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APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
“BEARERS OF A PROMISE”
COUNCIL OF MAJOR SUPERIORS OF WOMEN RELIGIOUS
NATIONAL ASSEMBLY
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Introduction

My Dear Sisters in Christ,

As the Apostolic Nuncio, I greet you in the name of the Holy Father, assuring you of his prayers and closeness as you gather for this national assembly, addressing the theme, “Bearers of a Promise.” I thank Sister Mary Bendyna, OP, and Mother Anna Grace Neenan, OP, for their kind invitation to be with you and address you. The theme is timely as I am sure your communities, like the Church throughout the United States, after the devastation and havoc caused by the pandemic, are eager to offer to the People of God, through your witness of life, the promise of hope, a hope that was kept alive in the heart of the Blessed Virgin Mary, who carried with her the hopes and dreams of her people.

As you contemplate the figure of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the young woman of Nazareth, as the Holy Father calls her in *Christus vivit* (nn. 43-48), I want to draw your attention to paragraph 48, where Pope Francis writes:

“Today, Mary is the Mother who watches over us, her children, on our journey through life, often weary and in need, anxious that the light of hope not fail. For that is our desire: that the light of hope never fail. Mary our Mother looks to this pilgrim people: a youthful people whom she loves, and who seek her in the silence of their hearts amid all the noise, the chatter and the distractions of the journey. Under the gaze of our Mother, there is room only for the silence of hope.” (POPE FRANCIS, APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION *CHRISTUS VIVIT*, 25 MARCH 2019, 48)

Mary watches over us and journeys with us. It is this “journeying together” as a “pilgrim people” upon which I hope to reflect, particularly in light of the forthcoming synod on synodality. Two years ago, when we were together we reflected on the need to be experts in communion, which necessarily involved addressing the Church as a communion of believers.

The Church as the Family of God

In *Lumen Gentium*, the Second Vatican Council describes the Church, using scriptural imagery (cf. *LG*, 5), as the “sheepfold, the sole and necessary gateway to which is Christ”; a “cultivated field, the tillage of God”; and, “the Jerusalem, which is above” and “our mother.” Other scriptural images utilized by the document include the Church as the Body of Christ, with its Head and members (cf. 1 Cor 12:12), who have differing gifts, given by the Spirit for the building up of the Church (cf. 1 Cor 12:1-11).

One scriptural image used by the Council that may be helpful for us is the Church as the Family of God, “the house of God in which His family dwells; the household of God in the Spirit” (cf. Eph. 2:19, 22). The family is a place of belonging, a privileged place to experience love and growth, an original sign, given

by God the Father. It is both a building block of society and a critical means by which we are introduced into a decisive relationship with God. The family exists to help generate life and to deepen companionship between individuals as they journey toward their common destiny.

Every family, including your religious congregations as families composed of sisters, has a mission to build up the Church and to increase the Kingdom of God in the world; to be a community of love in which people experience a sense of belonging; and, to be a beacon of light and hope to others.

In the Family of God, we continually meet and encounter the Event or Person who “gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.” (cf. BENEDICT XVI, ENCYCLICAL LETTER *DEUS CARITAS EST*, 25 DECEMBER 2005, 1) In the family, we behold the Mystery of Christ present as a face. One learns to confront one’s difficulties and to face the realities of life, enlightened by His Presence; there we encounter Christ in the other. In your congregations, your companionship coalesces or comes together in a space, in daily living and working together, on a common journey with a common goal: your destiny with God.

Christ Himself grew up in a family under the tutelage of the Blessed Virgin and under the protective care of Saint Joseph. The Church may be understood as the Family of God, but it is a family with diverse members that does not lose its identity and which has its very roots in Truth itself. Jesus addresses God as Father and refers frequently to the disciples as His friends.

The early Church addressed its members as *adelphoi* or brothers and sisters. The community of believers is not principally an administrative grouping, the way a company is organized, and occasionally re-organized; rather, the distinctive characteristics of the Church as the Family of God are prayer and Eucharistic worship. Believers have been drawn together and constituted as a family by the Holy Spirit. The Lord has called you sisters to be members of particular communities with diverse charisms. As you know, no family is perfect, and there are always family members with different temperaments, but there is one fundamental bond: faith.

A Synodal Church: A Church that Walks together and that listens

You have been called together as religious families by God, to assist in the mission of evangelization – of spreading the faith. The Holy Father wants a synodal Church to help support the mission of evangelization. Growing up, almost every one of us took a family trip or journey – with hopes for renewal, filled with many joys, along with a few mishaps. As your religious communities journey into the future, you do so together. The Greek word *synodos* means “to be on the journey together” as in a caravan or religious pilgrimage (Lk 2:41-44).

