

CHURCH

From Synod to Synodality, this is how praxis becomes doctrine

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Regarding the Synod on Synodality which will open on October 4th, it is legitimate to ask ourselves an apparently strange question: will this Synod be followed by a post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation by the Pope, or will the conclusions of the Synod be considered

full magisterium by themselves? The question is not redundant and has to do with the new concept of Synodality understood as a process and as decision-making after mutual listening, which is considered to be listening to the voice of the Holy Spirit. To understand the problem, let's take a quick look back at the synod on the family of 2014 and 2015 and to the Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*.

We all remember very well that in that Exhortation Francis did not want to say anything different from what was stated by the synod, especially in its final document. In paragraph 5 we read: "I considered it appropriate to draw up a post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation that collects the contributions of the two recent Synods on the family, combining other considerations that can guide reflection, dialogue and pastoral practice, and at the same time bring courage, encouragement and help to families in their commitment and difficulties".

By this passage, it seems that the pope simply wanted to incorporate the conclusions of the synod, adding some pastoral and paraenetic advice. It is true that in this way he made them become magisterium, however he seems to allude to a reduction in his role, limited to transposing and not interpreting and developing. *Amoris Laetitia* does not rise much above the conclusions of the synod. Formally it remains a post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation, but materially it refers to the conclusions of the synod fathers. In the Motu Proprio *Episcopalis communio* of 15 September 2018 on the new constitution of the synods, we read that the Pope may no longer write a post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation but simply confirm the conclusions of the synod which would automatically thereby become magisterium.

The question becomes more complicated if we remember two decidedly new aspects. The first concerns the fact that in the final document of the Synod on the family the Pope wanted there to be two articles which had been rejected by a majority of the assembly and, therefore, formally rejected and which, however, could be considered magisterium. The second concerns what happened in the 2018 Synod on young people where it even happened that the final document said it had to be read in the light of the preparatory document, with which the latter also became magisterium.

For these reasons, in one of my booklets on the Synod on the family and on *Amoris laetitia* I asked myself whether this would be the last Apostolic Exhortation. With this magisterial weakening of the synodal texts and of the post-synodal Exhortation itself, which contrasts with its widespread dogmatic interpretation as if the entire tradition had to be reinterpreted in its light, the idea of synodality emerged already then as a process that would produce praxis and not doctrine. Of course: practices that

would have required a new doctrine... but in time and over time. Let us also remember that nowhere in *Amoris Laetitia* does it expressly say that divorced and remarried people can access Communion. Then the bishops of the Buenos Aires region said: we do this, we admit them to Communion. That is, they implemented a practice, which the Pope confirmed with a letter which later ended up in the *Acta Apostolicae Sedes*. This is the practice... and the doctrine? Time will take care of that...

Our initial question therefore has a foundation and touches a central point in the evolution from the synod to synodality. The theologian Giacomo Canobbio wrote in the two leading theological magazines of northern Italy, that of Milan and that of Padua, that, by moving the synod from consultative to deliberative, decisions will have to be made and these will undoubtedly require the use of democratic vote.

Even before, the articles of the synod documents were voted on, but then everything ended up in the hands of the Pope and a post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation was born. (I recall in parentheses that Francis also benefited from this method, writing *Evangelii gaudium*, the post-synodal apostolic exhortation relating to the synod on evangelisation which had been called by Benedict XVI. *Evangelii gaudium* does not take into account the work of that synod given that Francis made it the manifesto of his pontificate, proof of Peter's centrality in the synodal processes at least until then). Now, however, the transition to the Pope can no longer exist, or it could only be formal, so that the use of the democratic method would directly concern doctrinal issues, immediately becoming magisterium. Canobbio proceeds his reasoning by adding that, if, after the synod on synodality, the last word were still that of the pope, well, then everything would have served at nothing and we would return to the starting point, regressing from synodality back to the synod.

As we can see, the question of whether there will still be a post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation in the traditional sense of the term is fundamental to establishing whether the new synodality definitively breaks with tradition. *Amoris laetitia* constitutes an important precedent in this sense and everything suggests that this will happen this time too, and even more so given the new definition of synodality as a process, which recalls an ongoing practice not necessarily guided by doctrine but itself a (factual) source of doctrine.