THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY IN ASIA: INSIGHTS FROM THE SYNOD ON SYNODALITY

Address of His Grace Msgr. Giovanni Cesare Pagazzi, D.D.
Secretary of the Dicastery for Culture and Education at the
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Good Afternoon, everyone.

I have been asked to reflect with you on the teachings of the recent *Synod on Synodality* and how they might assist theology in Asia. While this task is undoubtedly a challenge, I will do my best to offer some insights on the matter.

I would like to begin with a re-reading of some aspects that characterize the stories of the two disciples of Emmaus in Luke, and of the meeting of the Apostles in Jerusalem, that is, the assembly or the so-called Council, narrated in the *Acts of the Apostles*. In this regard, a Spanish theologian recently identified some moments or aspects common to these two stories. They are:

1) ***Movement*** (The disciples walk towards Emmaus/The Apostles towards Jerusalem);
2) ***Encounter*** (The disciples meet the stranger/The Apostles meet each other with great differences);
3) ***Conflict*** (The disciples, in their hearts, do not accept the sacrifice of Jesus/The Apostles are torn between Judaizing and pagan customs);

4) ***Agreement and Amazement*** (The disciples around Jesus/The Apostles around the Holy Spirit).

In his meeting with the bishops of Asia, Pope Francis confessed that there is something that the latest Synod could recommend to Asian theologians and that is, above all, to strengthen and propose new forms of dialogue *ad intra* and *ad extra*. In fact, the Holy Father said to your bishops: "Dialogue is an essential part of the mission of the Church in Asia, [therefore] the Church is called to be versatile and creative in her witness to the Gospel through dialogue and openness to all."[1]

I, therefore, invite you to delve into the great challenge of dialogue, taking into account the four aspects of the stories that I have described for you and the conclusions of the 2024 Synod.

Movement

In *De modo orandi corporaliter Sancti Dominici*, a medieval writing by an unknown friar, it is affirmed that not only does the soul move the body, but that the body can also move the soul: *"ut anima movens corpus removeretur a corpore."* This reminds us that when a human being moves, it is not merely an expression of life, but also a means of transcending through movement. Man and woman, in their essential totality, move to perform primary gestures essential for survival and growth. In the same way, through movement, they can make their union with the Creator more transparent. It is therefore of vital importance that the theologian not focus exclusively on primary gestures—such as research, teaching, and publication—but, above all, that she or he does theology to transcend, to "reach the places where new narratives and paradigms are being formed" (*Veritatis Gaudium,* n. 4b).

1. Pope Francis, *Address to the Bishops of Asia*, 17 August 2014.

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Having said this—and emphasizing that the movement made by the two disciples of Emmaus and the Apostles toward Jerusalem is, first and foremost, *walking*—I wish to highlight that the movement that should distinguish every theologian of Asia and the world is that of walking: going out, going further, leaving one's *comfort zone*, and entering *zones of risk* to draw close to others and offer responses grounded in the science of God.

Since the beginning of his pontificate, Pope Francis has consistently called us to become a *church that goes out*. He has expressed this appeal in nearly all his speeches, and in many different ways. It seems that, guided by the Spirit, the Pontiff is urging us to awaken from the lethargy that too often weighs down both Christians and theologians. To be a theologian who goes out means, above all, to move, to walk while knowing that the guiding compass is always, and without a doubt, the foundational criterion of *Veritatis Gaudium*.

Regarding the latter, an Italian theologian defined the first criterion of *Veritatis Gaudium* as concentration and integrality. He explains that it involves understanding the commitment of the theologian—both existentially and intellectually—starting from the radiating center of the *kerygma*. In other words, all theological research and reflection must be rooted in a principle that, both existentially and intellectually, integrates the original and defining dimensions of personal and social being, in a way that takes into account the totality of God and the human person in relation to God.

Recently, Pope Francis emphasized the primary importance of viewing the totality of a person when approaching the figure of a saint. Allow me to share his words: "To recognize the word that the Lord wishes to speak to us through one of his saints, we do not need to get caught up in details

[...]. What we need to contemplate is the totality of their life, their entire journey of growth in holiness, the reflection of Jesus Christ that emerges when we grasp their overall meaning as a person."[2] Thus, the first criterion of *Veritatis Gaudium* asks us to embrace the totality of the human person, as "in the deepening of the kerygma is becoming flesh more and more and better, which never ceases to illuminate the commitment [of the theologian], and which allows us to understand adequately the meaning of any theme that develops" (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium,* n. 165).

The first commitment outlined in the "Foreword" of *Veritatis Gaudium*, in concrete terms, is to promote universities and higher institutes of ecclesiastical studies as places and paths of formation, study, and research that are truly habitable and meaningful. These institutions must be marked by two inseparable objectives: on the one hand, an existential and intellectual immersion in the Christian experience—living the faith in practice, including its cultural implications, especially in the peripheries; and on the other, the acquisition of the skills necessary to weave meaningful social relationships at all levels, starting from the conviction that God, in Christ, desires not only the good of the individual but of society as a whole.

