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TO THE UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS
PLENARY ASSEMBLY
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My dear Brothers,

I greet you in the name of Pope Francis, assuring you of his closeness, fraternal support and prayers as you gather for this Plenary Assembly. I thank His Excellency Timothy Broglio, Archbishop for the Military Services and President of the USCCB, Fr. Michael Fuller, and the staff of the General Secretariat for the invitation to speak to you.

This fall, it will be two years since Pope Francis, listening to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, opened the synodal path to the whole Church and asked us to begin a renewed journey, alongside Jesus, with our people. The purpose of walking this synodal path is to make our evangelization more effective in the context of the precise challenges that we face today. As the Holy Father said in his homily to open the Synod, this journey must be walked in the threefold style of Jesus when he met the rich man (cf. *Mark* 10:17): we must *encounter* the Lord and one another, *listen* to people’s questions and to the religious and existential concerns that lie behind them, and *discern* with them how we must change in order to live a more abundant life.¹ If we have followed the Pope’s lead, then after two years, we should already know some answers to the questions that you are accustomed to hearing from me: *Where are we?* and *Where are we going?*

Have we discovered answers to those questions? Do we know what are the true needs of our people? Through our encounters with others, how have we been changed? What have we discerned? What old ways need to be abandoned, and what new ways must we adopt in going forward? Are we prepared to give our people the insights we have gained? As the General Assembly of the Synod takes place in Rome this fall and next, are we ready to offer these insights to the universal Church?

It may be that we are still struggling to understand synodality. Perhaps it has been hard for us to embody this “style of God.” Perhaps “the adventure of this

¹ Pope Francis, Homily at Holy Mass Opening the Synodal Path (October 10, 2021).

journey” has made us a bit “fearful of the unknown.”² As Church leaders, we are very good at organizing programs and carrying out action plans. And to be sure, such organization has produced many positive results. But because the synodal path is less about a “program” and more about *a way of being Church*, it can be a challenge to us. An image comes to mind which may help illustrate this challenge, and the change of mindset that is required of us.

In these days of “GPS” technology, when we ask, *How do we get to where we’re going?* we are accustomed to relying on turn-by-turn directions produced by an algorithm. We are told where we are, precisely how far we have to go, and where to turn. But my brothers, our spiritual navigation as Church leaders cannot be based on a computer program. It is less like GPS and more like a compass. The compass points to where “north” is. You know the direction you need to take to arrive at your destination; but discerning how to get there requires close attention to your immediate surroundings, which involves patient and careful observation. So too, we as Church know the direction we are going: Jesus Christ and his Kingdom are the “true north”. But to find the proper path, we have to immerse ourselves in the reality of our people and listen carefully to the questions and concerns of their hearts. This is the synodal path; this is the incarnational way of Jesus.

With this image in mind, I would like to offer three guidelines, which I hope will help us understand the synodal style that Jesus has modeled for us, and which the Holy Father is calling us to adopt. The first two guidelines employ actions which, as the Pope has explained, are necessary for synodal discernment: namely, *encountering* and *listening*. The third guideline suggests how our Eucharistic revival can contribute to a more synodal evangelization.

Encountering in order to Discover

First, we must engage our mission of evangelizing through what I have called a “hermeneutic of discovery.”³ Let me introduce this point by asking the question: *Is our mission as pastoral leaders to “fill the churches”?* Certainly we all want more people to participate in the Church’s worship. But in order to encourage this, the first step of a missionary Church is to “go out”: to enter those places which are outside our churches and beyond our ecclesial structures. Where Christ is not already known and loved, we must put him there by our own presence!

² *Ibid.*

³ Cf. Archbishop Christophe Pierre, Bergoglio Lecture, “Pope Francis: Origins and Destination – Leading the Synodal Journey”, Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, CT (February 8, 2023): nuntiususa.comcastbiz.net/pdf/homelies/20230208TheLeadershipofPopeFrancis.pdf, pp. 2-3.

