



**Catholic
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Service**



Bishop Reflection Series

April 18, 2022

Pope's call for worldwide synodal action is seed to be planted, nourished

By Bishop Daniel E. Flores, Catholic News Service

Pope Francis speaks often of the importance of seeds being planted, and of the need to give them time and attention as they grow. He mentions this frequently in “The Joy of the Gospel.” This image, I think, is the best place for us to begin to understand the Holy Father’s call for a worldwide synodal action in the Church.

The synodal action is a seed planted that offers hope of renewing our sense of common identity and mission as Catholics in the world. It is not a quick fix; it is a renewal of the way forward in a way proper to our baptismal dignity.

It is a deliberate effort to create spaces and times in the Church for us to exercise the most basic aspects of our baptismal grace: invoking the Holy Spirit to move us anew, listening to Scripture and each other with reverence and respect, discerning together how to move forward as the communion of the baptized called to witness to Christ Jesus, crucified and risen from the dead, and truly present in the world.

It starts locally, in parishes and small mission chapels, in apostolic movements, on college campuses, in immigrant refugee centers, and in soup kitchens, any place really, where we can gather for a time of reflective prayer and listening and speaking about the more foundational aspirations that the Lord Jesus puts in our hearts.

It involves a few basic questions to start the conversation: “How do I experience the Church as a place of communion and joy?”; “How do I not?” “How do I live my witness to Christ and the fullness of the Gospel he announced?” There are other questions we can begin with, but they all start with “I” and “we,” not with “us” and “them.” The divisions between “us” and “them” (in whatever way we in the Church can fall into dividing each other up) are grievously debilitating the mission.

Synodality is a simple action, childlike almost, but it is so difficult for us. It is difficult for us, as Pope Francis has rightly discerned, because for too long we have been formed by pressures and social examples that eschew the primacy of the prayerful listening posture that is proper to the church. We are all variously influenced by a culturally ingrained habit of listening only for the sake of seizing the first opportunity to interrupt; listening, so we can gather ammunition to win the argument; listening, only to those whose opinions are “important”; listening, only by appearance, not really hearing the heart animating the sense of what someone is saying.

And so, by default, we become divided into groups that only talk among themselves, and only rarely with someone who may have a different perspective, a different starting point, a different priority. The Church is not a political party, nor a corporation, nor a social club, nor an NGO. And though we know

by instinct of the Spirit what we are not, we can do better at consciously expressing more clearly who Christ has made us to be.

The Church is a “we” that exists as a communion within the “I” of Christ. In the Spirit poured out by Christ through his dying and rising, we can overcome our tendency to interrupt, and argue and ignore. But it is a habit of grace that, like a sprouting seedling, must be appreciated and cultivated, and allowed to grow.

The synodal action also involves gathering the local sense of the baptized into a series of regional and national summations that will ultimately find expression in a Synodal Assembly in Rome. But the local aspect is meant to remain active and continue to grow as a manifestation of local communion and mission.

Ever since St. Paul challenged St. Peter on the issue of how the Mosaic law applies to the communion of those baptized in Christ, our history has always included dramatic moments of contention and disagreement. But it is the way of the Church to resolve them by starting from our common identity in Christ, as brothers and sisters bound to each other because we are all connected in Christ. The common responsibility of the baptized is to hear patiently, to reflect commonly, and to move forward together as decisions are made.

Bishop Flores has headed the Diocese of Brownsville since December 2009.

April 18, 2022

'Journeying together' is at heart of Church's synods, synodal preparations

By Archbishop Thomas G. Wenski, Catholic News Service

In October 2023, Pope Francis will convene the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops with the theme, "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission."

Since the close of the Second Vatican Council, popes have convened such synods, made up of representative bishops gathered from across the world, to advise them on important matters to the life of the Church. The one that will open in Rome in October 2023 will be the 16th such gathering of bishops and other delegations composed of priests, religious and laity, to collaborate with the pope in the exercise of his universal magisterium. Usually, after the close of the synod, the pope will sift through the suggestions, insights and recommendations of the Synod Fathers and issue in his own name an apostolic exhortation that seeks to set forth a plan of action for the entire Church.

In one sense, a synod is an exercise in strategic planning, with the apostolic exhortation being the plan. For example, in 1974, St. Paul VI's "Evangelii Nuntiandi" (on evangelization in the modern world), gave impetus to the realization that the Church is essentially an evangelical movement: It exists to evangelize. Again in 1990, St. John Paul II's "Pastores Dabo Vobis" (on the formation of priests in circumstance of the present day) helped renew seminarian formation after the confusions of the post-Vatican II era -- the fruits of which we are now seeing in the quality of priests ordained in recent years. Perhaps better known to many today is "Evangelii Gaudium" (on the new evangelization for the transmission of the Christian faith), in which the newly elected Pope Francis published in 2013 the direction in which he wished to take his pontificate.

Besides these general synods, the pope can convoke a particular synod of a special region. St. John Paul II held several continental synods; and most recently, Pope Francis held a Pan-Amazonian regional synod. Many dioceses also hold synods -- here in the Archdiocese of Miami we had two in our 60-plus-year history. One convoked by Archbishop McCarthy in the late 1980s; the other by myself shortly after arriving back to Miami as your archbishop. Eastern churches and several Protestant bodies also hold synods.

The word itself comes from the Greek and it means basically "journeying together." "Synodality" refers to the very essence of the Church, her constitutive reality and thus is always oriented to evangelization. But, as Pope Francis himself admits, "Journeying together -- laity, pastors, the bishop of Rome -- is an easy concept to put into words, but not so easy to put in practice."

