



Homily of Cardinal Joseph W. Tobin, C.Ss.R.
Opening Mass of the Synod
Cathedral Basilica of the Sacred Heart
October 17, 2021

Today, more than ever, we are under the authority of the Word of God, and the Word can illuminate the process that Pope Francis began last week in St. Peter's Basilica to continue today in every diocese of the world.

Synod for many a strange word.

“Synod” is a strange word. Another strange word is “synodality.” This Synod is said to be the most momentous Church event in my lifetime. Who knew? That’s the problem.

Pope Francis or someone else did not invent the words. In fact, in the first 1,000 years of Christianity, the synod was a well-known institution of Church governance. Even after the first millennium, when then had faded to a memory in the West, synods continued among Orthodox and Eastern Catholic Churches. Christians in Lebanon, Ukraine, eastern Slovakia, or India are familiar with synods.

But for them, as in our Church for the first millennium, a synod is understood as a gathering of bishops with and under the authority of the Holy Father. The people have been passive spectators. That is what this synod – the one that began last week in Roma and will conclude in Roma two years from now – aims to change. But there is more to the strangeness of this word, especially when we consider what this word means.

A strange word – “same road” or a fool’s errand?

“Synod” comes from two Greek words that mean “same road” (σύν-οδός) and are used to signify a holy mystery: that the Pilgrim People, whom God has “called out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Pt. 1, 9), are called to travel the “same road.” Sometimes the followers of Jesus realize they are going the wrong way. Remember what happened to those two disciples, trudging their way home to Emmaus on “that first day of the week” (cf. Lk 24, 13-35)? Their hearts were broken, their dreams shattered, and their

conversation was heavy with despair. They did not hide their hopelessness from a stranger who began to walk with them. The stranger listened to their sorrow, but explained recent events in the light of the Word of God. Despite themselves, the two felt a spark of hope kindle in their hearts, which began to burn. When they later sat at a table with the stranger, and he took, blessed and broke bread and offered it to them, they knew they had been traveling in the wrong direction, and hit the road to find their brothers and sisters in Jerusalem (v. 33).

The synod recognizes that the People of God, those whom God has called out of darkness into God's light by virtue of their baptism, are called to walk the same road in the right direction. A synod is not called to defend or to change anything. Rather, it convokes an assembly that discerns what the Holy Spirit asks of the Church at this time in light of the mission for which it exists: to evangelize. The synod is not a program – certainly not simply a meeting – but a process, or rather, the program is that process of listening, praying, discerning, of recommending.

Folks on either side of the aisle may not be happy with this process. Traditionalists and progressives have a problem with synod because it is not tied to a firm agenda. And, if you look around us, we have no model in the pews, in this pulpit or in the sanctuary to say yes! that's what we must do.

The synod is a call to unity for all of us, in the pews, in this pulpit, in the sanctuary. A call that binds all of us to a communal act of obedience that is, first and foremost, listening.

Hear, O Israel!

The first reading was taken from the Book of Deuteronomy, a long sermon given on the plains of Moab by Moses just before the people were to enter the Promised Land. Moses said: "Because you will obey the voice of the LORD, your God..." – in order to obey, they had to listen. In fact, the first prayer Jesus said every day, the prayer that Mary and Joseph taught him, came from this sermon of Moses in the Book of Deuteronomy and began with the words "*Sh'ma Yisrael!*" "*Hear, O Israel: the LORD is our God, the LORD is one!*" (Dt. 6, 4). He is the One who makes it possible to enter the Promised Land. He is the One who gives meaning to our community.

Synods are efforts to listen, to be attentive to whatever the Spirit is trying to say to the Church, not what people have decided ahead of time that the Spirit should be saying.

The path to the 2023 Synod in Rome, whose theme is "For a synodal Church: communion, participation and mission," is designed to engage every diocese, every bishops' conference, and every continental Church body. It will unleash the biggest popular consultation in history, aimed at reaching over a billion people. Who does that? It will

require, as never before, that the People of God in this Archdiocese assemble as never before in mass meetings at parishes, but also in efforts to listen to folks who don't show up at the parish: universities, correctional institutions and the other peripheries of this local Church since all are given "the ability to imagine a different future for the Church and her institutions, in keeping with the mission she has received." (Preparatory Document, 9).

