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## The Synodal Method in Building Marital and Family Community

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Abstract: The aim of the article is to present the use of synodal method in building the family community. The method was developed for the use of the Synod about the synodality, initiated in 2021 in the Catholic Church. Documents of the church indicate the need for using the method within the universal Church as well as the local Churches. However, due to the fact that a Christian family is also a domestic Church, the method can also be used in building the marital-family community. The research conducted for the use of this article was based mainly on the documents of the Catholic Church devoted to the synod on synodality. They became the source of the undertaken analyses. The authors also used the elaborations regarding the research problem and the marriage and family issues. The aim of the article and the nature of the source materials suggest the use of the adapted research methods. The leading method was the monographic method in some of its dimensions. Moreover, the other research methods include: descriptive method, the method of the analysis of documents and the analysis of the contents. The article consists of three parts. The first part presents the novelty and characteristics of the synodal method. The second part was devoted to the applicability of the method in building the community of marriage and the third part was devoted to the applicability of the method in deepening the bond between parents and their children.

Keywords: synodal method, synod, marriage, family, domestic Church

While initiating the Synodal Way for the People of God in 2021, Pope Francis inscribed in it the communion and participation. These two realities: communion and participation are possible to implement with the proper method of conducting dialogue which, apart from being conducted by the interlocutors, is also conducted by the Holy Spirit (Coda 2019, 175-76). This method was called the synodal method in the synodal documents. It is an innovative method, although it originated in the well-known forms of dialogue and cooperation previously used in the Catholic Church. This method was mainly developed for the needs of the synod on synodality, however, it can - due to its specific nature - be used not only in the universal Church and in the local Churches but also in the family, that is in the domestic Church (Fiałkowski 2018, 550).

The Light-Life movement, also known as the Oasis movement, offers the spouses the marital dialogue as a tool for deepening their relationship and for building unity in marriage. However, the synodal method is broader and more comprehensive,



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it can introduce additional values and can be used not only in conjugal relations but also in the family. Although the synodal method can use the elements of the marital dialogue, it differs from it in a few crucial aspects.

The marital dialogue focuses on communication and on solving problems which arise between the husband and wife. It is intimate and private, and it focuses on the marital relations and on everyday life. It aims at deepening the mutual understanding, at strengthening the bond, at solving problems and at supporting healthy communication. The outcome of the marital dialogue directly influences everyday life of the spouses, improving their relations and the mutual understanding. The dialogue can be practised every day or as often as it is necessary, and it constitutes an integral part of the marital life.

On the other hand, the synodal method can be used in order to deepen the marital dialogue and to discover it in a new form; it also involves the whole family. This method is structured and collective and it is directed at the joint decision-making, at building consensus and at promoting unity. It aims at solving problems, planning and joint decision-making. The outcome of the synodal method are long-term and aim at improving the functioning and unity of the whole community. The method is introduced periodically, as a part of the planned meetings, often in response to the specific needs or problems.

Although both the marital dialogue and the synodal method are based on communication and cooperation, they differ with regard to the scope, aims, structure, time and tools. The marital dialogue is more private and intimate, focused on the relation between two people, while the synodal method is more structured and collective and it aims at reaching the consensus between the spouses as well as between the spouses and their children.

The aim of this article is to indicate the possibility of application of the synodal method in the family – that is: in the domestic Church. It mainly concerns the application of the method in building the community-dimension of marriage and of the family. The article is based mainly on the documents of the Catholic Church which regard the synod on synodality. The authors also used certain elaborations on this issue and on the issues of marriage and the family. The assumed aim of the article and the source materials suggest the use of the adapted research methods. The authors used a range of detailed methods, mainly: the method of analysis of documents, the analysis of the contents and the descriptive method. The monographic method was the leading method. The article consists of three parts. The first part presents the novelty and characteristics of the synodal method. The second part was devoted to the applicability of the method in building the community of marriage and the third part was devoted to the applicability of the method in deepening the bond between parents and their children.

### 1. The Novelty and Characteristics of the Synodal Method

Both the Holy Scripture and the Tradition confirm that synodality is the integral feature of the Church, and through this feature the Church reveals Herself and develops as the People of God (ITC 2018, 42). The fundamental call of the synodality is the common discernment of the signs of time (*GS* 11, 44). Common, that is the one involving all of the People of God. The novelty of the Synod of Bishops of 2021–2024 regarded not only the division into the preparatory local phase and the continental phase, but also the decision introduced by Pope Francis to increase the number of the lay faithful in the plenary sessions of the synod and to give them the right to vote. It is enough to mention that the first session of the synod included 363 members with the right to vote, including 54 women.

