



Ugo SARTORIO: *Sinodalità tra democrazia
e populismo. Oltre ogni clericalismo*
[Synodality between democracy and populism
Beyond any clericalism]
Padova: Edizioni Messaggero, 2022

The prospect of a Synod of Bishops on the question of the synodality of the Church announced by Pope Francis for 2023, has aroused much excitement regarding the new form of celebration of the Synod, which would consist in initiating it at the level of the particular Churches and involving into it the lay faithful. The practical form of the celebration of the Synod as a novelty, that may have come as a surprise to both the pastors of the Church and the faithful, meant that, along with the questions and solutions proposed by theologians, canonists, and Church historians alike, concerning the understanding of the phenomenon of synodality, have also brought about some queries pertaining to the practical manner of the celebration of the Synod. However, solutions proposed on doctrinal grounds do not always translate into everyday forms of practical life. This is linked to the attempts, prior to developing any solutions, at truly following the path indicated by the pontiff. The variety of measures taken, as the example of the German synodal path shows, provokes reactions from the Roman Curia and the pope himself. For this reason, it is important and desirable to take a doctrinal approach to understanding the synodal way of the Church and to point out the forms of its actualisation that take place in and for the Church. The danger of navigating through erroneous and undesirable pathways on the synodal journey stems from the adoption of concepts and descriptions of reality that are characteristic

of today's world. Transferring them to a community in this world but not of this world and capturing it in the wrong language becomes a source of misunderstanding within the process that is currently taking place in the Church.

This issue is looked at by Ugo Sartorio, who points out that synodality is an issue, not so much one that has its place defined by the limits of how, on the one hand, democracy and, on the other, populism are understood, but rather one that is incompatible with neither democracy nor populism. For an expert reader, the title of the study leaves no doubt. The author addresses issues that misrepresent the phenomenon of synodality, and so are a form of its reduction to weighty and desirable forms of democracy or populism. Nevertheless, the subject matter that the author addresses promises to be more intriguing, which is expressed by the book's subtitle: *Oltre ogni clericalismo* (Beyond any clericalism).

Already in the introduction, Sartorio points out that this short study is a sequel to his earlier, broader work on the subject of synodality (*Sinodalità. Verso un nuovo stile della Chiesa* [Synodality. Towards a new style of the Church], Ancora, Milano 2021). For this reason, the reviewed book does not address the fundamental questions concerning the phenomenon of synodality in its doctrinal approach by discussing the fundamental issues related to it but is devoted to the themes mentioned in the title and, as the author points out, without claiming to provide exhaustive solutions. Indeed, the question of synodality remains open and by its very nature inexhaustible, which stimulates as of yet and probably ever uncompleted transformation of the Church towards a new form of presence in the world. Therefore, the suggestions made by the author may provide a picture of the consciousness of the Church today, but without closing itself off to its further development.

In Chapter I entitled "Sinodalità e democrazia" (Synodality and democracy), the author presents and analyses the views of some theologians and scholars who have commented on the democratisation of the Church in relation to its synodality. This approach reflects the historical moment of change taking place in the world, in which a crisis of democracy is discernible along with the growing role of populist leaders. In both parts of this two-part chapter, the author first presents the views of a number of scholars (K. Rahner, J. Ratzinger, G. Ruggieri, G. Alberigo, E. Corecco, H. Legrand, A. Borras, R. Repole). However, he does so not from the point of view of the diachronic development of democracy and synodality, but rather from the perspective of the relationship between the Church and democracy. The positions of the above mentioned scholars, despite their different sources and ways of understanding the phenomenon of synodality, indicate constancy in their treatment of the issue of the

relationship between the Church and democracy. This is emphasised by U. Sartorio in the second part of the chapter, in which he summarizes previous opinions by the said scholars. He points out that the Church does not deny or reject the sense and value of democracy, but that she herself is not based on democratic structures because of the person of Jesus Christ as Lord, whose presence determines the actions of the Church. The awareness of this truth coexisting with the *sensus fidei* of the baptised on the synodal journey of the all People of God touches upon the question of the common recognition, acknowledgement, and determination of what is right for the Church, where the voice of the people meets the voice of the shepherds. Sartorio indicates that there is not always a balance in this process between the decisions reached and the path leading to reaching it. He accurately observes that this difficulty is not only due to external influences motivating consciousness in the decision-making of the faithful, but also due to a certain ecclesial mentality of insufficiently educated pastors and faithful who do not only decide “on the behalf of the Church,” but above all “as the Church.” The author points to the insufficient reception of the conciliar teaching and the lack of a proper reflection of the *communio* of all the baptised as the cause of it. At this point, Sartorio concludes, populism meets clericalism, which both are a travesty of the synodal way and shared responsibility for the Church. Indeed, synodality is not a tool for decision-making in the Church along the lines of democratic mechanism, but the way of living of the Christian community that allows everyone to be involved in listening to the word of God. The author has thus indicated the content and sources of democratic and populist inclinations inside the Church, which are caused not only by external factors. For they are present in the community of believers itself, in their understanding of the divine-human community and the role they are obliged to play in it.