Usually, themes for general synods are solicited from the bishops of the world and once chosen by the pope his collaborators prepare a "lineamenta" (a preliminary outline) to elicit feedback from concerned parties, from which an "instrumentum laboris" -- a working document -- will serve as a basis for the discussions at the synod.

However, Pope Francis has decided on a novel -- and potentially very creative -- bottom-up approach. He wants every local church (diocese) to participate, followed by consultations at the level of national conferences of bishops and continental assemblies. This ambitious undertaking will take two years to complete -- with the diocesan phase beginning in October 2021.

The General Secretariat for the Synod of Bishops has sent a preparatory document, accompanied by a questionnaire and a “vademecum” with proposals for consultations in each local church. The Holy Father opened the synod in the Vatican Oct. 9-10. Bishops were asked to open their own diocesan “phase” in their cathedrals on Oct. 17. By the end of April 2022, everyone who wished to were given the opportunity to be “listened” to in some fashion so that the pope can benefit from the “sensus fidei in credendo” (the sense of faith in believing).

The pope views this as an exercise of “spiritual discernment”: “One listening to the others; and all listening to the Holy Spirit.” (Pope Francis, Oct. 17, 2015)

So, as we embark on this “journeying together,” let us pray: “Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful ... and you shall renew the face of the earth.”

Archbishop Wenski has headed the Archdiocese of Miami since June 2010.

April 25, 2022

'A question is probably just a question'

By Bishop Brendan J. Cahill, Catholic News Service

I remember attending a workshop given by Father John Kemper in the early 2000s focused on the theme of teaching “Gen Xers.” At the time, I was teaching in a seminary and it seemed that often we teachers would enter into conversations about the “young seminarians” and how hard it was for us to understand them. I still have my notes from the talk that day, and the memory I want to share with you is that he told us, “When a student asks a question, it probably is just a question.”

That observation wouldn't appear to be so enlightening to many people, but for someone who often perceived a question as a challenge to authority, it changed a way of looking at questions. For example, I realized that if a seminarian asked me why I celebrated the Mass in a certain way, I simply needed to respond to the question.

One of the 10 themes listed in section 5.4 of the “vademecum” for the synodal process observes that “listening is the first step, but it requires an open mind and heart, without prejudice.” One way to look at this theme is to consider the areas in which I may have closed my mind and heart to another person or group, and even judged them before they opened their mouth to ask a question.

Using the story mentioned above, we could ask ourselves, “How do I listen to those in my ‘classroom?’” and then follow with, “What are the labels or judgments I have placed on them?” and “Who do I keep out of the ‘classroom?’”

The most basic attempt at the first question might reveal that there is a tendency to listen more closely to those who agree with me. There also could develop a tendency to shut down an alternate view or even a simple question, maybe without even realizing it.

Father Henri Nouwen wrote about this spiritual problem years ago in his book “Reaching Out,” observing how often a teacher spends time answering questions that aren't being asked.

Father Nouwen called for a spiritual movement in the classroom toward hospitality, in which students can be heard and appreciated for the questions they present. This image of the classroom can serve as an image for the different levels of relationships in my life. It could be at work or at home, in the larger community of schools and civic involvements, even in the Church.

The process of synodality has been challenging each of us to not immediately shut down any voice, and to listen to the questions that are being asked. In the process I am becoming aware of my preconceptions and judgments. I'm learning to listen without immediately responding.

The process challenges each of us to come to a greater appreciation of who we have been cutting off or who we may be talking about in a dismissive way. The process reminds each of us that often we don't need to give an answer, we can simply sit and acknowledge another person's humanity.

Beyond the people I may have been dismissing in my environment are those I don't even know. It could be different cultures, languages, political views, ages, experiences or other categories. The process of synodality outlines a path for each of us to go beyond stereotypes and what we hear about another group of people. Hopefully there will be a moment in which each of us can listen to someone from a "new" group. A beauty of the process can be in the realization that whatever group we belong to, many of us have similar questions, hopes and dreams.

Recently Pope Francis consecrated Russia and Ukraine to the Immaculate Heart of Mary in communion with the bishops throughout the world. A part of the prayer of consecration acknowledged our own sins before God, including when "we grew indifferent and caught up in our own selfish needs and concerns." May we develop listening hearts whose only concern is the salvation of all souls, especially those in most need of God's mercy.

Bishop Cahill has headed the Diocese of Victoria, Texas, since 2015.

May 3, 2022

Companions on the journey

By Bishop Steven R. Biegler, Catholic News Service

The call to be companions on the journey is prophetic. At a time when society is becoming more fractured, we are invited to discern how we might “walk together” more intentionally. Pope Francis posed this question prior to the war in Ukraine. Now the scenes of horrific violence and distressed people fleeing their homeland incite all humanity to ask: “How can we walk together as brothers and sisters?”

Nearly a year before the war erupted, the synodal document was formulated with that question in mind. In the synod, we are asked to recall how Jesus walked together with people, then to reflect on whether we are imitating his closeness to people.

The “vademecum” poses these questions: “In our local Church, who are those who “walk together?” Who are those who seem farther apart? How are we called to grow as companions? What groups or individuals are left on the margins?” (Vademecum, 5.4).

Pope Francis reminds us that Jesus was constantly reaching out to people on the margins. In the preparatory document for the synod, he wrote, “the work of evangelization and the message of salvation would not be comprehensible without Jesus’ constant openness to the widest possible audience, which the Gospels refer to as the crowd ... Jesus’ interlocutor is the “people” of ordinary life, the “everyone” of the human condition, whom he puts directly in contact with God’s gift and the call to salvation.” (Preparatory Document, 18).