In order for the community discernment to be properly experienced, its participants need to be mature enough. It is also required to use tools and structures which foster the dialogue and interaction within the People of God. Thus the new formula of the synod suggested by Pope Francis and the original method of the synodal work. Before the first session of the synod, *Instrumentum Laboris* calls it: "the dialogue in the Spirit," but is also known as: "the conversation in the Spirit," "spiritual conversation" or generally "the synodal method." (*IL* 32)

The basis of this method consists in listening meant as careful listening to the voice of the Holy Spirit inside oneself and into the voices of the companions on the road for discernment (Coda 2020, 190). Listening in the synodal method is intentional, that is: it depends on the man's will. Therefore, it is not enough to listen, but we must also hear it. It sometimes requires leaving our comfort zone, questioning one's thoughts and certainties and opening to the new ways of perceiving certain issues. Listening must permeate every stage of the synodal method. The fruits of the process of discernment and the proper direction on the way of our vocation depend on the commitment into hearing God's voice.

The synodal method consists of a few following stages. However, we must remember that they do not regard technicalities but rather a clear definition of the steps which should be taken to make the discernment effective (Steccanella 2022, 46). Each particular stage permeate s the others and often require adjustment to a certain topic, to the other participants or to the external conditions. Still, they indicate intentions and dynamism which are characteristic for the synodal way of the dialogue (*IL* 41).

The dynamics of the conversation in the Spirit includes three basic steps which are complemented by a kind of "a preparatory process." The first step assumes speaking up of all the group members. It is not about a free statement or presenting one's state of knowledge on a certain subject or about presenting revolutionary theses. The first speech should express one's own experience discovered during the prayer in the course of the preparations with regard to the suggested topic (*IL* 37).

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Therefore, the synodal method firstly assumes the personal prayer which becomes the source of hearing the voice of the Holy Spirit in oneself. The openness in listening also assumes the openness to hear oneself in order to most specifically define the opinion on a given subject. The preparatory process of the prayer leads to reassuming one's spiritual intuitions, to defining expectations and priorities with regard to the subject which should be taken up. This double "inner level" constitutes not only the starting point but it is also necessary because it opens the man into God's voice and it allows the light of the Holy Spirit to permeate one's personal thoughts, desires and opinions (Steccanella 2022, 48).

The others listen with the awareness that everybody brings a valuable contribution, without entering into disputes and discussions (*IL* 37). There is no question of any prejudice, of the attitude of closure and indifference. It is not time for the evaluation of someone's opinion or for expressing one's reasons "for" and "against." It is about listening to the voices of others with the awareness that in me as well as in the others the Holy Spirit permeates our prayers. This is the role of the next step of the method which assumes a moment of silence and prayer. After the speeches of every group members, now is the time for God to speak. This is the time for listening to one's own experience gained during listening to the other speeches of the group members. "The interior traces that result from one's listening to sisters and brothers are the language with which the Holy Spirit makes his own voice resound." (*IL* 38)

The second fundamental step on the synodal way is another speech given by all of the group members. This part is called the space for others and for the Other. This time it is about sharing the thoughts and emotions which are stored in every member's minds after listening to the others. It is not a proper moment to add the information which you have not talked about in the first part. This is the time to share the inner and most striking emotions which appeared while listening to others, which were most surprising and which opened a new perspective or what is the greatest challenge (*IL* 38).

The third step of the synodal way is "building together." It consists in determining by the group members the key points which appeared while listening to God, to one-self and to others. Similarly to the previous two steps of the common discerning, this one too is preceded by a moment for the personal prayer. The fruit of the prayer is to build the common position for each of the members to feel represented. The group works on a common short text which contains a list of the most often mentioned issues, points of convergence as well as issues which caused disagreement or doubts. We can say that this stage constitutes the answer to the question: what steps are we called to together by the Holy Spirit? (*IL* 39).

