them at the centre, but does not make them our own, does not idealise them or try to mould them to our own image, but accepts differences because we believe that they are enriching beyond the difficulties, rejections and disagreements that must not be dismissed in an angelic way.

The other person who always escapes (mystery of being) what I would like him to be or think (like me), who fights in secret against all the forms of "non-being" that invade him, who has his own freedom to flee from me or to love me, who doesn't always know who he is and what he really wants... and he, facing me, who has the same complexity. It is in this strange alchemy that the Christian, and all the more so the Montfortian missionary, is called to situate himself, where he wants to situate himself, having glimpsed that this was the call addressed to him by Jesus and the search for his own happiness. To be a missionary, and therefore a Montfortian, is to respond to a conviction - we could call it a vocation - that the encounter with Christ and the encounter with others are inseparable (1 John 4 and/or Mark 12:28f).

Synodality is therefore a proposal that goes far beyond an institutional reorganisation - which is certainly necessary but not sufficient if there is no spiritual dimension leading towards the other - and that aims to put the encounter back at the heart of the life of faith: the encounter with the other and the encounter with God, a single movement but two distinct and interconnected spaces. Synodality is not just a societal technique for meeting or debating to improve life together in the Church or in a spiritual family, but also a moment that opens up through prayer for one another, through praise for what is beautiful in the relationships that are formed, through requests to God through the intercession of the Virgin Mary and through shared contemplative silence. Contemplative silence to receive and perceive the word of God in today's world.

Exploring all these dimensions of synodality gives rise to multiple questions and very diverse fields of transformation of our lives, but very often the emphasis has remained centred on questions of ecclesial organisation and this is disappointing. Few believers have really got involved in Western Europe, anticipating the ineffectiveness of this global process, which is too vast to produce anything new. Perhaps we could go further in our spiritual families, for whom sharing and trust are already, to some extent, habits to be developed...

Father Jean Claude LAVIGNE