We need to constantly reflect on our fidelity to the mission of Christ. The synodal process calls us to step back and ask: Are we proclaiming the gospel to the widest possible audience? Are we journeying together with the people of ordinary life, like Jesus who attended to lepers, the blind, the crippled, and the poor? He told the parable of the good Samaritan because he did not want us to leave anyone alone on the side of the road.

Therefore, Pope Francis has asked us to hold gatherings for every facet of society. He is inviting all the baptized to participate in the synodal process, but he also wants us to listen to the “crowd,” including people who have left the practice of the faith, people of other faith traditions, or of no religious belief. We should be mindful of including those who may risk exclusion: women, the handicapped, refugees, migrants, the elderly and people living in poverty.

You might ask, “How could we ever accomplish such an all-encompassing participation in the synod?” Do not fret. This is not a time to complete the task, but a time for planting seeds. As stated in the preparatory document, “This synodal process need not be seen as an overwhelming burden that competes with local pastoral care. Rather, it is an opportunity to foster the synodal and pastoral conversion of each local Church so as to be more fruitful in mission.” The goal is to nurture the synodal journey as a way of life, not to complete it.

We are invited to be creative. For example, the Diocese of Cheyenne, Wyoming, has begun a conversation with the Eastern Shoshone and the Northern Arapaho people on the Wind River Indian Reservation. We are seeking to promote respectful interaction between Native Americans and other residents of Wyoming, so that we might learn from them and understand their perspective, to encourage ally building between the church and existing organizations. The process will take decades.

Over the past seven months, we have participated in Zoom meetings including diocesan leaders and Native Americans regarding the topic of boarding schools. Then we gathered in-person for an experiential session on intergenerational trauma titled “Repairers of the Breach,” which involved a historical review of government policies and boarding schools. Most importantly, we listened to Native Americans recount how this has adversely affected multiple generations. The experience gave everyone greater understanding and a deeper sense of solidarity.

In an analogous way, Catholics should see the synod as a kairos event to nurture “walking together,” not only in the Church but also in society. The synodal process can be a leaven for respectful listening as our nation addresses racial inequalities, the impasse over immigration, and other contentious political issues. What if we viewed the synodal process within the Church as a way of modeling respectful listening, which contrasts the political discourse often poisoned by angry partisan sentiments?

Then we would accomplish the goal which Pope Francis proposed when he said that the synod is intended to stimulate trust, to bind up wounds, to weave new and deeper relationships, to learn from one another, to build bridges, to enlighten minds, warm hearts, and restore strength to our hands for our common mission (PD, 32).

Bishop Biegler has headed the Diocese of Cheyenne since 2017.

May 8, 2022

Speaking out

By Bishop John E. Stowe, Catholic News Service

Our Holy Father Pope Francis has given great emphasis to the importance of listening during the synodal process underway in the universal Church. He teaches that to be an effective teaching Church (“ecclesia docens”) we must also be a learning Church (“ecclesia discens”); listening is an essential part of learning.

Pope Francis, himself an effective teacher, shows the way and is widely known as an engaged listener. The first phase of the universal synodal consultation is essentially a collection of listening sessions going on throughout the world which will be distilled, synthesized and presented to the Office of the Synod in Rome.

My own experience, similar to that of many other bishops across the country, is that our people were eager to be heard but not especially familiar with processes that asked for their voice. Listening itself has been an important lesson as we embark on this synodal path.

What are we hearing? What is being said? As novel as the listening process has proven to be, obviously someone has to speak for that listening to take place. If bishops and pastors have been invited to listen especially to voices that we have not always been attentive to, we have to make sure that there are opportunities for someone to speak out on behalf of those voices.

I have frequently summarized Pope Francis’ directives to the participants in the Synod of Bishops on the Family as “speak boldly and listen charitably.” The pope has lamented that when given the opportunity and the optimal setting for speaking openly, there is often a hesitancy to say what is truly on one’s mind for fear that another will disagree, or that the speaker will be viewed unfavorably or offend someone by speaking openly.

There are appropriate moments for voicing disagreement, for presenting an unconsidered facet of an argument, for acknowledging the value of underrepresented points of view and even for challenging notions that have gone unchallenged even if it is unpopular to do so. The synodal sessions are indeed ideal for this kind of “speaking out.”

Of the many words that Pope Francis has introduced or reintroduced to our lexicon, one of his frequently employed terms (often left untranslated) is parrhesia, described as boldness or conviction, which the Holy Father insists is vital to the proclamation of the Gospel today and also needed in our interactions within the Church. Paul’s letter to Timothy insists that God’s Spirit is not timid (2 Tim 1:7).

The Holy Father himself has not been timid in calling the world’s attention to the peripheries: from migrants drowning in the Mediterranean Sea to the plight of Ukrainian women and children refugees fleeing the destruction of armed violence in their homeland.

The Church must be a voice for the voiceless as witnessed by St. Oscar Romero who paid the ultimate price for courageously speaking against soldiers taking the lives of the poor in El Salvador. Advocates for the sanctity of human life must be bold in speaking against the taking of life in the womb through abortion as well as against the practice of euthanasia for the terminally ill; they must also be bold in denouncing the death penalty, nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction and the exclusion from access to health care, adequate clean water and nutrition, shelter and the basic necessities of life.

Can the Church remain faithful to her mission and not publicly challenge the poor treatment of migrants and refugees? Or confront the persistent manifestations of systemic racism in society? Can the Church be truly proclaiming the Gospel if not calling for mercy and compassion when society can be cold and heartless? Can the Church stand by silently when justice is more readily available to people of means than to the poor? What about when people are abused or treated unfairly, even within the Church's own structures?