The Preparatory Document for the Synod uses Scripture to justify this broad inclusion, noting that the Gospels consistently present the interconnectedness among Jesus, the crowd, and the apostles (cf. PD, 18-20). Jesus, who always takes the initiative, is constantly open to the people, recognizing them as conversation partners in ways that shock and scandalize others, especially religious officials. At the same time, he calls some to follow him and entrusts them with special responsibility for helping others to encounter him.

All three actors, says the Preparatory Document (20), are essential.

- If Jesus, present to the Church through the Spirit, is absent, the synod descends into a political game between the apostles and the crowd, a churchy version of Congress. We know where the ensuing impasse ends up.
- Without the crowd, the synod becomes rigid, even narcissistic, an exclusive, inward-looking sect.
- Without the apostles instructed by the Spirit, the crowd risks falling prey to myth and ideology, to the "flavor of the month" or whatever is politically correct.

The Preparatory Document somberly notes that, in Scripture and in the Church today, there is a fourth "actor" who has many names – *diabolos*, the Evil One, Satan, whose role is to try to separate these three actors. Without all three—the People of God, the Holy Spirit, and the bishops—it is not a real synod, and we cannot consider the road we must walk. The Evil One knows that.

The road ahead

The object of the next two years and in a special way for the Archdiocese, the next especially the next six months, is not to hold a series of meetings and "that's that." Rather, it is the effort to open us to a permanent conversion of heart -- a change of hearts and a change of culture at all levels of the Church. Some of you already participate in forms of synodality: in parishes with active pastoral and finance councils, in the Archdiocesan Pastoral Council, in the College of Deans and the Council of Priests. Groups that humbly invoke the Holy Spirit and try to recognize and walk the "same road."

Synodality is not an attempt to *divinize* the will of the people as the French Revolution tried to do, but to *discover* the divine will, God’s saving plan in our times and our places. The process of this synod will make the People of God actors in the process of discernment rather than passive onlookers.

After April of next year, the prayer, listening, discerning and recommending will move to national and continental levels before informing the assembly that will gather in Roma in October 2023.

Imagine a different future

Too much, too soon? Certainly. But that may be the point. Just as the pandemic shone a harsh light that revealed the cracks in our society and its values, the genius of the synodal process is that it will starkly reveal just how little-traveled is the road to the synodal Church and how anti-synodal is the culture of a controlling hierarchy with a passive laity.

Such light is good, for no conversion happens without a necessary and honest confrontation with the truth of who we are, followed by an awareness of how much the Spirit’s help is required to get us to where we are called to be. In the Gospels, no one comes to Jesus with a vague, bland request to “feel better,” they name the evil that holds them captive: “I’m blind, and I want to see,” “my boy is possessed by an evil spirit, free him,” “I’m bleeding inside, please make it stop!”

If the synod produces such humility and openness to grace, it will yield a rich harvest.

A letter from an old man to a fragile community

Today’s second reading gives me comfort and hope. We heard an excerpt from a letter written by an old man in prison who says he is close to death. His audience is a fragile community of disciples living in a port city on the edge of the Roman Empire. Their precarious existence is under constant threat of being crushed by external persecution or torn asunder by internal disputes. Yet, in his letter to the Philippians, the Apostle Paul uses the word “joy” more time than in any other epistle.

Let us joyfully embark on the synodal journey, walking the same road and guided by the wisdom of Paul:

If there is any encouragement in Christ, any solace in love, any participation in the Spirit, any compassion and mercy,
complete my joy by being of the same mind, with the same love, united in heart, thinking one thing.

Do nothing out of selfishness or out of vainglory; rather, humbly regard others as more important than yourselves, each looking out not for his own interests, but [also] everyone for those of others.

Alas! If only the reading had included the verse which follows, our traveling kit would be complete: *Have among yourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus!*

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