The culmination point of the common way is the prayer of praise of God and the prayer of gratefulness for the received experience. This is a particular experience because the conversation in the Spirit does not only consist in the exchange of thoughts. The word which is spoken and heard results in the feeling of intimacy

and the mutual closeness. The term "in the Spirit" indicates a genuine protagonist of the dialogue. The foundation of each stage is the prayerful listening of the Voice of the Holy Spirit and opening to the free action of Him Who blows like the wind wherever it pleases (John 3:8). The conversation between brothers and sisters in faith opens the space for *con-sentire*, that is listening to the Voice of God together. *Instrumentum Laboris* emphasizes that a genuine conversation in the Spirit demands a step forward in the precise, although unexpected, direction which indicates a certain activity (*IL* 33).

The conversation in the Spirit, although it is inscribed into the long tradition of discerning in the Church, still it constitutes a certain novelty included in a certain framework. The aim of the synodal method is to pass from "me" to "us," which allows to include the personal experience into the community dimension (*IL* 35). However, it is not an obvious process, therefore it requires formation and proper spiritual direction. In order to enhance the communication in the group, the process is accompanied by a facilitator (Lat. *facilitare* "facilitation"). His task is to moderate the group, which consists in not only supervising the technical aspects of the method, but rather in providing certain dynamics to the synodal group, which assumes the intermingling listening, speaking and acting.

In order to notice particular elements of the synodal method more precisely, it should be defined as the following layout:

- 1) personal preparation: reflection and the prayer meditation on the suggested contents:
- 2) community discernment:
  - silence and listening to God's word;
  - personal speech and careful listening to the others;
  - silence and prayer;
  - dialogue on the basis of what emerged earlier;
- 3) building together:
  - silence and prayer;
  - the answer to the question: to what steps is the Holy Spirit calling us together? creating a short résumé;
  - the prayer of thanksgiving.

# 2. Using the Synodal Method in Building the Community of Marriage

The conversation in the Spirit was "discovered" in the synodal process as the atmosphere enabling to share personal experiences which creates the space for the community discernment in the Church (*IL* 34). Using the dynamics of the synodal method

does not have to be limited to the work of the Synod, but it can also be transferred to other institutions and environments, particularly the ones which are characterized by the way they function which is referred to as "the unity in diversity." One of them is the community of marriage which assumes the autonomy of each of the spouses, and at the same time it creates the unity of bodies and souls.

Dialogue is the basis of the synodal method, it leads to expressing oneself and to hearing the neighbour. Our partner in the dialogue usually comes from a different environment, has a different temperament and the way of thinking, and consequently, he or she has a different perception of the same subject. It also regards the community of marriage. On the one hand, choosing a husband or a wife, people are usually guided by a certain compliance as for the life ideals, beliefs, religions, the world of values or ethics. On the other hand, there are a number of issues which the spouses perceive in a different way, in particular with regard to the matters of lesser importance. Man and woman, while contracting marriage, decide to share their lives with the other person who has his or her own experience or even the burden of their upbringing, the influence of their environment and mental and emotional conditions (Szyran 2010, 103).

The marital covenant does not erase the individual features of a person, his or her character, emotions, feelings or thoughts, but it joins them with the bond of love with the individuality of the spouse. The two individuals "me" and "you" enter into the mind of "us" (Gen 2:24). Therefore marriage constitutes a specific form of a meeting of two people of the opposite sex, who often come from different environments and experienced different models of upbringing and culture, and who are now facing the task of creating the unity in the community of the two. Thus building the mutual relation of love must be rooted in the widely defined dialogue which, according to Pope Francis, is "essential for experiencing, expressing and fostering love in marriage and family life. Yet it can only be the fruit of a long and demanding apprenticeship." (*AL* 136)

The so called "dialogic practice" is a particular form of the marital dialogue. It consists in the monthly meetings of the spouses in order to remove everything that is an obstacle on the way of their mutual love and of the unity of marriage (Szyran 2010, 127). The synodal method is perfectly inscribed in this way of the marital meeting as its central part consists in listening and thus focusing on the other person.

The spouses begin their meeting – according to the dynamics of the conversation in the Sprit – with the personal preparation. While listening to oneself, and confronting with the important events and experiences of the previous month, they examine their hearts in order to express what they are currently experiencing. Christian spouses are aware that marital covenant must built on God's word (Matt 7:21–29), therefore it takes place in the atmosphere of the concentration on the prayer, with calling for the light from the Holy Spirit. It is also the time of praying over the past events and inscribing them into the marriage vow spoken before the spouse, before God and before the community of the Church.