When we accept the synodal invitation to listen to all of the people of God, we certainly hear affirming voices and powerful testimony about the importance of faith and the joyful struggles of those putting that faith into action. We also hear the pained expressions of those who have been hurt or feel excluded by the institutional Church and who challenge the authenticity of our witness based on their experience.

The voices of those who are striving to live their faith with integrity but who face challenges from within and without the Church share their resolve as well as their failures. The voices of those which society considers the least important should encounter the most willing of listeners in the Church. Then as a body and as the leaders within that body, we must give proclaim what we have heard without fear of rejection or misunderstanding, but with the conviction of the Gospel's truth.

We must be prepared to "preach the word in season and out season" (2 Tim 4:2).

Bishop Stowe has headed the Diocese of Lexington, Kentucky, since 2015.

May 16, 2022

'Everything starts with baptism'

By Archbishop José H. Gomez, Catholic News Service

I had the blessing of attending the Mass in Rome with Pope Francis for the opening of the 16th Synod of Bishops on the theme: "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission."

As we have begun the diocesan phase of the process, I continue to reflect on the Holy Father's words from a moment of reflection that was held before the synod's opening Mass. "In the Church, everything starts with baptism," he said. "Baptism, the source of our life, gives rise to the equal dignity of the children of God, albeit in the diversity of ministries and charisms. Consequently, all the baptized are called to take part in the Church's life and mission."

To me, this is what the synod is all about.

We cannot stress this enough: Our lives find their meaning and purpose in Jesus Christ. Nothing else explains who we are, why we are alive and what we should be living for.

In baptism, we claim our new identity in Christ, as men and women who have met Jesus Christ, experienced his love, and accepted the salvation he won for us by his death and resurrection.

What the pope is calling "the synodal path" is a journey of prayer and reflection. In this coming year, our Holy Father is asking each of us to a new encounter with Jesus Christ, and a new appreciation of our responsibility for the Church's mission of bringing all souls to know Jesus Christ and his salvation. We need to remember that the Church's mission is more than what happens in our parish programs and liturgies, in our ministries and administrative work.

We are a part of something far greater. We are a part of God's plan for history and creation. For God, this is all a love story. He created the world and sent his only Son into this world, to unite all things in Christ, and through Christ to join all peoples in all nations, in the communion of his divine love.

The Church's mission is to complete the love story of salvation history. As Jesus gave his life to save us from sin and death, he calls each of us to give our lives to him, to follow him, and to share in the mission of his Church. We are saved to save others.

In his opening homily for the synod Pope Francis urges us to enter into a new encounter with Jesus, and he emphasizes "adoration -- this prayer that we neglect so much."

This is vital to our mission. We cannot give what we do not have. We need to be converted before we can bring others to conversion. That means we need to pray before we can proclaim.

All this returns us to the celebration of the Eucharist, which is the source and the summit of our Catholic faith.

The synod preparations align beautifully with the U.S. bishops' pastoral intentions to bring about a eucharistic revival in this country.

Like the synod, the eucharistic revival is a missionary project. It aims to draw our people deeper into the heart of the mystery of faith, to awaken what St. John Paul II called "eucharistic amazement."

As we walk together on the synodal path, my prayer is that each of us will come to a deeper appreciation of the precious treasure that we have in the Eucharist, in which our Lord makes himself a gift of love, offering his Body and Blood to become our food and our companion as we make our way on this earthly journey.

May Our Blessed Mother help us to make this jubilee, and this synodal process, a true moment of conversion, for each of us, and for our Church.

Archbishop Gomez heads the Archdiocese of Los Angeles and is the president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

May 23, 2022

Ecumenical dimensions of synodality

By Bishop John M. Botean, Catholic News Service

It is tempting to assert that the ecumenical dimension of the synodal journey is the most comprehensive of them all, since it is those who are most closely related to the Catholic Church in the bond of baptism who have much to share with us from their experiences.

Insofar as these “blood relatives” remain separated from us as regards full eucharistic communion, those things which caused and continue this separation are matters of concern for the Catholic Church as it looks at itself. In some cases, the differences between Catholics and other Christians are more dogmatic; in others, they are more concerned with Church governance, in which the path to synodality plays a critical role. Differences in governance are not merely administrative but go to the very identity of the Church as the body of Christ.

The relationships between the Catholic Church and other Christian communities exist on many levels, from formal, international and national dialogues to local ecumenical and clergy groups.

Perhaps, however, it is the relationships individuals have with each other that play the largest role in discerning the will of the Spirit, who is not absent from these groups. Recognizing that we share “one Lord, one faith (in Jesus Christ), and one baptism” (Eph. 4:5) can be inspiring and enlightening to the extent we take this common element seriously. The path toward a synodal church means that all Catholics are invited to take upon themselves the task of getting to know their neighbors in prayer and worship as well as in dialogue.

Catholics are in some respects closer to some denominations than to others. It is perhaps those closest to us with whom we can “journey together,” gathering from their experience what is most useful in setting out on our own synodal path. Sometimes that experience will point out a direction in which the Catholic Church may travel, but other times its direction may best be discerned by way of contrast. For instance, Pope Francis has stressed that a synod is not a parliament. However, the Episcopal Church in the USA, to take one example, is about to gather in June 2022, for its 80th General Convention, which is explicitly a legislative body. While, historically, synods have indeed legislated, it is not likely that journeying together with those Christian bodies that do govern themselves by “majority rule” will result in the Catholic Church adopting their practices entirely. This does not mean we cannot be instructed and inspired by what they do, however.

