

Pastor's Perspective Series

Pope Francis and the Synod of Bishops on "Synodality in the Church"

October 16, 2022

"Synod" is an ancient term for a gathering of Church leaders, to listen to one another, share honestly their insights on the matters at hand, and to come to common decisions and actions for the future unity of the Church as a whole. Synods could be small or large, gathering leaders and advisors from a defined geographical area. After many years without many such synods, the Second Vatican Council renewed the Catholic Church's commitment to the importance of synods, mandating the creation of a "Synod of Bishops" to meet on a regular basis, in order to look at some major aspect of Church, usually proposed by the Pope. Over the last 55 years the Synod of Bishops have met many times, often with the Pope issuing an Apostolic Exhortation afterwards to capture the insights gained from the Synod. Pope Francis has made no secret of the fact that he considers the "synodal way" to be one of the most important fruits of the Second Vatican Council that has not yet been fully realized in the life of the Church. Too often the Synod of Bishops devolved into trying to figure out "what did the Pope want them to say?" rather than a fully honest, open sharing and dialogue.

To help the Church embrace this synodal way of leadership Pope Francis asked that all the bishops of the world hold listening sessions with the people of their dioceses, asking them to discern together the successes and challenges of living as joyful missionary disciples in today's world, prior to the upcoming 2023 Synod of Bishops gathering. Because we held a diocesan Synod in Detroit in 2016, which included many such listening sessions, Archbishop Vigneron decided not to hold new listening sessions but to submit what we did back then. Almost all the other bishops of the United States did hold listening sessions and submitted the results of their experience to a committee, headed up by the former auxiliary bishop of Detroit, Bishop Daniel Flores, now head of the Brownsville, Texas diocese. Over 700,000 people participated in the listening sessions and the summary of the most prominent themes that emerged will now be submitted to Rome. Over the next few weeks, I would like to highlight some of those themes. At first I was skeptical of the process, thinking that bishops would put in only what they wanted to hear. But in reading the summary document that the United States bishops have prepared, I am more encouraged. I have placed a link on our website under "News Briefs," if you would like to read the full document yourself.

October 30, 2022

I have previously mentioned a bit about this upcoming Synod and that the U.S. Bishops have put together a summary of the results of their listening sessions in preparation for that Synod. It can be read online at usccb.org/synod. I have also put a link to it on our stregis.org website under "News Briefs." Interestingly, Pope Francis recently announced that he will hold the Synod in 2023 as planned, but then there will be a year of continued reflection after the Synod and a further gathering in 2024 to finalize the results of the Synod, extending the process for an extra year. It is very clear that Pope Francis feels that the future shape of the Church depends on how fully it can embrace a more truly communally discerning structure at all levels. He sees this as one of the key insights of the Second Vatican Council, which was held sixty years ago. Only if we (the Church at all levels) find a way to listen to how God's grace is at work in all of us, even those who are not necessarily living the way we would like, will we be able to truly bring the living "good news" (gospel) of Jesus to the world today. Too often we act as though the Church is this ancient structure, unable to change in any significant way. But what if the first two

thousand years of our Church's history is just our infancy? Pope Francis is inviting us to take the long view.

The U.S. Bishops "National Synthesis" is divided into five parts: "Introduction, Enduring Wounds, Enhancing Communion and Participation, Ongoing Formation for Mission, and Engaging Discernment". I found it striking that the Bishops recognized the need to name the wounds present in our Church right off the bat. So often the Church is defensive and either tries to hide its failings or chalk them up to a "few bad actors" or even blame "the culture" for all the problems. Not with this summary. They listened and heard the deep wounds that are present in the Church. Moreover, the summary states that many of these wounds *"have been inflicted not only by individual members of the Church but often by the institution."* In other words, the whole Church needs to take an honest look at itself and ways it has failed the People of God and failed in its mission to serve the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The most prominent wound continues to be the hurt and pain caused by the sexual abuse of minors and the way the Church hierarchy for so long tried to hide that reality. This in turn frays the relationship between people and priest, priest and bishop, Church and civil society: *"The sin and crime of sexual abuse has eroded not only trust in the hierarchy and the moral integrity of the Church, but also created a culture of fear that keeps people from entering into relationship with one another and thus from experiencing the sense of belonging and connectedness for which they yearn."* I can remember vividly the weekend in 2002 when a number of priests were removed from ministry in the Archdiocese, named publicly, and listed as having credible allegations of sexual abuse of a minor directed toward them. Not only was the number shocking (over twenty on that day), I knew several of them well and would have sworn there was no way they would have done such a thing. And I was wrong. In the months and years following, as people came forward to report past abuse and the diocese released the names of both diocesan and religious order priests who served in the Archdiocese of Detroit at any time from 1950 to the present and who had a credible allegation of abuse directed against them, the numbers climbed to over 80 (approximately 1 of every 40 priests). Because religious orders are independent of the diocese, the Archdiocese lists the names of these religious order priests but is not privy to what happened to them. Of the 47 who were Archdiocesan priests, 22 have died, 7 have been dismissed from the clerical state (so-called "laicized"), and 14 have been permanently removed from public ministry. Names and statistics can be accessed on the aod.org website under protect.aod.org/. The latter website also has resources for how to report abuse to both the Church and to civil authorities or to request assistance if someone was a victim of clerical abuse.