After experiencing such a personal preparation, there comes the time of listening to one another. Here we should stress: only of listening. Sharing what the spouses are feeling in the depth of their hearts: joys, hopes, concerns and difficulties. The meeting should begin with the common prayer in order to unite their hearts and to become properly prepared for the given time. This is the moment of hearing the spouse, of creating the space for the unconstrained sharing of the most important thoughts which might not have been uttered in the everyday life. It is also worth to share the currently appearing feelings and emotions in order to fully unveil one's heart before the spouse.

Now comes the moment of the silence and prayer. After hearing the wife by the husband and the husband by the wife, the spouses need this time to hear the other's experience and to inscribe them in their hearts. This is the moment when the spouses inscribe the emotions and thoughts of the other spouse into their personal experience. This process is taking place in the atmosphere of the proper dialogue, the aim of which is not to change the other person but to get to know and to understand him or her. Only as a result of such a dialogue, the spouses are able to adopt the common decisions and actions and try to change oneself and not only and primarily not the other spouse (Grzybowski 2009, 13). This is not an easy task, therefore the spouses need to ask for the support and assistance of the Holy Spirit.

The spouses can now share the fruits of their prayer on the basis of their mutual speeches. Similarly to the process of the synodal method, this is not the time for the evaluation of the other person's comment, also in the marital dialogue, this is not a moment for the discussion or for the mutual accusations. Before the spouses proceed to expressing their personal opinions, feelings and thoughts, it is necessary for them to make sure that they have heard everything that the other person wanted to say. Often one of the spouses does not expect their problem to be solved right away but he or she only needs to be heard. He or she needs to know that their problem became the couple's "common problem." He or she needs to know that his or her success, joy but also sorrow, disappointment, fear, anger, hope, dreams and expectations were noticed (*AL* 137).

The marital dialogue based on the synodal method is included in the third part. The marital conversation is supposed to direct the spouses to look in the same direction in order to become the genuine "us." This is the result of the next prayer meditation. This is the time when the spouses discover God's plan for both of them together in their marriage. When the spouses contract marriage, they take up the task of building the unity based on God (Coda 2023, 104). The spouses committed themselves in the spirit of the full responsibility for themselves to care for each other with every available means. In the sacrament of marriage God was invited to their marriage and family life in order to protect and lead the spouses. Building love also requires making proper use of the fruits of the sacramental grace. "Dialogic practice" if it comes from the inside of the married couple, becomes the time of the special God's

action. The personal experience and background of the spouse, which are inscribed into the atmosphere of the prayer, lead to the unity of hearts, of souls and of minds (Szyran 2010, 131–32).

The spouses proceed to building together. It regards working out the common direction of action, possibly formulating the necessary postulates, indicating priorities and undertaking certain commitments. This is a process which assumes their common participation. They try to find harmony and common perspective which will constitute the foundation for their further action and for the development of their marital relation. This moment is very sensitive because imposing "yourself" or, on the contrary, the passive indifference, can disrupt the dialogue, and consequently, destroy the obtained fruits. Pope Francis writes about the habit of giving importance to another person. It regards the appreciation of others and not underestimating the experiences of others or their requests, although it would be necessary to express one's point of view or, on the contrary, to give up on your own right (*AL* 138).

The meeting ends with the common prayer which is a thanksgiving. The spouses thank God for each other and renew their marriage vows. It can proceed in the private but extremely intimate form of the vows renewal. It contributes not only to the return of the original love but also motivates to even greater zeal for fulfilling the spoken words. In the final part of the meeting of spouses they should express the mutual thanksgiving and possibly, if they experienced it during their prayers, the words of apology. The non-verbal communication is essential here, it includes the gestures of the mutual kindness and closeness.

The main aim of the marital dialogue based on the synodal method is the deeper and more mature getting to know of the spouses; their joys and successes, needs, hopes as well as disappointments, sorrows and pain. In this dialogue the spouses recognize the truth about themselves, which is mainly revealed in the gift of themselves full of love, the gift of one's inside and the richness of one's emotional life (Szyran 2010, 64). In its nature this dialogue does not aim at solving problems but at achieving mutual understanding and building the relationship. These relationships enable the common discernment and making decisions, solving the difficult and painful matters and the common building of the bond based on love (Grzybowski 2009, 19).