The Eastern Orthodox churches stand in a special place in relation to the Catholic Church insofar as we share not only baptism, but the priesthood and all the other sacraments with them as well as a common veneration of Mary, the Most Holy Mother of God.

These churches have an explicitly synodal structure, but it is balanced by the existence of primacy within that structure. Each Orthodox Church is headed by an archbishop or patriarch, but he can never act without the consent of his holy synod, the central governing body of the Church. A patriarch

is never a monarch; he exercises primacy among the bishops and is not considered to have jurisdiction over each and every member of his particular church.

Moreover, unity among the Orthodox churches is achieved by consensus, seen in the communion of each patriarch with the others. As a consequence, church unity is somewhat more fragile to maintain than in a church with a strong central authority. This is currently most visible in the painful rupture of communion between the Churches of Constantinople and Moscow over the recognition of an autocephalous (autonomous) Church in Ukraine.

While the Catholic Church has much to reflect on and learn from in Orthodoxy in particular, it is here that we see the unique primacy of the successor of the Apostle Peter in its most significant capacity: that of ministering to the unity of the entire Christian Church and strengthening each church in its leaders, as Jesus indicated: “Simon, Simon, behold Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed that your own faith may not fail; and once you have turned back, you must strengthen your brothers,” (Luke 22:31-32 NABre).

This ministry of unity, important as it is, has not always been carried out in the ways to which Catholics have become accustomed over the past number of centuries, and this is reflected in the manifold ways that churches and ecclesial communities have found to organize themselves and maintain an inner cohesion. With this in mind, it would be well to consider afresh the invitation prophetically extended by St. John Paul II in his 1995 encyclical, “*Ut Unum Sint*,” that the various Christian communities help him “to find a way of exercising the primacy which, while in no way renouncing what is essential to its mission, is nonetheless open to a new situation,” (“*Ut Unum Sint*” 95, emphasis added).

In short, it is by “looking around” that we can best “look within” in the process of becoming a more synodal church.

Bishop Botean is the head of the Ohio-based Romanian Catholic Eparchy of St. George.

May 31, 2022

Synodality and dialogue: fostering a culture of encounter

By Cardinal-designate Robert W. McElroy, Catholic News Service

The very notion of dialogue has atrophied throughout our American culture, as partisan, racial, economic and ideological divisions have undermined civility and the basic proposition that we can learn from a dialogue with those with whom we disagree. As a consequence, the “social space” for dialogue in our political, social and religious lives has shrunk. We are wary of many forums for dialogue that in the past have been fruitful sources for nurturing solidarity and wisdom. At times we despair of the very possibility for dialogue on key questions that are vital for the future of our society, our nation and our world.

For this reason, three concepts that are central to the synodal journey, which the church has embarked upon this year are especially welcome and provide an opportunity to renew dialogue in the United States.

The first of these is the concept of encounter. Pope Francis has stressed that whenever we enter into dialogue, it should be out of a stance of respect rather than a desire to change the other. Encounter proceeds from the recognition of the grace within the life and reflections of our partners in dialogue. It seeks not to overpower or convince, but rather to discover the wisdom that lies in the heart of the other. Francis models the notion of encounter upon the relationship that Jesus has with those whom he encountered on this earth, and with us. It is filled with love and compassion, and the profound recognition that we are all children of the God who is Father of us all.

A second synodal concept that speaks to the repair of our culture of dialogue in the United States is the concept of listening. We must genuinely listen in dialogue, not merely be preparing our rebuttal. Listening is the respect we owe to others in recognition of their equal dignity. Listening flows from a recognition that we have so much to learn. Listening understands that the grace of knowledge and wisdom are not possessions to be hoarded, but gifts to be found even in the most unexpected places and moments.

A third synodal imperative that can help to heal the corrosion of genuine dialogue within the United States is the call to speak honestly and forthrightly in dialogue. We are asked in every synodal conversation to convey our true thoughts, honestly and clearly, without pretense or distortion. Such honesty breeds the genuine exchange of ideas and beliefs that can be the basis for the building of true solidarity in society and in our personal relationships. This kind of honesty -- which is forthright, but not hurtful; informative but not overpowering, communicative and not stylized -- is essential for dialogue at every level from our family life to our religious communities to our politics and government.

The mandate for the synodal process points to the centrality of mutual understanding as the goal for substantive and meaningful dialogue. But such dialogue is not easy. It calls us to deepen our

conversations with members of our family, and to deepen our compassion as well. The search for mutual understanding calls us to work for unity and solidarity among the religious communities of our country, a goal which we have let slip from our focus in the life of the Church. Perhaps, most importantly of all, we are called to change the tone of dialogue in our nation to banish stridency and division and promote genuine conversation and understanding. The very rawness of our political culture in this moment makes this goal seem almost impossible.

But the Church's view of dialogue does not admit of defeatism or isolation. It seeks to build upon the interreligious dialogues that have so monumentally contributed to understanding during the past sixty years. It attempts to foster a greater recognition of the graces and the injustice that characterize our nation. It emphasizes the many unifying moments and elements of our society and government. And it focuses upon building a solidarity among all people that is rooted in the fundamental recognition that we have all been graced by God who has given us every blessing that we know in this life. It is in witnessing to that giftedness that we can construct a genuine unity built upon the fundamental disposition of gratitude. And in that unity we can find the surest foundation for the construction of a culture of dialogue and encounter.

Cardinal-designate McElroy has been the bishop of San Diego since 2015. On May 29, Pope Francis announced he will create 21 new cardinals Aug. 27, including Bishop McElroy, 68.

June 7, 2022

Truly synodal Church is one that listens, collaborates with all people

By Archbishop Shelton J. Fabre, Catholic News Service

As a child, I can fondly recall the ways that I was able to participate in the life of my church parish of St. Augustine's in New Roads, Louisiana -- assisting as an altar server or volunteering at various youth functions.

