

**ADDRESS OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE,
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 TO THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF
 THE UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS
 BALTIMORE, MARYLAND
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My Dear Friends in Christ,

I am delighted to be with you in-person here in Baltimore as we gather for this plenary session of the episcopal conference. I thank His Excellency Archbishop José Gomez, Archbishop of Los Angeles and President of the USCCB, Father Fuller and the entire conference staff, for their invitation to speak to you.

It is hard to believe that it has been five years since I began my mission in this country. Together during these years, we have had to confront the challenges to the family, religious disaffiliation, the sexual abuse crisis, increasing secularization, polarization within the nation and perhaps could also be inside the Church, and a global pandemic! What a journey! Throughout this spiritual journey, we have been on the road together, along with our people. Amid various crises, there have also been moments of joy.

Today, I would like to speak to you about synodality, and the need for apostolic discernment. What is synodality? The Greek word *synodos* means “to be on the journey together.”

What synodality is not

Initially, I must say what synodality is *not*. Holding a synod on synodality is not simply having a “meeting about meetings.” We call that purgatory! It is also not an abstract concept – the mere idea of having a meeting about meetings. If that were the case, we would certainly be in one of the lower rings of hell in Dante’s *Inferno*! Realities are greater than ideas (cf. *EG*, 231). Synodality helps address the reality of our present situation.

The Holy Father also clearly stated in his book *Let Us Dream* that synodality does not involve changing “traditional truths of Christian doctrine”; rather, it is concerned with “how teaching can be lived and applied in the changing contexts of our times.” (POPE FRANCIS, *LET US DREAM*, NEW YORK: SIMON AND SCHUSTER, 84-85). There is a difference between true and false reform in the Church, but true reform, while necessarily remaining faithful to the living Tradition of the Church, must also involve concrete gestures, which include the participation of the whole Church as Congar pointed out in his *True and False Reform in the Church*, writing, “reforms undertaken uniquely from on high, without widespread participation of those at the bottom (on the periphery and at the popular level), have little effectiveness.”

Further, Pope Francis has affirmed that synodality is not to be understood as “a kind of parliament underpinned by a ‘political battle’ in which in order to govern one side must defeat the other.” (IBID., 86) It is understandable that many are hesitant about the synod because we are not used to participating in synodal processes. The conversion, especially in our mentality, that the process brings about can leave us “vulnerable” but in a better place.

Why discuss synodality?

I believe that synodality is an answer to the challenges of our time and to the confrontation, which is threatening to divide this country, and which also has its echoes in the Church. It seems that many are

unaware they are engaged in this confrontation, staking out positions, rooted in certain truths but which are isolated in the world of ideas and not applied to the reality of the lived faith experience of the People of God in their concrete situations.

Pope Francis, in his homily for the Day of the Poor, last Sunday, affirmed: *“We are part of a history marked by tribulation, violence, suffering and injustice, ever awaiting a liberation that never seems to arrive. Those who are most wounded, oppressed and even crushed, are the poor, the weakest links in the chain”* (Homily for the 5th World Day of the Poor, November 14th, 2021).

There are a number of pressing issues facing the Church today. One is the pro-life issue. The Church must be unapologetically pro-life. We cannot abandon our defense of innocent human life or the vulnerable person. Yet, a synodal approach to the question would be to understand better why people seek to end pregnancies; what are the root causes of choices against life and what are the factors that make those choices so complicated for some; and, to begin to form a consensus with concrete strategies to build the culture of life and the civilization of love.

The initiative *Walking with Moms in Need* is actually a synodal approach. It seeks to walk with women; to better understand their situations; to work with pro-life and social service agencies to meet the concrete needs of expectant mothers and their children. Many expectant mothers are often suffering from loneliness, and common events, such as baby showers, are not part of their reality. Parishes, by listening to what some of the spiritual, social, and emotional needs of the people are, can accompany women – even with small acts of kindness. Concrete gestures, not mere ideas, show forth the maternal, tender face of the Church that is truly pro-life.