A second significant but much more immediate wound has been the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on parish communities. As one region summarized, the pandemic *"has led to the fraying of our communities in some ways, accelerating a trend towards disengagement and intensifying the isolation and loneliness of many, youth, and the elderly in particular. A large number of the faithful have not yet returned to worship."* Each year all the parishes of the Archdiocese take what is called an "October count" of the number of worshippers at all the weekend Masses on two consecutive weekends in the fall. [Ours is being done this weekend and next.] This allows for an interesting (though a bit rough and limited) historical comparison over the years. At St. Regis, very clearly the October count went significantly down in 2020, had a small uptick in 2021 and seems to be at about the same level for 2022, roughly 60% of the numbers at Mass in person as there were prior to the pandemic. This hurts not just the life and energy of the Worship, it contributes to a lethargy in terms of making Sunday Eucharist central to a family's life, reduces active commitment to volunteer ministries, makes more tenuous one's identification as committed to the parish, and reduces the numbers who are actively supporting the parish financially.

The third wound mentioned by the National Summary was the deep divisions experienced within the Church that reflect the polarization within the culture around us. Some regions more than others mention the pre-Vatican II Latin liturgy versus the current updated liturgy as an important divisive wound (though very few actually celebrate the old form), and others point to the way that cultural divisions get publicly played out among the U.S. bishops themselves, even to the point where some seem to be antagonistic to Pope Francis. A number of regions pointed out how scandalous it is when such bishops are perceived to not be in unity with the Pope.

The final significant wound that the report mentions is the feeling of “marginalization” among many members of the Church in regard to acceptance by or full participation in the Church. This in turn intensifies the feeling among a number of Catholics, especially the youth, that the Church is hypocritical in terms of failing to act in justice within its own communities. We preach a good game but fall far short in practice. The summary divides those experiencing marginalization into two broad groups. I think the report is worth quoting more fully here: *“The first includes those marginalized who are made vulnerable by their lack of social and/or economic power, such as immigrant communities; ethnic minorities; those who are undocumented; the unborn and their mothers; people who are experiencing poverty, homelessness, or incarceration; those people who have disabilities or mental health issues; and people suffering from various addictions. Included also in this group are women, whose voices are frequently marginalized in the decision-making processes of the Church... The second group includes those who are marginalized because circumstances in their own lives are experienced as impediments to full participation in the life of the Church. Among these are members of the LGBTQ+ community, persons who have been divorced or those who have remarried without a declaration of nullity, as well as individuals who have civilly married but who never married in the Church.”*

Importantly, the last “wound” was reported in all the Regional Syntheses (16 in total), and therefore part of the experience throughout the country, not just in certain areas. Clearly there is no easy fix to mending such wounds, but it is also clear that we have to find a way forward that opens up decision-making, respects differences, and engages those who have become disconnected from the Church. These are the challenges the next three sections of the National Summary address.

November 6, 2022

Last week I summarized the U.S. Bishops’ chapter on “Enduring Wounds,” which is part of their response to the Vatican in preparation for the Synod. But I did not say much about the last “wound”—the marginalization so many people feel when dealing with the Church—other than quoting the document. The summary noted that all sixteen regions made mention of this marginalization, and so it is something that all of us should be aware of. Some who feel marginalized lack the social and/or economic power to feel fully part of the Church’s life and leadership. This includes immigrants, ethnic minorities, the homeless, those in prison, as well as those who are poor. In particular, the report notes how many women feel that their voice is insufficiently heard in the Church, especially in leadership.