As a priest and as a bishop, I have seen so many good people give of themselves selflessly for their parish communities.

When people have a part to play, they become more invested in their particular parish community, and those relationships bear great fruit in the lives of so many. A healthy, mission-driven parish where both clergy and laity are participating is an influential force in witnessing to the beauty and power of the Gospel.

The Second Vatican Council desired to renew the Church's understanding of the integral and complementary role of both the ministerial priesthood as well as the common priesthood of the lay faithful. Consistent with the spirit of the council, one of the desires of Pope Francis in focusing the 2023 Synod of Bishops on the synodal nature of the Church is to continue the reorientation of the clergy and the lay faithful toward a greater sense of participation in the mission of the Church.

One of the themes of the synod is "Authority and Participation," which seeks to foster a greater sense of cooperation and participation from all members of the Church, especially those who are most marginalized. A truly synodal Church is one that listens and collaborates with all people, listening for what the Spirit is saying through them.

In an address given at the 2009 Pastoral Convention of the Diocese of Rome, Pope Benedict XVI stated, "Too many of the baptized do not feel part of the ecclesial community and live on its margins, only coming to parishes in certain circumstances to receive religious services."

Thus encouraged, a shift in mindset is required, moving from viewing the laity as mere collaborators with the clergy to recognizing that the clergy and laity are "co-responsible" for the Church's well-being and action. It is the role of the Church's hierarchy to foster this deeper sense of authority and co-responsibility by the clergy and laity, with due regard for the respective roles of the clergy and the laity. Too often, the participation of the lay faithful is viewed in a narrow and limited way.

Participation in the liturgical expression of the faith, or in select groups in the parish community, are only a few of the ways the many parts of the body of Christ can work together.

It is important to recognize, however, that we cannot be content with simply going through these

exercises at set times, such as a diocesan or worldwide synod. Rather, the invitation is to make this effort with regard to authority and participation an ongoing reality in the Church, a way of life where we always embrace mutually respectful collaboration, listening to one another and to the Holy Spirit and, most importantly, an openness to being impacted or changed by whatever we are called to by the Holy Spirit.

This collaboration is not always easy -- we may not like what we hear, and it may be a difficult process to journey through challenging dynamics.

However, bringing these things to light allows the Spirit of God to work in and through us in a powerful way. It deepens our trust when we follow wherever the Lord is leading us, and God will do great things in the lives and hearts of all people, even if we may not be able to understand them in the moment. It creates an atmosphere of openness that fosters unity within the particular church, not just on a functionary level, but on a deeper, more spiritual level.

It is the goal of the synod process to assist the Church in coming to a deeper understanding and living out of the full cooperation of the clergy and lay faithful in the mission of the Church.

Archbishop Fabre heads the Archdiocese of Louisville, Kentucky.

June 13, 2022

Discerning and deciding

By Bishop Anthony B. Taylor, Catholic News Service

In a synodal style, we make decisions through discernment of what the Holy Spirit is saying through our whole community. This is a slow process requiring patience and deep listening guided by the Holy Spirit. This is a challenge for those of us who are used to a more structured leadership style, especially in our culture which values efficiency and seeks immediate results.

The synodal style invites us to set aside preconceptions about what needs to be done and take time to listen more broadly, aware that the Holy Spirit “blows where he wills” and often speaks to us from unexpected quarters and in unexpected ways.

One of the strengths of the Church in the United States is that given our general culture, we are quite accustomed to lay participation on parish pastoral councils and finance boards, as well as school boards, and on the diocesan level there are the presbyteral council, the diocesan pastoral council, the diocesan finance council and numerous boards.

These are almost entirely comprised of the most active Catholics in the parish and the diocese, and some of their membership is hand-picked by the established leadership, be it the pastor or the bishop or department heads of the diocese. The result is that divergent voices are less likely to be heard, especially when these entities adopt a businesslike approach and focus mainly on the practical matters on the prepared agenda.

Thus, it often happens that we decide without first taking the time to discern. How can we then broaden our approach to decision-making, such that the concerns and perspective and contribution of the larger community are included? And how can we make sure that what we are hearing is in fact the voice of the Holy Spirit?

Each parish and diocese is different, but what we all have in common is that we have people who “fall through the cracks,” perhaps because they don’t feel fed spiritually or maybe the Church was not there for them at a time when they needed it, or they don’t feel like they really belong, perhaps due to some specific circumstance. Most of these people are not on any of our existing councils or boards, so how to hear their voice -- especially if they have a “truth” to share that is painful to hear?

Here we need to be creative. For instance, in my diocese some parishes have a Hispanic council in addition to the parish pastoral council. The pastor serves as a bridge between the two groups and facilitates sharing on a deeper level than would have been possible otherwise. The concerns expressed by the Hispanic council are often quite distinct and might not be heard otherwise. Other places have groups that meet special needs, for instance grief groups and Alzheimer support groups, and these groups have something to contribute and will do so if invited.

But how about establishing an outreach to those who for whatever reason feel marginalized in

the life of the Church? For instance, divorcees and persons experiencing same-sex attraction, and undocumented immigrants, and inmates in our prison system. Hearing their voice may sometimes need to be one on one, especially when dealing with sensitive matters, but they too have a truth to share that we need to take into account in our discernment.

And then we need to take everything we are hearing to prayer, asking the Holy Spirit to help us discern well what he wishes to reveal to us. In this respect, the National Eucharistic Revival that we will be undertaking the next three years is providential, especially its promotion of eucharistic adoration, because that time of patient, silent listening in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament is an especially fruitful time for discernment. Thoughts come together and “gel,” often in unexpected ways.