We are a “pilgrim Church,” journeying toward the heavenly Jerusalem. Significantly, in *Lumen Gentium* (LG 9-17), the Second Vatican Council treated the “People of God” before treating the hierarchy. If a pyramidal view of the Church, with the bishops and priests on top and the laity on the bottom, had dominated previously, now all the baptized, with their distinctive roles, including religious, could understand their vocations as a service to the Church.

Synodality is a way of living the faith in a permanent way at every level: in your communities, in the parish, the family, and at the peripheries. All Church members, not just the clergy or experts, are to be engaged in this way of living. Synodality describes the journeying together in history of the People of God toward the New and Eternal Jerusalem.

Pope Francis calls us to be a synodal church, a church that walks together. He spoke of this in 2015, stating that it is “precisely this path of *synodality* which God expects of the Church of the third millennium.” (ADDRESS DURING THE CEREMONY COMMEMORATING THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE INSTITUTION OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS, OCTOBER 17, 2015)

Echoing Pope Benedict XVI that synodality was a “constitutive element of the Church,” he described it as “nothing other than the ‘journeying together’ of God’s flock along the paths of history towards the encounter with Christ the Lord.”

A synodal church is one that listens and “which realizes that listening is more than simply hearing.” This involves listening not only to each other, but also to the Spirit to know what “he says to the churches.” (Rev 2:7) Listening affirms each person’s dignity and expresses respect for the voices, legitimate desires, problems and sufferings of the People of God.

The process of listening begins with the People of God, who, in virtue of their baptism, share in the prophetic office of Christ. Priests and bishops, attentive to the voice of the flock, listen to God to act rightly and to give credible witness to the apostolic faith. Consecrated persons are uniquely positioned to illuminate the transcendent and eschatological dimensions of the pastoral issues that arise in our changed cultural context. The process converges to a point of unity in faith, facilitating an encounter with the Lord in Truth.

Recently, Cardinal Mario Grech addressed those living a monastic or contemplative vocation, writing:

“The invitation to listen permeates your entire life, from your listening to the Word of God in the Sacred Scriptures, all the way to your listening to your brothers and sisters in community as well as to the men and women of our time. To listen, precisely because it is more than physical hearing, is to learn. Your life is a gymnasium in which diligent listening to the Scriptures, ‘as a baby sucks milk from his mother’s breast’ (Ephrem the Syrian), educates one in a profound listening to oneself, others and God.” (LETTER OF CARDINAL MARIO GRECH TO THE MONASTERIES, 28 AUGUST 2021)

We must listen attentively to God, just as the Virgin Mary listened, heard and responded to her call. Mary is the *Attentive Virgin*, who received the Word of God in faith, which was the gateway for her vocation, as St. Augustine writes, “Blessed Mary by believing conceived Him whom believing she brought forth.” The Church and, especially religious, must be attentive to the voice of God, recognizing that God often speaks in a whisper. Amid the cacophony of modern life, with its many distractions, it has become increasingly difficult to hear God’s voice.

If one is to hear the call and respond, one must first listen, which demands “discovering” an environment in which one can listen. While with eyes and ears, one may be attentive to external signs of a call, without *silence* as a regular part of one’s day, interior attentiveness will be exceptionally difficult, if not practically impossible. Without silence and prayer, open to the Spirit, we might walk together off the edge of a cliff!

Synodality: The Journeying of God toward humanity

How can we theologically understand the Church as a Family of God that journeys together? We begin almost every prayer with the sign of the cross, invoking the Trinity. There is a clear Trinitarian imprint on the understanding of the Church in the documents of Vatican II, which describes the Church, as “a people made one with the unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” (LG, nn. 2-4)

One speaks of a “Trinitarian synodality” *ad intra*, referring to the dynamic relationship of the Persons of the Trinity as a communion of love, and a “Trinitarian synodality” *ad extra*, in which the persons of the Godhead “journey together” toward all of creation, the Church, and humanity in history. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are the model for all forms of synodal living, and, therefore, of a model of living as the Church.

The Scriptures allude to this in the Divine “We” in the story of creation (Gen 1:26), in the visit of the three guests to Abraham (Gen 18:1-5), and in the journey of God toward His people through the covenants of the Old Testament, culminating in the Messiah. The New Testament, especially the Annunciation (Lk 1:26-38), recounts the Incarnation as a Trinitarian action – a journeying together: the Father sends the Spirit to overshadow the Virgin so that the Eternal Word of the Father might become incarnate. In the Trinity, there is communion and reciprocity among the Persons *and* an outpouring of love toward humanity.