Because the Church, at least in the foreseeable future, will not be opening up ordination to the priesthood to women, it becomes even more important to clearly separate those leadership positions which require ordained leadership and those that have no essential connection to ordination. Pope Francis recently did just that for a number of Vatican positions, making it possible for lay men and women to be in very significant leadership positions. In the past the Church defaulted to ordained men for all such positions and even balked at allowing lay people to have direct authority over an ordained

co-worker. Much of that was due to inertia—it is so hard to move an institution that is set in place—but also because it is much easier to control those in leadership if they are ordained. Bring in lay people and you have to actually follow all labor laws, can no longer simply dismiss a person from their position, and so forth.

Pope Francis also commissioned a task force to look at the question of women deacons from a historical perspective. The commission was of two minds. One group believed the historical evidence is quite clear that in the early centuries some women were ordained as deacons, using the same or similar sacramental rituals for the ordination, and so it makes no sense to say women cannot be ordained deacons. The other group insisted that the historical evidence only pointed to women in a special deaconess role, mostly to assist with women who were to be baptized, and such women were not seen as ordained in the same way male deacons were. You can guess my own historical judgment—pretty clear to me that the Church did in the past, and certainly could now or in the future, ordain women as deacons. But even if that step is not taken, why couldn't women be named cardinals? A cardinal is a papal-appointed position. Most are bishops, a few over the years have been priests, some have been lay men prior to being appointed cardinal, but there is nothing inherent in the position that would make it necessary to be ordained. The role of a cardinal is to advise the pope on matters pertaining to the unity and good of the universal Church, and, if under 80 years of age, be one of the electors should a Pope die or resign. Wouldn't it be good to have some wise women do that advising and electing as well as men? Would there be a lot of awkwardness and negative feedback in instituting such a change? Yes, but so what.

After expressing the wounds, the U.S. Bishops' Summary then turns to several areas of "hope," ways that people hope the Church can build on what it is already doing in order to become even better at serving the mission of Jesus Christ. For example, one such hope is that of "Enhancing Communion and Participation." This chapter points out that there was nearly universal agreement on the centrality of the Eucharist in the lives of Church members, even if there were lots of differences about how to make it more engaging (better preaching, better singing, more Latin, less Latin, etc.). Moreover nearly all the regions expressed the desire for and a belief that the Church can be "more welcoming." As one region put it (quoted in the summary): *"The Church seems to prioritize doctrine over people, rules, and regulations over lived reality. People want the Church to be a home for the wounded and broken, not an institution for the perfect. They want the Church to meet people where they are, wherever they are, and walk with them rather than judging them; to build real relationships through care and authenticity, not superiority."*

Pointedly, the groups quite often mentioned in this regard were those who feel the Church condemns them or other family members with its teaching (most especially our teaching on marriage, divorce, and sexuality). Regions expressed a desire for the Church to find a way to accompany such persons and their families in an authentic way. Accompanying does not mean the Church will change its teaching. But it does mean the Church needs to listen to the experiences of those who feel excluded and take seriously how they are experiencing the grace of God in their lives, even if their lived experiences go contrary to Church teaching.

Finally, to enhance communion and participation the Summary talks about the need to take seriously the experiences of those who feel excluded not because of Church teaching issues but because of how the Church is too often experienced as closed or unwelcoming to them. In this regard the Summary mentions racial and ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, and most especially the youth in our parishes. In that regard I loved what one region said, after listening to the youth and young adults who

participated in the listening sessions in that region. Do not call us, they said, “the future of the Church.” Rather, includes us now in ministries, on councils and other leadership groups. That is a wonderful insight. In many areas of the world, this would not be an issue, because the majority of Church members are under forty years of age. In the U.S. and Europe, however, where so much is structured around older Catholics (and, to be honest, the support of older Catholics makes possible the existence of current structures), we have to stop seeing youth as a problem area to be solved and let them lead us and surprise us with the ways they want to get involved and shape the Church.