The synodal method is not limited to building the marital bond for the so called "dialogic practice." The given proposal indicates the dynamics of using the conversation in the Spirit also in other moments of the marital life. It can also be useful in solving the conflicts. Its undeniable value is revealed in calming emotions and in looking at the emerging conflict not only through one's own experience but also the experience of the other spouse. Solving the conflict with a few of the elements of the synodal method depended not only on the husband or wife's decision, but it requires their common consent as well. Moreover, the spouses ask God for help and this help can direct the spouses to the unexpected solutions for reconciliation.

The dynamics of the presented method underlines the community discernment. It is particularly important in the cases when the needs of the spouses are not identical and they must decide what to do and in what order in a certain situation. Each particular stage of the synodal method allows to present one's opinion and, at the same time, to hear the opinion of the other. The "common building" seems to be the most difficult element. It is the most difficult element but, it is worth to notice, that the element is possible to realize. If the spouses do not only talk "me" but "us," it is possible to work out a compromise which in turn will strengthen the marital community bond (Zarembski 2015, 167–68).

# 3. Using the Synodal Method in Deepening the Bond Between Parents and Children

Synodal method based on the dialogue is useful in deepening the bond between parents and children. The dialogue between them is intergenerational. However, this dialogue has become very difficult nowadays. The quickly changing social and cultural conditions of the contemporary family result in a situation when the challenges in certain fields which the parents used to face are significantly different from the challenges faced by the generation of their children. This leads to misunderstandings in perceiving reality and in adopting different ways of thinking and of assessing the occurring phenomena. The misunderstandings which result from using the same terminology by the parents and by their offspring, however giving them different meanings and content, sometimes lead to tensions or even to conflicts. The misunderstandings in the intellectual sphere and the accompanying emotions may even lead to prejudices within the family and, in a further perspective, to the existential distancing the children from their parents (Zając 2018, 526).

The synodal method, the first element of which is the prayer, mostly promotes building the good will in parents and in their children. The prayer meant as a sincere meeting and conversation with God, in particular a common prayer of the two generations, is an aid helping to look in the same direction (Mierzwiński 2008, 390). God's presence is a kind of a catalyst of the transformation of emotions and knowledge brought to the common prayer by both sides and a transformation of them into the common feelings and contents which they will take with them for the further stages of the family dialogue. We can even claim that the prayer is beneficial for overcoming the tensions inside each person as well as between them.

The positive attitude of parents and children towards one another, despite their different ways of perceiving the world, is a good starting point for the personal speech and for the mutual listening. The child is now able to express himself or herself and has the courage to present his or her point of view, although he or she knows that

this point of view is not approved of by his or her parents. The child is also able to highlight all the aspects of cases, knowing that the parents will not disrupt the presentation of all the issues. The parents can also talk to the children about everything, including the issues which are usually avoided by young people who consider their parents to be out of date. The adults are aware that they are free to speak and their children will not disrupt the conversation.

The synodal method is beneficial for the acquisition of skills of the unconstrained speaking out but it also teaches to carefully listen to the interlocutor and deepens the empathy. It is noted that the currently threatening phenomenon regards the mutual listening to other interlocutors. The people who are listening to the interlocutors expressing the contents, do not pay attention to the contents. In fact, this conversation is not a dialogue but two monologues, because both interlocutors are not listening to each other and the contents expressed by each of them do not correspond with each other to a noticeable extent. The synodal method encourages the interlocutors not only to listen to each other but also to place each other in the position of an interlocutor and to look at the presented phenomena with the other's eyes. Thus it teaches listening to and understanding the other person as well as the empathy towards his experiences and background (Parysiewicz 2010, 269).

The synodal method can be useful in bringing up the young generation. The method is beneficial for the individualistic approach to every child in the family and in solving educational problems (Bereźnicka 2014, 112). One of the educational problems of the parents is omitting the individual differences between the children and treating them all in the same way. And as long as the rules in the family can be permanent and should be equally valid for all the family members, the parents approach towards their children should always take into account the children's sex, age, character, temperament, talents, limitations, and other individual features. Some parents do not understand their educational failures. They claim that applying the same methods of upbringing and the same approach towards all their children, they are not capable of upbringing their children equally successfully. Such parents lack the awareness of the differences between the needs and expectations of the children and the full knowledge of the children's experiences and about the relations between the siblings as well as about the atmosphere at home. Bringing parents and children together for the common conversation makes it possible for the parents to carefully listen to each of the children and for everyone to express his or her opinion (Zarzecki 2012, 70-71).