In Chapter II, “Chiesa sinodale e populismi” (Synodal Church and populism), the author remains faithful to the methodology present in the previous chapter. He depicts for the reader another relational juxtaposition. It is, on the one hand, a community defined as populist and, on the other, another one guided by the principles of synodality. The point at which the two meet is the question of participation, understood in its own proper sense and characteristic of the two ways of doing it. The analyses carried out lead Sartorio to conclude that democracy is an ambiguous concept, also in the forms of its implementation. Its constant element is the reference to society as the source of its origin. At the same time, he points out that populism itself can be read similarly in terms of the representation of a community by its leader. In this context, he goes on to consider issues, including problematic ones, relating to co-

participation and power in the Church from the perspective of decisions taken. He emphasises that co-participation in the Church is a bond based on mutual trust between members of the community. The means offered by the synodal dimension of the Church should therefore be seen as an expression of the will to build an ever deeper community and shared responsibility. The author focuses his further reflections around the issue of the populist community and the synodal community by first pointing out that populist thinking is concentrated upon the leading figure and the immediacy of his/her actions aiming ultimately at satisfying the needs of the group supporting him/her and ultimately negating social pluralism. The author supports his reflections with statements by Pope Francis, which gives his remarks the value of a view of reality that is independent of politics. He quotes and comments on the pope's vision of the Church as the People of God based on the teaching of the Council, which is far from any form of populism. Francis stresses that in the community of the Church as the People of God there is no place, also because of the role the ecclesiastical hierarchy has in it, for any trace of the characteristics of populism, which boils down to absolutising the will of community and marginalising the elite. In Francis's perspective, the Church is far from any form of populism, since it is part of its nature to have a deep bond existing as a *communio* between the laity and the clergy. Neither group can exercise authority over the other. The Church hierarchs cannot do so if their authority is not evangelical and does not lead to the co-participation of all in the life of the Church. Nor do the laity have uncontrolled authority over the ecclesial community. Of great value for understanding the issue under consideration are the conclusions at the end of the discussed chapter. This is because the author has not only provided an analysis of the issue but has enumerated in a practical way the potential forms of the presence of a populist approach within the ecclesial community.

The chapter which follows is entitled "Sinodalità, oltre ogni clericalismo" (Synodality, beyond any clericalism). The author explains the intention of addressing this topic in the light of the reflections carried out thus far. This makes it possible to understand the content marked in the title of Sartorio's study. The eponymous clericalism is, in Pope Francis's understanding, the interference of the Church in the sphere of politics, the involvement of the clergy in the matters inappropriate to their vocation and role in the Church, up to what he calls the improper, combined with abusive exercise of authority in the Church. Thus, the concept of clericalism has been moved from an external attitude towards the Church to an internal one. It may seem that the author's reflections therein slightly deviate from the main theme of his study. However, he explains that the

issue of clericalism can be looked at in the perspective of the synodality of the Church, since taking the synodality path is at the same time a means of getting rid of the clerical attitude among the clergy in the dimensions that Pope Francis spoke about. The essence of synodality, in the first place, is to listen together to the word of God, which stands in opposition to the unequivocal views expressed either by the clergy or the laity influenced by them on issues related to the life of the Church. At the same time, a true synodal journey instigates the process of transcending the clericalism present in the community.

The final (fourth) chapter of the book is devoted to guidelines for making the common synodal way possible. The author draws attention to the concept of synodality, which remains too vague in its meaning and concepts. He proposes the use of wording that makes participation and shared responsibility clearer (synodal, process, way). He also points to the need to get rid of the slogans that are often uttered about the ecclesial synodal way and replace them with terms that characterise it. The said terms would clarify it and constitute an impulse to undertake the journey together. It is the third element which Sartorio focuses on indicating that it is impossible to speak of the synodal way and have in mind the meaning other than a common path in the sense of taking it with others with all the consequences of journeying together. The synodal way is fraternity, communion, solidarity, which require converting towards what is done together. The author also emphasises that synodality is not an ecclesiological question concerning forms of expression, structures, and procedures in need of improvement, but it is a theological question that requires a constant search for an expression of the Church that is able to reveal the mystery of God present in the Church and the world. Hence, synodality is about listening to the problems of today's man. This leads to the final conclusion and simultaneously to the indication that synodality is at the same time listening to God and to the other person, thus creating a circle of people walking together on a common path. This reality of the Church is far from her dominant vertical dimension. It goes back to the biblical roots, when God reaches out to his people. Synodality, Sartorio concludes, is therefore a continuous journey of conversion.

The study by Ugo Sartorio, in spite of the significant-sounding terms contained in the title: democracy, populism, clericalism, deals with the issue of synodality in the full sense of the word. The three synodality-related issues determine the subject of the study and, at the same time, arouse interest in the problematics encompassed by the meaning of these three concepts. It is a skilful procedure that makes these issues, which are present in public life and at the same time concern the Church herself, to

contribute to the spirit of the text that exposes the misjudgement of the Church in terms of philosophy and politics. This is, however, a secondary topic compared to the more important issue leading to an understanding of the synodal dimension of the Church in today's world.

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