Realities are more important than ideas. We can have all the theological ideas about the Eucharist – and, of course, we need this – but none of these ideas compare with the reality of the Eucharistic Mystery, which needs to be discovered and rediscovered through the practical experience of the Church, living in communion, particularly in this time of pandemic. We can become so concentrated upon the sacrality of forms of the liturgy that we miss the true encounter with His Real Presence. There is the temptation to treat the Eucharist as something to be offered to the privileged few rather than to seek to walk with those whose theology or discipleship is falling short, assisting them to understand and appreciate the gift of the Eucharist and helping them to overcome their difficulties. Rather than remaining trapped in an “ideology of the sacred”, synodality is a method that helps us to discover together a way forward.

The same could be said with respect to race relations. Everyone here certainly condemns racial injustice. But is it merely the idea of racism that is wrong? How tangibly as Church could we respond to the lived reality of what some members of society must daily confront? This leads us back to a question which I posed at the conclusion of the June assembly: What type of Church are we?

Even last November, we reflected upon the need to be a Samaritan Church and asked: “What will our proposal be for healing the world?” However, it is not just the world that needs healing. The Church too is wounded – by the abuse crisis, the lingering effects of the pandemic, and the polarization afflicting society. This is the reality which must be engaged.

In his reflection at the opening of this new Synod on the subject of Communion, Participation and Mission, the Holy Father stated:

“Communion and mission risk remaining somewhat abstract terms if an ecclesial praxis is not cultivated which expresses the concreteness of synodality in every step of the journey and of work, promoting the real involvement of each and every one.” (POPE FRANCIS, ADDRESS AT THE BEGINNING OF THE SYNODAL PATH, 9 OCTOBER 2021)

The Church needs concrete action, involving everyone, action which mediates the presence of Christ in the human reality of our hurting world. In my mind, the way this concrete action is actuated is through synodality.

What is synodality?

*Synodality is a way of life. Synodality is a way of living the faith in a permanent way at every level: in your dioceses, parishes, the family, and at the peripheries. All Church members are to be engaged in this way of living to support the mission of evangelization. Cardinal Mario Grech adds that “synodality is not only a *methodos* but an *odos*, not only a method but a way towards a re-thinking of the Church’s role in contemporary society.”* (CARDINAL MARIO GRECH, “TOWARDS A SYNODAL IRISH CHURCH. ADDRESS TO THE BISHOPS OF IRELAND, 3 FEBRUARY 2021)

Six years ago, Pope Francis told us 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.”

Synodality involves listening. A synodal church is one that listens and “which realizes that listening is more than simply hearing.” A Church that listens and is close, reflects God’s own “style” of “closeness, compassion and tender love”. It is sometimes said that there is a lot of confusion about doctrine in the Church today. However, the argument continues that what is needed is clear teaching. That is true, but the Holy Father says, “A Church that teaches must be firstly a Church that listens.” (cf. *LET US DREAM*, 84)

What type of Church do we want to be? We can begin by being a Church that listens. This listening involves not only listening to each other, but also to the Spirit to know what “he says to the churches.” (Rev 2:7) This emphasis on the Spirit is a distinctive element of the Pope’s vision of synodality, as we live epochal change.

Jesuit Father Hans Kolvenbach commented that amid change, there is a need for fidelity – to Christ, the Church, the world, and humanity. Still, he spoke of the need for creativity – not with the truth of the Faith – but in the sense of adaptation to meet the demands of our times. Ignatius of Loyola was never content with the status quo. Perhaps, this is why the Holy Father cites Mahler, stating, “Fidelity to tradition does not consist in worshipping ashes but in keeping a fire burning.” (POPE FRANCIS, ADDRESS AT THE BEGINNING OF THE SYNODAL PATH, 9 OCTOBER 2021)

This means openness to deeper conversion to Christ. The first work of the Holy Spirit is conversion. In *Let Us Dream*, Pope Francis says:

“What characterizes a synodal path is the role of the Holy Spirit. We listen, we discuss in groups, but, above all, we pay attention to what the Spirit has to say to us. That is why I ask everyone to speak frankly and to listen carefully to others, because there, too, the Spirit is speaking. Open to changes and new possibilities, the Synod is for everyone an experience of conversion.” (POPE FRANCIS, *LET US DREAM*, NEW YORK: SIMON AND SCHUSTER, 85)

Experience teaches us that this synodal listening is effective. I think back to Aparecida. All the bishops understood that there was a crisis in transmitting the faith. Each had his own ideas and agenda which he hoped would be accepted or even imposed upon others. It was only by listening to each other and to the Spirit that they were able to set aside their pre-conceived notions about how things ought to be and together discover the path forward and to produce a powerful, new pastoral roadmap for the Church, allowing the Church to receive great gifts of clarity, vision, courage, pastoral closeness and evangelizing zeal — the kind of parrhesia which was seen in the apostles following Pentecost.