And sometimes pastoral situations sort themselves out in the presence of the Lord in ways that would not have been possible if we had not first spent time listening patiently to what the Holy Spirit is saying across a broader range of voices than those who are customarily at the table in our decision-making process.

Bishop Taylor heads the Diocese of Little Rock, Arkansas.

June 21, 2022

Sharing responsibility for our common mission

By Bishop Edward C. Malesic, Catholic News Service

What is our common mission as baptized Catholic Christians? It is to “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Mt 28:19-20). In his great commission at the end of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus asks all of us to be missionary disciples.

Sometimes we Catholics mistakenly separate discipleship from missionary activity. We can think that being a faithful Catholic is to follow Jesus, to participate in the sacramental life of the Church, to keep his commandments, to study his Word, and to strive for personal holiness, but that missionary activity should be left to the formally trained experts like priests, religious and lay ecclesial ministers. In “The Joy of the Gospel” (“*Evangelii Gaudium*”), Pope Francis corrects this sort of thinking. He writes:

“Every Christian is challenged, here and now, to be actively engaged in evangelization; indeed, anyone who has truly experienced God’s saving love does not need much time or lengthy training to go out and proclaim that love. Every Christian is a missionary disciple to the extent that he or she has encountered the love of God in Jesus Christ; we no longer say we that we are ‘disciples’ and ‘missionaries,’ but rather that we are always ‘missionary disciples.’” (EG, 120)

The Holy Father’s message is simple. Disciples beget disciples. At the end of every Mass, after we have acknowledged our sins, listened to God’s word, and feasted on the body and blood of Jesus, we are sent out into the world as missionary disciples -- all of the baptized are sent. The priest or deacon doesn’t say only to a select few, “Go and announce the Gospel of the Lord” or only to the clergy and religious, “Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life”; no, he says it to everyone.

Just as the work of the priest is to consecrate the bread and wine at Mass, so too is it the work of every baptized Christian at the end of every Mass to go and consecrate the world to Christ wherever they live and move and have their being. A synodal Church is one in which all the members become salt, light and leaven, walking together to bring Jesus outside the walls of our Church buildings. Here’s how the Second Vatican Council explains this foundational call:

“The laity, by their very vocation, seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God. They live in the world, that is, in each and in all of the secular professions and occupations. They live in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life, from which the very web of their existence is woven. They are called there by God that by exercising their proper function and led by the spirit of the Gospel they may work for the sanctification of the world from within as a leaven. In this way they may make Christ known to others, especially by the testimony of a life resplendent in faith, hope and charity.” (“*Lumen Gentium*,” 31)

The Synod on Synodality is calling us as a Church to evaluate how we are acting as missionary disciples. How do we as individuals assist the mission of the Church to make Jesus more accessible to others?

We can ask some questions of ourselves. Do I really believe that I have a responsibility in bringing him into the world in which we live, work, play and study? Have I told the story of how, where and when I have encountered the Risen Lord and shared my witness of the way Jesus has changed my lives? Do I believe that I have been sent into the world by Jesus to transform it by his Gospel of eternal life and love? Have I truly answered his call to be a missionary disciple?

Pope Francis writes, “The Church herself is a missionary disciple; she needs to grow in her interpretation of the revealed word and in her understanding of truth.” (EG, 40) May our participation in the synodal process encourage great growth and maturity in all of her members, so that we can serve the world with joy as believers sent out with a life-giving message. As men and women gifted with the sevenfold gifts of the Holy Spirit in the sacrament of confirmation, let us all be bold witnesses of Jesus Christ.

Bishop Malesic has headed the Diocese of Cleveland since 2020.

June 23, 2022

'Forming Ourselves in Synodality'

By Bishop Thomas R. Zinkula, Catholic News Service

"Forming Ourselves in Synodality" is the 10th and final thematic nucleus presented in the preparatory document and the "vademecum." The prior thematic nuclei, such as companions on the journey, listening, celebration and ecumenism, refer to concrete experiences.

These experiences are fertile ground for a reflection on how we might form ourselves in synodality. We do not begin with the abstract notion of synodality and then seek to implement it. Rather, we begin as members of living faith communities and, from this experiential starting point, discern how we might become ever more faithful to the calling of the Holy Spirit.

The "vademecum" uses the following language when it considers "Forming Ourselves in Synodality": "Synodality entails receptivity to change, formation, and ongoing learning. How does our church community form people to be more capable of 'walking together,' listening to one another, participating in mission and engaging in dialogue? What formation is offered to foster discernment and the exercise of authority in a synodal way?"

This reflection will focus on the first sentence: "Synodality entails receptivity to change, formation and ongoing learning."

"Change." Openness to the possibility of change, or conversion, begins in the context of relationships. We recognize the possibility of change, not as something extrinsic or superimposed, but as an invitation to personal and communal fulfillment. We hear and respond to the call, "Follow me." Change, both personal and institutional, involves a response to a summons.

We find ourselves more receptive to change, personally and institutionally, if we first have genuinely and humbly listened to the experience of others. Receptivity to the experience of others as real and meaningful, and not as artificial or less valuable than our own experience, is the precondition for receptivity to change in ourselves. We must, as Pope Francis encourages us, "remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other" in the "art of accompaniment" ("Evangelii Gaudium," 169).

"Formation." We are all, always, being formed into the people we are becoming. Formation comes by way of action. It also comes by way of prayer. Both are formative. Moreover, formation occurs in the context of community, and yet, it is us and the Holy Spirit who are the principal agents of our formation ("Co-workers in the Vineyard of the Lord," 52).

