

THE REAL GOAL

The Synod is a manual of psycho-social manipulation

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INSTRUMENTUM LABORIS

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**Luisella
Scrosati**



An extremely interesting new analysis of the *Instrumentum Laboris* (IL) of the ongoing Synod on Synodality is offered by the website lex-orandi.org. It brings together different associations of faithful active in defending the ancient form of the Roman liturgy, in a 30-

page document titled *L'Instrumentum Laboris pour la première session du Synode. Une guide de lecture*. Putting aside the theological and disciplinary content of the document, the analysis dwells on other aspects, hitherto hardly examined.

Beyond the rhetoric about the participation of all in the life of the Church, the real goal of the Synod is stated in No. 15 of the IL, which indicates the trajectory to be followed, the goal to be achieved within the many issues that are on the table for discussion: "Their purpose is to help focus on how the implementation of the conclusions of the two previous Ordinary General Assemblies of the Synod of Bishops (2015 and 2018) and of the successive Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortations, *Amoris laetitia* and *Christus vivit*, represents an opportunity to walk together as a Church capable of welcoming and accompanying, accepting the necessary changes in rules, structures and procedures. The same applies to many other issues that emerge in the discussion threads". So the authors of the analysis are right to emphasise that the Synod has no other purpose than "to have the disciplinary and institutional changes initiated under the pontificate of Francis accepted and implemented" (pp. 2-3).

Precisely because the purpose of this synod is to digest and assimilate what has emerged from previous synods, an appropriate method is needed: conversation in the Spirit. Presented as the great novelty, it is actually the 'spiritualised' version of a well-tested social psychology method tried and tested precisely to overcome possible resistance. And it is no coincidence that, behind the woolly language, this is what the IL has clearly in mind (cf. Nos. 37-39). After everyone, in the small groups of twelve members, has taken the floor, while the others listen in silence, again everyone can intervene, but - attention - "not to react and counter what has been heard, reaffirming one's own position". The third step aims at the "identification of the key points that have emerged and the building of a consensus on the fruits of the common work, which each person feels is faithful to the process and in which he or she can therefore feel represented. (...) discernment is needed, which also pays attention to marginal and prophetic voices'.

The authors of the analysis emphasised how this procedure closely resembles that method of the psycho-social sciences that goes by the name of 'group dynamics'. This is also explicitly admitted in module B 3. 1 of the IL: "the perspective of transparency and accountability (...) also arouses fears and resistance. That is why it is important to seriously confront, with an attitude of discernment, the latest findings from the management and leadership sciences. Furthermore, the Spirit conversation is indicated as a way of managing decision-making processes and building consensus (...)"

Removing resistance and building consensus, according to techniques borrowed "from the sciences of management and leadership": the Holy Spirit has nothing to do with it and only acts as a frontman for a psycho-social technique. Just as the Apostles had nothing to do with the decision to prefer small groups of twelve over public discussion. It is all a matter of proven techniques for managing group dynamics.

Let us take a closer look at this 'group dynamic', which, in the writer's opinion, constitutes the analysis's most brilliant insight. Its 'inventor', Kurt Lewin, was convinced that it was easier to change a group than an individual. French psychologist and sociologist, Jean Maisonneuve, explains why: "One of the main resources of resistance to change is the fear of deviating from group norms" (p. 9). The group tends to maintain an equilibrium, in whatever sphere. It is therefore necessary to provoke change through two methods: applying pressure in the direction of the desired change and decreasing resistance to it. "However" - Maisonneuve emphasises - "practising only the first method practically always ends up provoking tensions, more or less lively conflicts. It is therefore necessary to associate the second method with it" (*Ibid*).

The two Synods on the family and the Amazon adopted the first method, the current Synod the second. Synodal method and conversation in the Spirit do not indicate anything other than dynamics that aim to bring about the attenuation of all resistance, through the change promoted in the group. From the group to the individual. It is for this reason that, as we have seen, the Synod does not provide for debates and discussions; nor can one take the floor to "react and counter". It is to all intents and purposes an "abandonment of rationality (...) worrying and not in keeping with the dignity of the Christian" (p. 11).

From this perspective, one can also understand the emphasis placed on the "facilitators", i.e. those who direct the dances of change; in fact, in No. 42 of the IL one reads: "training in this method, in particular of facilitators capable of accompanying communities in practising it, is perceived as a priority at all levels of ecclesial life". Now, the synodal method is supposed to combat all sorts of abuses; but, the authors of the analysis rightly ask themselves, "does it not open the door to drifts and manipulations, or to the abuse of consciences, since it is affirmed a priori that the consensus obtained will be the voice of the Holy Spirit?" (*Ibid*). Conversation in the Spirit is nothing but a manipulative technique, all the more effective because it is hidden behind a spiritual mask.

No. 42 of the IL concludes with a noteworthy sentence: "Training for conversation in the Spirit is training to be a synodal Church". The 'synodal Church' is the result of the

method of 'conversation in the Spirit', and thus a community where all resistance is overcome and the programme carried out by a few is accepted and shared thanks to the mastery of the 'facilitators'. The analysis shows that it is no coincidence that the expression 'synodal Church' recurs 98 times in the IL (where 'Catholic Church' occurs only 10), the term 'synodal' 159 times and synodality 42. The other popular terms are obviously 'discernment' (93 times), listening (98), process (86).

Nor is it surprising that this 'synodality' in fact covers a highly elitist process:

"The synod is a process decided largely by the clergy, applied by the clergy and directed by the clergy (albeit through lay people placed by them)" (p. 10). And it is even less surprising that it does not represent the people of God at all. The analysis gives some examples showing that the actual grassroots response during the first stage of the Synod was around 1%. Roughly the same as those with voting rights of the first 'liberal' parliaments in Europe. The intermediate syntheses then actually manipulated some critical demands that came from the albeit small base, such as the one concerning the ancient liturgy, clearly present in the synthesis of the French Bishops' Conference, but unrecognisable in the IL.

In the light of the "group dynamic" one understands even better why the *sensus fidelium* is always brought up, without ever recalling the conditions present in *Lumen Gentium* 12, nor the document of the International Theological Commission of 2004, namely that there is no *sensus fidelium* without the conduct of the Magisterium, to which it owes obedience. In the synodal view, the *sensus fidelium* is nothing but that consensus which is the result of manipulation; strictly contrary to the Magisterium.