The necessity to listen to all the members of the family, which is suggested by the synodal method, gives the parents possibility to deeply dive in and get to know the inner world and the life situation of their children. The children who turn to their parents do not always manage to be heard. The parents who are focused on other things, which they consider to be more important, or who tend to have as much time for their children as possible, may not find enough time for their children and do not

pay enough attention to their children's life matters. What is more, they often consider their children's problems to be insignificant and therefore, they do not talk about them. Using the synodal method encourages parents to give their children as much time and attention as they need in order to build their inner-family relationships. It is also beneficial for solving the children's problems. Although many problems are revealed only between a child and his parents, other children should also be involved into their siblings' lives. It results in co-responsibility for the fate of the other family members, motivates to provide support to them and is beneficial for the deepening of the bond between the siblings. These bonds are now likely to become more and more rooted in the mutual love and empathy. What is more, it replaces the unhealthy competition and the negative attitudes which emerge between the siblings (Parysiewicz 2017, 239–40). The synodal method may also contribute to creating the space for each family member to express themselves freely and to the requirement of the patient listening to each family member regardless of the seriousness or the lack of it in perceiving the matters of a family member.

Another problem which can be easily solved on the synodal way regards building the consensus between parents in the cases of their various approaches to bringing up the children (Pyźlak 2022, 325). This issue is partly included into the range of the marital dialogue which the parents lead with each other using the synodal method. It also partly belongs to the matters of the whole family. The differences in the style of bringing up children between the father and the mother strongly influence the upbringing of each particular child as well as the relations between the siblings. Different styles of bringing up result in the fact that children are prone to use their parents' attitudes for their own purposes, which in turn can result in the development of the attitudes of egocentrism and self-interest in the children. It can also lead to the attempts to manipulate the parents. It is important that the fundamental matters should be discussed by the parents only, without the presence of the children, and that they should draw up the consensus as for solving the problems, however, the family dialogue based on the synodal method is the space for presenting the parents' joint position towards the whole family community. Moreover, the ambiguous and questionable aspects raised by the children at the time should also be solved by the parents in the spirit of consensus.

The synodal method, which assumes the ability to listen and to express oneself, which is accompanied by the prayer at various stages, has the community building value. It serves to foster getting closer of the family members and deepening the feeling of responsibility for one another. It also fosters taking the appropriate responsibility for the community of the family perceived as the common wealth by each member. Thus it serves the deeper involvement into the community building and into its tasks for its best interest. This work is expressed through, e.g. taking up roles and responsibilities in the household. And, what is more, the engagement can also be taken in the spirit of the service for the other family members to even greater

extent. Using the synodal method in the community of the family enables building enduring bonds between parents and children and among the children, the bonds can accompany them with equal intensity after the offspring's gaining independence and their leaving the family home (Kamiński 2013, 183–84).

### Conclusion

The synodal method was developed for the use of the synod on synodality. According to the teaching of the Catholic Church, the method was supposed to be used in the works of the synod within the universal Church and the local Churches. The article indicates that the method can also be used for the development of the domestic Church, that is the family. It is useful for the deepening of the bond between husband and wife. It can become a form of the marital dialogue of the spouses who aim at deepening the unity between them and God. The synodal method can also be used in the dialogue between parents and children. The method is fostering community building. It serves the mutual understanding between people of different generations and strengthening the bonds between the household members. It fosters the Christian upbringing of the young generation and acquiring the skills of establishing contacts and creating deep relationships in the future.

The community building value of the method results from its roots in the dialogue with the Holy Spirit Who is invited into the dialogue between the people who are bound by close ties. His presence fosters mutual openness to one another of the family members and their assuming the attitude of being open to one another based on the free will. In the atmosphere of friendliness, they acquire the skills of listening of one another, the skills to share their opinions and to express their experiences. The religious nature of the synodal method allows to get rid of unnecessary fears and worries and it is beneficial for the deepening of the mutual trust and care.

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