The Church is a dynamic reality; it is always “on the move”! Like Christ himself, we must go on mission into the world with an openness to *discovering what is actually there* – not merely imposing what we already know. This requires close proximity with the one we are encountering. We must *move toward*, and *engage* people in the existential “places” where they are living. Instead of being merely an observer, a commentator, and a judge – safely removed from what we are judging – we must become an explorer, a missionary. Only in this way do we gain real *knowledge*, in that deeper sense which includes intuition and personal experience instead of just sterile information.⁴ This is how God has chosen to know us: by becoming one with us. It is how we must encounter those whom we are called to serve.

Extending beyond our current structures and usual ways of doing things, the Kingdom will spread “by contact, by physical presence, not by the propaganda of ideologies.”⁵ When we engage with people’s real experiences – as “messy” as that reality may be – we give them hope because they realize that Christ is willing to be with them no matter where they are on their journey. If they “come to church” to encounter Christ, it will be because Christ has first come to them. Let us, therefore, be ambassadors for Christ (cf. 2 *Cor* 5:20)!

Listening with the Goal of Uniting

This leads naturally to the second guideline I would like to offer: *listening with the goal of uniting*. My brothers, we know that the devil is one who wants to create division.⁶ It is exasperating enough to see how divided our political society is, and how much these divisions impede progress and harm those who are already most vulnerable to poverty and suffering. But then, to see how the same kind of polarization infects us within the Church! I am reminded of the words that St. Paul spoke to the early Church when its leaders were at odds with one another:

“For you were called for freedom, brothers. But do not use this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh; rather, serve one another through love. For the whole law is fulfilled in one statement, namely, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ But if you go on biting and devouring one another, beware that you are not consumed by one another (*Gal* 5:13-15).”

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁶ Pope Francis, *Angelus* Address for the First Sunday of Lent (February 26, 2023).

To overcome polarization, we must learn to listen to one another, work together, and walk together *cum Petro et sub Petro*. Synodality, we should trust by now, is not a new “program”; nor is it a disguise for a plan to change Church doctrine. It is *a way of being Church* that allows us to discern the path on which the Spirit of God is calling us. A vital part of that discernment comes from a true understanding of someone else’s perspective, and an authentic search for common ground with those whose views are different from our own.

This present gathering is an occasion to *be the kind of Church that we are called to be*: to assemble together, to listen to one another and to the Holy Spirit, and to let our differences not divide us but enrich and strengthen our unity. In other words, this gathering of successors to the Apostles – like the first gatherings that we read about in the Acts of the Apostles – is a privileged opportunity for the Spirit to build us up as Church and to equip us for mission. This assembly, if we allow it, can be a true experience of synodality, provided that our question – *What must we do?* – is asked with openness to the Spirit’s answers, and with trust that the Spirit still speaks through Peter’s successor. It is only through a courageous and humble synodal unity that we, as bishops, will be fully equipped to apply divine power to the problems that weigh heavily on our people today.

As leaders in the Church with many administrative duties, your life can sometimes feel like an endless succession of programs and meetings. I understand this. And I know that you don’t want the Synod to be just another “thing to do.” Allow me, therefore, to highlight some examples in which synodality is already at work in this country, in ways that bring us hope and joy.

One clear instance of this are the Catholic social service agencies. Everywhere I have travelled during my seven years of service in the United States, I have seen how valuable these charitable service organizations are to you bishops and your local Churches. Recently, when I visited a diocese for the rededication of the Cathedral, the first thing I was shown was the new Catholic Charities facility, which houses a food pantry, classrooms, basic health services, and immigration assistance. I’m sure every one of you could say something about the charitable services that your own dioceses are offering, and what great work they are doing. Such work doesn’t happen without synodality: people who immerse themselves in the local reality, who enter the lives of those on the peripheries, and who help them navigate to a better life. The whole world, including the Holy See, knows the magnitude of the charitable work that is done by the Church in the United States.

Another one of the best examples of synodality in the U.S. was the Fifth National Encuentro of Hispanic/Latino ministry, which will be discussed during this Assembly. Other examples of synodality include the numerous small, grassroots apostolates which have sprung up in your dioceses and parishes, offering things like family formation, spiritual accompaniment, and social connections for people who are marginalized and misunderstood.