We must be hungry for formation. The synod is a historic opportunity for the formation of individuals, local parishes, and the Church writ large precisely because of the experience itself. It calls us to listen to one another as we journey together with affection and care, like the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Furthermore, we will be formed in the spirit of synodality in the degree to which we engage in reflection upon our experience of the synod. We should not simply "do the synod" and then forget the

disciplines it called us to. Rather, we should let this experience inform our future activities. This will be occasioned by a patient discernment marked by a desire to accompany, to listen, to know, to love and to give our lives over to Christ.

“Ongoing learning.” In our culture, we run the risk of reducing the process of learning to dwelling in the realm of ideas. Ongoing learning is not simply memorizing facts about Church history or doctrine, as important as that may be. These facts, however, are not the whole picture. They are merely elements of a foundation. The life of faith is an open and dynamic relationship with a God who calls us to an ever newer life, an ever wider horizon of awareness of how we are to follow the most basic and essential of commands: “Love one another as I have loved you.”

The synod calls us to a learning rooted in openness to new experiences and discernment. This is the kind of learning Pope Francis called us to in his encyclical on caring for creation when he wrote: “Our goal is not to amass information or to satisfy curiosity, but rather to become painfully aware, to dare to turn what is happening to the world into our own personal suffering and thus to discover what each of us can do about it” (“Laudato Si’,” 19). Francis has given us a distinctly Catholic and synodal environmental ethic, one which deepens our attentiveness to lived experience and our relationship with God through creation. This is the kind of ongoing learning to which the synod calls us.

In closing, “Forming Ourselves in Synodality” will directly enhance the Church’s mission of evangelization. The evangelizing mission of the Church does not take place in a vacuum. It takes place in a context and a culture. Forming ourselves in synodality will equip us to better face the challenges of our time, to respond to the Spirit’s promptings in our hearts, and to live out this essential mission of the Church, a mission which seeks a unique expression in the complexity of the 21st century.

Bishop Zinkula has headed the Diocese of Davenport, Iowa, since 2017.

June 27, 2022

The synod: a transformative process

By Xavière Missionary Sister Nathalie Becquart, Catholic News Service

Recently, the synod coordinator for a U.S. diocese told me: “With our diocesan synodal team, we have organized listening sessions in all our parishes according to the methodology described in the ‘vademeccum.’ We also did it in many other places, like Catholic schools, shelters for migrants and refugees, groups of single mothers, etc. It is really transforming the people and the diocese. Now we feel that we have to continue this process and focus on discernment.”

In many reports, we have begun to receive at the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, we can read these kind of comments coming from a U.S. parish: “Participants were grateful for the opportunity to share their joys, hopes, concerns and recommendations in response to building a better church. The sessions were spirit-filled, and conversations were animated, reflective, energetic and oftentimes were characterized by strong emotions.”

It is striking to hear from so many parts of the world where people had the opportunity to take part in a true synodal consultation like this, allowing them to pray together, to listen to each other, to dialogue on the fundamental question of the synod and the 10 themes, that they experience joy.

Many express gratitude. “It is the first time the Church is asking (for) my voice and it makes me realize that we are the Church, not only the priests and the bishops.”

Many also witness that experiencing this type of mutual listening, they understand that the change in style of being Church, even before being a doctrinal or structural matter, is a personal conversion to which each and every baptized person is called.

The synod is already bearing fruits and we can contemplate how the Holy Spirit is leading the Church to a synodal conversion at the grassroots in local churches embracing synodality with creativity.

Of course, it is not an easy path, as it is a call for change that naturally gives rise to fears and resistance. Finding ways to truly walk together as the people of God with and through our differences of vocations, positions, ages and gender is a challenge. The Catholic Church is re-learning synodality that was the style of the early Church as a fruit of the Second Vatican Council. But it is an open path, not written in advance.

The 2021-2023 synodal path is a learning process, a paschal journey for a “new birth,” a missionary renewal to enter into a new vision of the Church that is a discerning Church, a relational Church, an inclusive Church.

In a nutshell, it’s a Church on the move, understanding herself as a missionary communion reflecting the mystery of the Trinity -- the mystery of the Trinity in history on the road of humanity today.

“Therefore, making a Synod on Synodality does not mean doing it on a theme like so many others, but on the deeper identity of the Church as communion and mission that becomes concrete, historically incisive when it is participated by all. The Church is such, in fact, only when it is carried on its shoulders by all and shared in its heart by all, at the service of its brothers and sisters, especially beginning with the last, the discarded and the existential and spiritual peripheries of our time.” -- Msgr. Piero Coda, member of the Theological Commission of the Synod 2021-2023.

As many theologians expressed it after the opening of the synod in October 2021, we are living “the most important ecclesial event after the Second Vatican Council.” In fact, this is the first time in 2,000 years of Church history that a synod is called to involve the entire people of God as written in the first sentence of the preparatory document: “The Church of God is convoked in Synod.” So everyone is called to participate, to give his or her voice, especially the poor, those from the margins, the voiceless.

The diocesan phase of the synod is almost over, but the conversion to synodality has no end. Therefore, we are invited to continue this crucial journey for the future of the church and the future of a world longing for peace, reconciliation and unity. All the baptized have a role to play for promoting and implementing synodality at all levels of the Church.

And if we believe that “synodality is the way of being the Church today according to the will of God, in a dynamic of discerning and listening together to the voice of the Holy Spirit,” as stated by Pope Francis, we can be confident that we will receive the grace to answer this call of God to become a synodal Church.

Sister Becquart is the undersecretary of the Synod of Bishops at the Vatican.



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