The Second Vatican Council is another example of how listening to the Spirit can bear fruit. The pre-conciliar schema were abandoned for something new, and, I would argue, something better for meeting the challenges and signs of the times. While embarking on a new path involves “growing pains”, remaining in a previous mode of thinking would never have addressed the cultural shifts of that time.

It is true that the path forward is not always immediately clear; patience and discernment are necessary. Still, the path forward necessarily involves unity. A divided Church will never be able to lead others to the deeper unity desired by Christ. This is why communion is an integral to the upcoming synod.

Some may ask, “Well, if the path isn’t immediately clear, isn’t there a danger that we will stray from the right path?” One can see the difficulties that could emerge from inauthentic versions of the “synodal path” that veer into dangerous territory, descending into political or ideological issues without listening to the Spirit. The synodal path must be rooted in Tradition. It is important to recall that the local church journeys with the bishop, who serves as the guarantor of the Truth in the process and who himself journeys in communion with the Pope. The diocesan Bishop walks and decides *cum Petro et sub Petro*.

It will be argued that we are walking together but are wandering aimlessly. We are walking toward the heavenly Jerusalem, but along the journey, we hope to encounter Christ, who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. He is the Truth. Not every opinion is equal, nor is the synodal path a purely democratic process, as if truths were determined by majority vote. No. There is revealed truth, but we must listen respectfully to understand where the other person is coming from. Sometimes, we will not immediately reach agreement or see a path forward; nevertheless, with time, the Spirit can lead us to see things differently and to move forward.

Synodality is God-driven. When I addressed you in June, I spoke of the need for listening and dialogue. I offered four dimensions of dialogue from *Ut Unum Sint*: the dialogue of charity, conversion, truth, and salvation. Our dialogue and our listening must involve, not only talking among ourselves – bishops, clergy, religious, and laity – but also listening to God – listening to what the Spirit has to say.

It is the Spirit who preserves the Church in matters of faith and morals. An authentic synodal process ultimately is driven by God. As we listen to God and to one another, we learn. The Church needs this attentive listening now more than ever if she is to overcome the polarization afflicting this country. The Holy Father says:

“We need respectful, mutual listening, free of ideology and predetermined agendas. The aim is not to reach agreement by means of a contest between opposing positions, but to journey together to seek God’s will, allowing differences to harmonize. Most important is the synodal spirit: to meet each other with respect and trust, to believe in our shared unity, and to receive the new thing that the Spirit wishes to reveal to us.” (POPE FRANCIS, *LET US DREAM*, 93)

The mission of Christ toward humanity was Spirit-driven. Jesus' public mission began with His baptism, when the Spirit descended over Him. This same Spirit, which was poured out on the Apostles at Pentecost, has been poured into our hearts in baptism and again at our priestly and episcopal ordinations. Listening to the Spirit, we are transformed as disciples.

It is not only we who are transformed by this Spirit but also our people. If we want our people to be missionary disciples, then we must set the example in leading them in the art of listening and discernment, but also consulting with them, especially when they have a specific expertise. Involving them in this discernment helps them to share more deeply in the life of the Church and to accept "co-responsibility" for the Church, which we, as bishops, are called to shepherd.

Synodality is Mission-Driven. The model for this missionary discipleship is the Blessed Virgin Mary. The Holy Spirit, who is at the core of this ecclesial "walking together", overshadowed her. 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 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. As an icon of synodal life, Mary reminds us of the importance of listening attentively to God. She was able to say *Yes* to God without having all the definitive answers, and gradually, she discovered the way.

What happens when we listen attentively to God, particularly when there is a disagreement or a seeming impasse? Usually, there is a breakthrough or what the Holy Father calls an "overflow" – an overflow of the Spirit which "breaks the banks that confined our thinking, and causes to pour forth, as if from an overflowing fountain, the answers that formerly the contraposition did not allow us to see." (POPE FRANCIS, *LET US DREAM*, 80)

Just as Jesus began his public ministry in the power of the Spirit, so too does the Church carry out her mission, having listened to the Spirit. Synodality is mission-driven. It is not about campaigning, persuading, or doubling our efforts to do this or that. Thankfully, it is not about more programs; it is about humbly listening, to each other and to the Spirit, and to be open to what the Spirit has in store for us.