The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit journey together in harmony. The Triune God journeys together toward all of humanity. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit journey with us as we discern the way forward for our communities. In turn, you, as religious sisters, must journey together, open to what the Spirit says and guided by the living Word (cf. Ps 119:105).

Synodality is a way of living the faith in a permanent way at every level in the life of the Church and is rooted in the Paschal Mystery, beginning with baptism, through which individuals share in the communion of the Trinity. Baptism involves the human response to the call to live in union with Christ through the Spirit. (1 Cor 1:9) This communion purifies the person from sin, makes him or her a new creation, an adopted child of God, and member of the Church, opening the door to the other sacraments, including the Eucharist.

It is the Church which makes the Eucharist, just as the Eucharist makes the Church. In virtue of the Eucharist, the People of God as the Body of Christ journeys together, with diverse members (1 Cor 10:17), under the headship of Christ. Christ, the Good Shepherd, leads the flock on its journey. He not only leads, but He also feeds the flock. In the reception of Holy Communion, communion with God is deepened vertically and horizontally. God’s own *agape* is received bodily, so that His saving work may continue in and through the Church. Conscious of the gift, the Church goes forth to draw all of humanity together in unity. A religious community must remain intimately connected to Christ in the Eucharist, prioritizing Sunday Mass and access to the Eucharist.

Synodality: Walking together in the Spirit and with the Blessed Virgin

At the baptism of Christ, the voice of the Father was heard and the Spirit descended over Him like a dove. This same Spirit, which was poured out on the Apostles at Pentecost, has been poured into our hearts in baptism. The Holy Spirit introduces order (1 Cor 14:31) amid the diversity of members and charisms in the Body of Christ, so that members work together for the good of the whole Church.

Each member is given some manifestation of the Spirit in view of the good of the body (cf. 1 Cor 12:37). The gifts of the Spirit are gathered in the Church, where members serve and listen to one reciprocally. The first work of the Spirit is conversion. Cardinal Grech reminds us that:

“a true synodal journey cannot disregard our willingness to be converted by our listening to the Word of God and by the Holy Spirit present in our lives. Monastic and contemplative life reminds the Church that the invitation to conversion is at the heart of the proclamation made by Jesus... for the synodal process our Holy Father has suggested to the universal Church, you are ‘experts’ of this dignity of conversion in its positive aspects as well as in its difficulties, difficulties that should not discourage but rather should be lived in a true spirit of faith and hope.” (LETTER OF CARDINAL MARIO GRECH TO THE MONASTERIES, 28 AUGUST 2021)

Living in this spirit of faith and hope, you become, like the Blessed Virgin, bearers of the promise. The Holy Spirit, who is at the core of this ecclesial “walking together”, overshadowed Mary, who lived this journey in a privileged way. Although the Spirit was operating from the dawn of creation, in the fullness of time (Gal 4:4), a qualitative leap was made in salvation history. By the Holy Spirit, Mary conceived the Word of God, who in turn was given as a gift to humanity. Mary and the Spirit “journey together” from the Annunciation through Pentecost.

If in the economy of salvation, the Holy Spirit represents the condition of possibility for the self-communication of God in Jesus on the part of the Divine, Mary, with her *fiat*, represents the condition of possibility of this communication on the part of humanity. Through her attentive listening and openness to God, she fulfilled her mission in bringing Christ to the world.

She demonstrates the characteristics of living this journey. She journeyed with and in the Trinity, willingly receiving the love of the Father, bearing the Son within her womb, and becoming a temple of the Holy Spirit. The Mother of God is an icon of synodal life, reminding us of the universal call to listen attentively to God with an openness to the Spirit.

As you gather for these days to explore how you might imitate the Virgin in being bearers of the promise, influencers of God, and guardians of hope, it is my sincere hope that Mary and the Holy Spirit will guide you along the path of authentic discernment. Therefore, let us entrust ourselves to them, concluding with a prayer to Christ from the Swiss mystic Adrienne von Speyr:

“Dear Lord, grant that we contemplate and affirm you and your Church, carry out what our mission demands, in an ever-new spirit, in the spirit of your Mother’s consent. Grant also that we pray for this Spirit. We know you yourself are where you send your Spirit. The Spirit brought you to your Mother: the Spirit enabled her to carry you; and because in her you found again your own Spirit, you formed your Church. Since you have called us into this Church, make from each one of us a place where the Spirit of your Church blows, where the will of your Father is done together with you and with the help of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”