To move, then, is not merely to conform by seeing the Gospel as a normative witness, but also, to recognize its ongoing incarnation—historically and culturally—as it becomes flesh "more and more and better" in the life of the Church and of humanity. Walking together means encouraging the mystique of us, a shared spirit which becomes the leaven of universal fraternity.

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2. Pope Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation Gaudete et Exsultate,* March 19, 2018.

Encounter

In Saint Luke's accounts concerning Emmaus and Jerusalem, the movement "ends" with a meeting: the two disciples with the stranger, and the Apostles with each other in the great assembly. This reminds us that—although we may be theologians who go out—we must, above all, speak with those we have met and foster the beautiful gift of dialogue. "Truth is *lógos* which creates *diá-logos*, and hence communication and communion," as Pope Benedict XVI said (cf. *Caritas in Veritate*, n.4).

Dialogue, in *Veritatis Gaudium*, is decisively presented, to avoid misunderstandings and inappropriate preconceived resistance, as "an intrinsic requirement for experiencing in community the joy of the Truth and appreciating more fully its meaning and practical implications" (n. 4b).

A theologian who does not dialogue certainly loses the opportunity to understand the meaning and effectiveness of what he has studied and written at his desk. Without dialogue, he cannot witness how knowledge moves from theory to lived experience—from the desk to the person. In this regard, Pope Francis' words can be enlightening, showing us a way to meet the person and the people. The Pontiff says:

> The first thing to do [...] is to heal from simplification. Reality is complex; challenges are varied; history is full of beauty and at the same time marred by evil. When someone cannot or does not want to deal with its dramatic complexity, then he or she easily tends to simplify. Simplification, however, mutilates reality; it gives rise to empty and unilateral thinking and it generates polarization and fragmentation.[3]
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> In short, there is no dialogue.

3. Pope Francis, *Address to the Participants at the International Congress on the Future of Theology*, 9 December 2024.

Another thing necessary to promote dialogue is "to review, from this standpoint and in this spirit, the structure and method of the academic curricula proposed by the system of ecclesiastical studies, in their theological foundations, in their guiding principles and their various levels of disciplinary, pedagogical and didactical organization" (cf. "Foreword," n. 4b). From the perspective of the new evangelizing stage of the Church, the "cultural laboratory," represented by ecclesiastical studies, is strongly urged to offer an evangelically relevant and historically incisive contribution to the creation of that "culture of encounter between authentic and vital cultures" which elaborates from within, with evident *chiaroscuro*, today's story. If this decisive criterion is not taken into account, [any dialogue with reality] is illusory (cf. "Foreword," n. 4b).

Pope Francis provided three fundamental guidelines to help dialogue, namely *"the duty to respect one's own identity and that of others, the courage to accept differences, and sincerity of intentions.* The duty to respect one's own identity and that of others, because true dialogue cannot be built on ambiguity or a willingness to sacrifice some good for the sake of pleasing others. *The courage to accept differences,* because those who are different, either culturally or religiously, should not be seen or treated as enemies, but rather welcomed as fellow-travelers, in the genuine conviction that the good of each resides in the good of all. *The sincerity of intentions,* because dialogue, as an authentic expression of our humanity, is not a strategy for achieving specific goals, but rather a path to truth, one that deserves to be undertaken patiently, in order to transform competition into cooperation."[4]

4. Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Identity of Catholic School for a Culture of Dialogue*, 25 January 2022, n.30.

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In this sense, the *Final Document of the Synod* stated, that "The dialogue, the encounter and the exchange of gifts typical of a synodal Church are called to open up to relationships with other religious traditions, with the aim of establishing friendship, peace, harmony and sharing moral and spiritual values and experiences in a spirit of truth and love" (n. 41).

Conflict

Whenever there is dialogue between two individuals or parties, conflict is almost inevitable. Sometimes, these are merely formal things that can be resolved quickly; other times, they concern deeper issues of content, thus generating more serious tensions. An indispensable principle for building social friendship is that *unity is superior to conflict*. Pope Francis pointed out that "This is not to opt for a kind of syncretism, or for the absorption of one into the other, but rather for a resolution which takes place on a higher plane and preserves what is valid and useful on both sides" (*Fratelli Tutti*, n. 245).

Therefore, a theologian must not be afraid of conflict, nor must he escape it when it occurs during dialogue. Conflict, when approached constructively, can help both sides grow and offers an opportunity to strengthen unity, not uniformity.

When conflict arises, some people simply look at it and go their way as if nothing happened; they wash their hands of it and get on with their lives. Others embrace it in such a way that they become its prisoners; they lose their bearings, project onto institutions their own confusion and dissatisfaction and thus make unity impossible. But there is also a third way, and it is the best way to deal with conflict. 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 (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 227).