The task remains to discern carefully what is truly from God so that the Church might better embody the truth of God she proclaims.

Synodality demands Apostolic Discernment in Common. Pope Francis has invited us to enter into a resolute process of discernment and reform so that the missionary impulse of the Church might be more focused, generous, and fruitful, adding that the important thing is "to not walk alone, but to rely on each other as brothers and sisters, and especially under the leadership of the bishops, in a wise and realistic pastoral discernment." (*EG*, 30; 33)

Apostolic discernment in common is a process of searching for the will of God in which the apostolic group becomes the subject of an act of discernment. It is apostolic inasmuch as the discernment process is geared toward the service of the people through the proclamation of the Gospel. Three phrases

that help understand discernment are: *to recognize; to interpret; and to choose*, which have also been described as to see, to judge, and to act.

To recognize. Individuals, parishes, and dioceses must confront situations and difficulties in life; they need to be able to recognize and name these difficulties. At the same time, they also must possess a sense of self-awareness. While many people are well-educated in the sciences, often they are illiterate when it comes to affectivity and spirituality. There is a serious need to form people and communities in listening to and recognizing the interior movements of the Spirit and to have an honest assessment of one's own identity.

There must be a recognition of those movements of the Spirit which bring joy and which last, and those that do not. As Monsignor Luigi Giussani frequently said, "reality has never betrayed me." Discernment is never abstract. We need to grasp the human reality and to be realistic about the present conditions of our mission.

To interpret. Individuals, parishes, and dioceses must not only recognize challenges, but also learn to interpret and judge experiences in light of faith, trying to grasp the *meaning* of things and to evaluate them in light of the hierarchy of truths. Discernment requires not just looking at data but rightly interpreting it in the Spirit, who also reveals "blockages that are preventing us from taking advantage of the grace of God that is already being offered to us." (POPE FRANCIS, *LET US DREAM*, 90)

The process of deliberation is critical. Bishops and priests, having listened to the Spirit *and* the lay faithful, will need to weigh the pros and cons, when making proposals about how best to evangelize. Synodality is exercised in the local church, in which priests and laity are called to "cooperate with the bishop for the good of the whole ecclesial community." (POPE FRANCIS, "ADDRESS ON THE OCCASION OF THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE INSTITUTION OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS," AAS 107: 1142.) Involving the laity is in not an abdication of authority but an invitation to shared responsibility.

By undertaking a synodal process, we develop a mindset essential to common apostolic discernment: listening and engaging reality. We must be prayerful and without self-deception in our experience of consolation and desolation. What brings abiding joy as opposed to a fleeting pleasure or a pyrrhic victory? Where do I (we) experience the abiding presence of God in our discernment?

Apostolic discernment in common demands integration. How do we integrate our insights with those of the community or our brother bishops? Through others, we might more clearly, if not perfectly, discover the will of God, which ecclesial authority and abiding consolation will confirm, if we have properly discerned.

To choose. Discernment demands choosing and taking concrete action. Bishops have a personal and specific responsibility to witness to the truth and to preserve the unity and integrity of the faith. After listening, praying, and carefully deliberating, bishops must make decisions. This choosing is never an assertion of power but remains a service to the Church. Ultimately, discernment is of a communitarian nature and an expression of the co-responsibility that believers have.

This choosing demands patience, which "does not come easily to our impatient age." The Holy Father encourages us:

"Discerning in the midst of conflict requires us sometimes to pitch camp together, waiting for the skies to clear. Time belongs to the Lord. Trusting in Him, we move forward with

courage, building unity through discernment, to discover and implement God's dream for us, and the paths of action ahead." (POPE FRANCIS, *LET US DREAM*, 94)

My Brothers, we have been on the road together for more than five years, and we have pitched camp more than once, but with the help of the Holy Spirit and accompanied by Christ the Good Shepherd, we will discover patiently the path of true unity – the way that leads to the Father. Listening to one another and to the Spirit and walking with our brothers and sisters, we will emerge from the present crises together as the Church Christ has called us to be!