My point in highlighting these few examples is to show that the call to synodality need not strike us as something unfamiliar, or feel like an impossible burden. Important works within the Church *have already been unfolding on a synodal path*. By enjoying and celebrating these works of the Spirit, we can be encouraged to expand the synodal way into other ecclesial activities. This has the potential to bring more joy to our ministry as priests and bishops, and to sow greater unity among us.

Before moving on to the last point, on the Eucharist, I would like respectfully to mention someone who is a model of synodal service, combined with Eucharistic charity: our brother who returned to the Lord four months ago, Bishop Dave O’Connell. Here was a shepherd who immersed himself in the reality of his sheep, who walked with them, and was with them in finding a way no matter the difficulty of their circumstances. Since he followed the compass that always pointed him to Christ, may he rejoice now at his destination; and may his intercession help us, his brothers who are still on the journey.

Living the Eucharist as Mission

The third and final guideline is *living the Eucharist as mission*. In an address last month to *Caritas Internationalis*, Pope Francis said:

“There is no better way to show God that we understand the meaning of the Eucharist than by giving to others what we ourselves have received (cf. 1 *Cor* 11:32). When, in response to Christ’s love, we make ourselves a gift for others, we proclaim the Lord’s death and resurrection until he comes (v. 26). In this way, we make manifest the most authentic meaning of *Tradition*.”⁷

Pope Benedict expressed the same essential truth when he said:

⁷ Address to the Participants in the General Assembly of *Caritas Internationalis* (May 11, 2023).

“The love that we celebrate in the Sacrament is not something we can keep to ourselves. By its very nature it demands to be shared with all... We cannot approach the Eucharistic table without being drawn into the mission which, beginning in the very heart of God, is meant to reach all people. Missionary outreach is thus an essential part of the Eucharistic form of the Christian life.”⁸

This is the point regarding the Eucharist: because it is the real presence of Christ, it is a dynamic Sacrament, imbuing everything we do with the character of Christ’s outgoing love for his people. It is a Sacrament for *mission*. A Eucharistic revival, therefore, is a call to let the entirety of our lives be an expression of the Lord’s presence among us: a living-out of the union that exists between our humanity, which Christ has taken to himself, and the divinity into which he leads us. To teach the doctrine of the real presence, to promote Eucharistic adoration, and to take our Lord in procession: these initiatives will undoubtedly bear fruit in the lives of the faithful. But the fruit will multiply only if the faithful learn that the Eucharist which they receive is meant to make them missionaries – who take the presence of Christ, which is now *in them*, to people who do not yet know the Lord.

John the Evangelist tells us: “[Jesus] loved his own in the world and he loved them to the end (*John* 13:1).” Have we, in our ecclesial structures, in our modes of expressing the truth of the Gospel, reached the same “end” to which Jesus loved people? Have we exhausted all of the new “ardor,” “methods,” and “expressions” which John Paul II said we would need for the new evangelization?⁹ If we are to love our contemporaries “to the end,” we must allow Christ’s presence to take us through any walls that block us from delivering peace to his people. If some of these walls were constructed with an understandable desire to protect the integrity of our faith, we must recognize the moment at which those walls are doing more to prevent the spread of the Gospel than to safeguard it. We must be open to change.

Conclusion

One year from now, we will be on the brink of the National Eucharistic Congress in Indianapolis which will culminate this country’s Eucharistic Revival. At that time, where will we be in our synodal journey?

⁸ Pope Benedict XVI, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis* (February 22, 2007), 84.

⁹ Pope John Paul II, Address to the Assembly of the Episcopal Conference of Latin America, Port-au-Prince, Haiti (March 9, 1983).

- Will we have deepened our understanding of people's needs by approaching them with an openness to *discovery*?
- Will our *listening* to one another and to the people of God have brought us to a greater unity of identity and purpose?
- Will our experience of the Eucharist be increasingly *missionary*, so that we are more truly "bread broken" for those who are hungry?

So long as we remain united together under Peter and open to the Holy Spirit, I believe that our answer to these questions can be a clear "Yes," which will resound more strongly throughout this country, whose people we are so privileged to serve as shepherds in the name of Christ.