That said, there are two types of conflict that, sometimes, drag down even our theologians. The first is the product of those voices that do not share our faith and our choices. Do you remember the biblical story, in the second book of Samuel, when David was fleeing from Absalom and, having reached the city of Bacurim, a man of the same family as the house of Saul came out, called Shimei, son of Gera. He cursed David, shouting: "Get out, get out, you man of blood, you worthless man! [...]. The Lord has given the kingdom into the hand of your son Absalom. See, your evil is on you, for you are a man of blood." David's response to such imprecations still amazes us today. The King, when one of his men proposed to kill Shimei, said: "Let him curse, for the Lord has told him to. It may be that the Lord will look on the wrong done to me and that the Lord will repay me with good for his cursing today" (2 Sam 16:5-14).

Indeed, today there is no shortage of criticism or misunderstanding. In many countries, theology does not enjoy state and academic recognition as a science. Across the globe, some thinkers continue to denigrate any attempt by theology to answer the essential questions of the human person and of humanity. What should we do? Surely, following David's example, we must listen to our detractors and honestly ask ourselves to what extent our theological reflection—while respecting its own scientific method—responds to the needs of both society and the church. We cannot be afraid. Perhaps the Spirit wants to tell us something for the sake of theological research itself.

The *second conflict* theologians must confront is the growing divide among themselves—particularly between those who remain excessively self-referential or rigidly attached to a singular, exclusive way of doing theology, and those who have embraced Pope Francis' call to engage theology in dialogue with other human and scientific disciplines. The latter group

seeks to integrate theology with key aspects of culture, literature, music, art, and more, enriching theological reflection through interdisciplinary openness. It is worth remembering that the sole—but stimulating and guiding— indication offered in *Veritatis Gaudium's* "Foreword" concerns the interpretation and use of the principle of interdisciplinarity. This principle is not to be understood in its "weak form of simple multidisciplinarity"—essentially a horizontal approach—but rather in its "strong form of transdisciplinarity," that is, the collocation and fermentation of all knowledge within the space of Light and Life, offered by the Wisdom of the Revelation of God." This vertical perspective is both open and founded in making the transcendence of God in human history through Christ (cf. *Veritatis Gaudium*, n. 4c).

The final document of the Synod specified that "ecclesial synodality, therefore, commits theologians to do theology in synodal form, promoting among themselves the ability to listen, dialogue, discern and integrate the multiplicity and variety of requests and contributions" (n. 67). I invite you not to be afraid of transdisciplinarity.

Agreement and Amazement

The story of Emmaus reveals the moment of agreement between Jesus—no longer a stranger—and the two disciples, culminating in their astonishment at recognizing him in the breaking of bread. Similarly, the account of the Apostles in Jerusalem highlights a final decision made after dialogue, and the shared amazement of feeling guided by the Holy Spirit. As the most recent Synod affirmed, such agreement is reached "in prayer and fraternal dialogue, recognizing that ecclesial discernment, care for decision-making processes and the commitment to be responsible for one's own actions and to evaluate the outcome of our own decisions are practices

with which we respond to the Word, that shows us the ways of mission" (cf. n. 79).

Agreement will become simpler only when we put into practice the fourth and final criterion of *Veritatis Gaudium*, which "concerns the urgent need for 'networking' between those institutions worldwide that cultivate and promote ecclesiastical studies, in order to set up suitable channels of cooperation also with academic institutions in different countries and with those inspired by different cultural and religious traditions" (4d).

This must be thought of and implemented—as illustrated in *Evangelii Gaudium*—according to the model of the "polyhedron, which reflects the convergence of all its parts, each of which preserves its distinctiveness," (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 236; *VG* 4d) also taking responsibility for historical conflicts in the commitment to an effective, and not simply compromising "resolution [of them] which takes place on a higher plane and preserves what is valid and useful on both sides" (4d).

The *amazement*, however, should be the force that inspires dialogue and the seal that confirms what has been agreed. Dialogue, serenity, and joy are clear signs of communion between the parties. Synodality has a dimension that reveals something of the nature of the Church and, at the same time, is constitutive of its unity in the multiplicity of its expressions. This is the convergence of the notion of the Church as *koinonia*, which is realized in each local Church and her relationship with other Churches, through specific structures and synodal processes.[5]

In this regard, "theology has a particular competence and responsibility. Through constant dialogue with the social,

5. Cf. Commissione Teologica Internazionale, *La sinodalità nella vita e missione della Chiesa,* n. 116.

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religious, and cultural currents of the time, and with openness towards other sciences which, using their own methods, study these developments, theology can help the faithful and the Magisterium to see the importance of the movements, events, and trends in human history, and to discern and interpret the ways in which the Spirit may be speaking to the Church and the world."[6]

Synodality is built through dialogue, with the understanding that acceptance will not always follow. The proclamation of the Gospel inevitably coexists with rejection by some. We must respect those who are *ad intra* of the church who, while sharing the same faith, hold differing views on non-essential matters. Likewise, we must show respect toward those who are *ad extra*—who do not share our faith in Christ in order to allow their voice to be heard and reflected on as well.

Thank you.

6. Cf. Commissione Teologica Internazionale, *La sinodalita nella vita e missione della Chiesa*, n. 53.