We are at a crisis point in the Church—we can choose to maintain a tight hold on customs that are not essential to our identity, thereby becoming a much smaller, more uniform, more closed-in Church, or we can embrace the “open windows” model, which Pope John XXIII began with the Second Vatican Council and find ways to become a more youthful, energetic Church, open to the future. I think Pope Francis sees the upcoming Synod as a step in that direction. Next time, another area of hope: lifelong formation as disciples.

November 20

As mentioned in previous bulletin articles, over 700,000 Catholics in the United States participated in one or more “listening/discussion” sessions related to the upcoming Synod of Bishops in Rome. Pope Francis asked for as wide a consultation as possible and he got it! The challenge is how to synthesize all that into a working document for the bishops. The first step was to take all the diocesan and local feedback and turn it into a national synthesis. The next steps are to take the national ones and produce continental/large regional syntheses, and then finally a global summary of what were the most prominent questions, concerns and ideas overall. I have been going through the national summary from the U.S. Bishops’ listening sessions. After being pretty candid about the “Enduring Wounds” in the Church, the remainder of the document focused on what they heard as a vision of hope and they grouped these under three headings: “Enhancing Communion and Participation,” “Ongoing Formation for Mission,” and “Engaging Discernment.” My article from November 6 (available online) looked at the first grouping. Here I want to touch on the second and conclude next week looking at the third.

The need for ongoing formation is rooted in the clear understanding that the work of evangelization has barely begun, and that for such evangelization to be effective it must engage not just the clergy but all of us. This means that a commitment to ongoing, life-long formation is one of the key hopes expressed. It needs to be rooted, the document notes, in a personal encounter or relationship with the risen Jesus, engage people with study of and faith sharing of the Scriptures and our Tradition, helping all understand how to be attentive to the working of the Holy Spirit. The document then notes the importance of families being intentional about such formation, willing to choose spiritual support and growth over other activities, making such formation more important to their lives. In turn, the document also expresses the hope that clergy would be trained to do better at translating the Scriptures to practical action, not just focusing on dogmatic teaching, but balancing that with words of empathy and compassion for those who are struggling and helping the laity see their role in decision-making.

Reading that portion of the document, I could not help but be struck by how much the Archdiocese of Detroit has done, since its own Synod of 2016, to focus precisely on this area. The model of “Encounter (Jesus), Grow (in Discipleship with Jesus), and Witness (to the Gospel of Jesus Christ) has permeated nearly everything the diocese does under the rubric “Unleash the Gospel.” If I had to evaluate where we have fallen a bit short in our diocese, it would be in helping seminarians understand their pastoral role and not just their teaching/dogmatic role. Secondly, it would be in encouraging a bit more creativity and

compassion in accompany people who find themselves out of sync with the Church's teaching. There is a tendency too often to think that we are fulfilling our responsibility by condemning something or other. Here is where Pope Francis has been so wonderfully refreshing. He constantly asks the Church, especially those in leadership, what the Holy Spirit is inviting us to do to compassionately walk with such people, not simply point out their failings. He is always reminding us that we too easily fall into the mode of the leaders that the New Testament gospels call the Pharisees.

The strengthening of ongoing formation was tied especially to the areas of the social mission of the Church, use of communications, and the co-responsibility of the laity for the Church. The more laity are formed for mission, the more they will take responsibility for the ongoing vitality of the Church and so clergy can let go of some of the ways we too tightly hold onto power, which has led to a type of clericalism that has not been good for the Church. This can be seen in the area of transparency about finances, priest discipline and abuse issues, about how key decisions in the diocese are made. Too often it looks like it is the prerogative of just the bishop or pastor and so does not reflect the whole Church. That hope for greater transparency was also tied to both an appreciation for and a hope that we would better use means of social communication both within the Church and in presenting the Church's wisdom to the world. Many noted that some of the most prominent so-called Catholic media sites seemed to focus on hot button topics that stirred up division more than a unity about the Church's wisdom.

Again, when reading this section, I was struck by how much our Archdiocese has focused on the area of communication. We have print media like *Unleash the Gospel* magazine, a Catholic News general email, a more ministry-focused weekly email, and various emails from departments of the Archdiocese. At the parish we have tried to incorporate email communication into our repertoire, along with this bulletin, the website, postcard reminders and an occasional parish mailing, a Facebook page for the parish and school, and more. The challenge is how to balance all this out. It becomes too easy on the sending side to overdo the communications or, on the receiving side, to ignore the communications if they are too numerous. How far do you go? Twitter? Instagram? Tik-Tok? Other media platforms? With all of this one of the key concerns expressed in the U.S. Bishops' Summary comes to the fore: how can the consumer (us) know which sites to trust?

