

2. Called to follow Jesus

Why are we called to walk together, to live out our vocation in a synodal way? Where does the Church's synodality start from? What is the basis for St. Benedict's conviction that it is not possible to walk and run on the way of our vocation without being "put through the test of living in a monastery for a long time" (RB 1:3) and "well formed in the battle line of fraternal life" (RB 1:5)?

A vocation is a journey started by the Lord's call. We walk because Christ calls us to follow him, because Christ draws us to Himself. And by calling us, Christ demands a journey of us, for he is the "way, truth, and life" (Jn 14:6). If we do not start off with this awareness that Jesus calls us to make a journey with Him, we will never understand why it is necessary to walk together. Only if we understand that Christ demands that we follow him, that we walk after Him, will we be disposed to accept the conditions that Jesus asks of us in order for us to be able to walk after Him. And the first condition is that we walk alongside the other disciples called by Christ. We do not understand why we must walk together if we do not first understand that Jesus demands that we make a journey. But even if we do not accept to walk together with others, the journey will not be possible. Fraternal communion, though always imperfect and tiring, is the condition that Christ imposes on his disciples for them to walk after Him and with Him effectively.

When we understand the synodality of the Christian experience in this way, we understand that, to live it out truly, we need to begin by taking seriously our vocation to follow Jesus Christ. One does not walk, and does not walk together, without responding to the Lord's call. This is true not just for the so-called "special" callings: it is true for every Christian. Baptism is already a mysterious encounter with Christ who calls us to follow him on the way of salvation that leads us to the Father. In fact, even before baptism, the very fact of being willed and created by God constitutes a vocation to follow Christ toward the Father. Even one who does not know Christ, even one who does not meet him during his life, is always willed and created in Him, to find the fulfillment of his life's journey in being eternally with Him in the bosom of the Father. The Holy Spirit knows how to call the heart of each human being toward Jesus Christ, and the life of every human being is always a journey that God mysteriously guides, with the suggestions and groans of the Holy Spirit.

So, the issue for us is to let ourselves be ever again called by Jesus to make a journey together as we follow him. For this reason, I was saying, it is necessary to meditate at the same time on the synodal journey of the Church and on our vows, because we cannot truly walk together without following Jesus who calls us, and we do not follow Jesus who calls us without telling him "yes."

But what does it mean and what does it involve for us to tell him "yes"? When one makes monastic Profession, like when people are joined together in the sacrament of matrimony, or when one receives Ordination, the point is always to say "yes" to following Christ in a determinate vocational path.

Our baptism is already a yes to Christian life as a vocation that is foundational, universal, and perfect in itself, to follow Jesus Christ in his paschal life.

One is normally aware of this, and when one makes Profession, the promise that is made is expressed as definitive, “until death.” But then we see so many infidelities, in ourselves and in others, that often we go all the way to abandoning our vocation. So we ask ourselves, for ourselves and for others: But did we not say a definitive yes? Did we not promise a fidelity to the end?

Often one who effectively abandons the path of his vocation says that the yes was not truly free, was not truly conscious. At times one says that he is changing because one wants to follow Jesus more freely and with greater truth, perhaps giving oneself more generously to others, etc. In reality, I see that few who abandon a vocation manage indeed to live a life more given over to Christ, a happier life with Him.

The problem of fidelity depends on the awareness with which one pronounces one’s own yes. So, the first question that we must ask ourselves is what it means to say yes to Christ, to say yes to a calling to follow him, in whatever form this comes about. What does it mean to say yes to Christ not only at the moment of one’s vows, but always, even every time that following Him leads us to have to embrace new aspects within the vocation that we have embraced?

Sometimes I see monks and nuns who become unfaithful at the moment that they take up a service or task within the community. I have unfortunately seen not a few betray their yes to Christ when they become superiors of their communities, and these are the most serious infidelities, because often they drag other members or even whole communities into infidelity.

Or, as I accompany couples of spouses and families, I see that the yes of the wedding day gets repeated and renewed along the whole path of their journey, and at times it requires some painful yeses, full of sacrifice, for example when children are born with grave health problems. It is clear that in these moments such people are truly called by the Lord to make a great step forward in following him, on a path that often begins to go uphill, or whose direction cannot be determined, except that direction of faith that sees Jesus going before us and comforting us.

How many times I would like to see in monks and nuns too the same capacity to say yes to Christ that I see in so many lay people, the same fidelity and the same capacity for sacrifice in love!

In this sense I have been challenged recently, when facing various difficulties in the Order, by St. Paul’s outburst in the letter to the Philippians: “For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ” (Phil 2:21).

It is a phrase that it is worth understanding more deeply, in order to understand what it means to say yes to Jesus Christ.