December 4, 2022

The final section of the "National Synthesis," which the U.S. Bishops are sending to the Vatican in preparation for the 2023 worldwide Synod is titled "Engaging Discernment." Here is how the final document describes the practice of discernment: *"Discernment is a practice of the Church carried on in a spirit of prayer, meditation, and ongoing dialogue. The Spirit is the principal agent of discernment and leads us together to gaze upon the face of Christ in one another. Local, attentive listening to one another within and outside of the Church; participation, honesty, and realism; and a continued willingness to learn accompany discernment."* In the over 30,000 "Listening Session" involving more than 700,000 people, the bishops were surprised at how well this process of discernment went, given all the cultural divides and social turmoil that is current in our country. In fact, the document says: *"The rediscovery of listening as a basic posture of a Church called to ongoing conversion is one of the most valuable gifts of the synodal experience in the United States."*

That experience of communal listening and discernment is precisely the reason that Pope Francis focused on this theme of "Synodality." The bishops were able to listen even to those who felt wounded by the Church or who find themselves alienated from Church practice due to issues of marriage and

sexuality and realize that the Spirit of God is capable of bringing all these voices into fruitful conversation. That is a learning experience for so many of them. As bishops, they can feel the pressure of preserving the doctrine of the Church as the most important duty, rather than recognizing that such doctrine, as Pope Francis said early in his pontificate, must serve the mission of the living Christ: *“Doctrines are not a closed, private system deprived of dynamics able to raise questions and doubts. On the contrary, Christian doctrine has a face, a body, flesh: He is called Jesus Christ and it is his life that is offered from generation to generation to all men and in all places.”*

Several times Pope Francis has challenged bishops and theologians to quit thinking in terms of complete or closed systems and to attend to the living reality of the Church as it is experienced today, especially on the fringes, among the poorest and most vulnerable. These listening sessions helped a number of bishops experience the truth of those insights. Also, especially when they are the ordinary (head) of the diocese, bishops tend to remove themselves from such grass-roots listening. Instead, they can begin to rely on a few chosen people to offer the “wisdom” of the people to them. Unfortunately, too often such select groups, though composed of very dedicated and committed people, can quite easily miss the voice of the most humble, less powerful in a diocese.

If one reads the Pope’s comments on this upcoming Synod and especially his most recent encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, it is clear that this willingness to listen respectfully together, in honesty, with all participating, is at the heart of how Pope Francis believes the Church must change, if it is to serve the mission of Jesus Christ at this point in history. He finds the fundamentals of such an understanding not only in Scripture and the ancient Church practice of synodality but especially in the experience and documents of the Second Vatican Council. That Council cautiously but clearly opened up a more communal understanding of the Church. What before had been imaged more like a pyramid with the Pope at the top, surrounded by the cardinals and bishops, then clergy and religious, then the laity at the bottom, could no longer be imaged in that way, after the Second Vatican Council. Instead, the Church is first imaged as the whole People of God, with every baptized member having the same dignity and sharing in Christ’s priestly, prophetic, and kingly ministry, not just the ordained. The role of hierarchy, then, is not to be the Church but to serve the Church in holiness, allowing the charisms of the Holy Spirit present in all the people of God to flourish in their own way. It is not up to the hierarchy to decide who has such charisms. Rather, it is their role to help all charisms serve the unity of the Church and the salvation of the world.

The “National Synthesis” ends with a reflection on how gratitude was so evident in the midst of the listening sessions and needs to be at the heart of discernment. Gratitude opens us to hearing God’s voice and seeing God’s face at work in others more clearly. This “synodal path” has a long way to go before most Catholics are comfortable with the idea that not everything has to be cut and dried, in or out, fully embraced or condemned. We can find elements of grace at work even in those who seem to be living a life different from the Gospel, and we can find elements of sin and need for redemption in ourselves, even if we are trying to be faithful disciples. But if we follow a “synodal path,” sharing honestly, listening without judgement, and prayerfully reflection, the Holy Spirit will lead us to being the Church the world needs and God desires.

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