



REJOICE in the LORD

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MOVING BEYOND OURSELVES

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

One year ago, in October 2020, our Holy Father, Pope Francis, published his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* (On Fraternity and Social Friendship). Shortly afterward, I provided a summary of the pope's encyclical in this newsletter.

In August of this year, and again last month, I used this newsletter (Vol 2. No 24 and Vol 3 No. 3.) to reflect on the teaching of Pope Francis—concentrating on the first chapter, “Dark Clouds Cover the World,” and the second chapter, “Strangers on the Road.” Today, I would like to offer some thoughts on the third chapter of *Fratelli Tutti*, “Envisaging and Engendering an Open World.”

I offer these brief reflections in light of the synod process that has begun in our archdiocese and in all dioceses throughout the world. Pope Francis has invited us to walk together as members of one family, brothers and sisters who share a common hope, and who dream of a better world for ourselves, our families, and our friends and neighbors everywhere.

As our Holy Father makes clear in *Fratelli Tutti*, we cannot hope to find true peace and happiness as long as we are isolated or closed in on ourselves. The pope observes:

In the depths of every heart, love creates bonds and expands existence, for it draws people out of themselves and towards others. Since we were made for love, in each one of us “a law of ekstasis” seems to operate: “the lover ‘goes outside’ the self to find a fuller existence in another”. For this reason, “man always has to take up the challenge of moving beyond himself” (Fratelli Tutti, #88).

The challenge of moving beyond ourselves is at the heart of all social interaction and friendship. It is also what prompts men and women to fall in love, bind themselves to each other in the sacrament of marriage, and give themselves wholeheartedly to their children. “Love creates bonds and expands existence,” the pope teaches. We find a richer life when we abandon self-seeking and give our hearts and souls to God and to all our sisters and brothers.

Pope Francis cautions us to resist the temptation to cling to a small group, narrowing our focus to just family members, close friends and those who are like us in thoughts, beliefs and actions. The Holy Father writes:

Nor can I reduce my life to relationships with a small group, even my own family; I cannot know myself apart from a broader network of relationships, including those that have preceded me and

shaped my entire life. My relationship with those whom I respect has to take account of the fact that they do not live only for me, nor do I live only for them. Our relationships, if healthy and authentic, open us to others who expand and enrich us. Nowadays, our noblest social instincts can easily be thwarted by self-centered chats that give the impression of being deep relationships. On the contrary, authentic and mature love and true friendship can only take root in hearts open to growth through relationships with others. As couples or friends, we find that our hearts expand as we step out of ourselves and embrace others. Closed groups and self-absorbed couples that define themselves in opposition to others tend to be expressions of selfishness and mere self-preservation (Fratelli Tutti, #89).

Closed, self-absorbed societies are not Christian communities. They impede us from encountering Christ “on the road,” from listening to one another in spite of our differences and disagreements, and from discerning God’s will for us as fellow travelers on life’s journey.

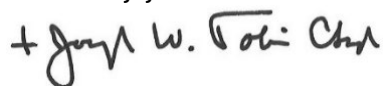
Quoting St. Thomas Aquinas, the Holy Father says that:

The love made possible by God’s grace is a movement outwards towards another, whereby we consider “the beloved as somehow united to ourselves”. Our affection for others makes us freely desire to seek their good. All this originates in a sense of esteem, an appreciation of the value of the other. This is ultimately the idea behind the word “charity”: those who are loved are “dear” to me; “they are considered of great value”. And “the love whereby someone becomes pleasing (grata) to another is the reason why the latter bestows something on him freely (gratis)” (Fratelli Tutti, #93).

When we walk together as pilgrims on a synodal journey, we are invited, and challenged, to move beyond ourselves “in a union increasingly directed towards others, considering them of value, worthy, pleasing and beautiful apart from their physical or moral appearances.” We are admonished—by the Gospel—not to judge others by our own cultural values, but to see those who are different from us as God sees them. “Only by cultivating this way of relating to one another,” the pope teaches, “will we make possible a social friendship that excludes no one and a fraternity that is open to all.”

The synod process that we began last month is a means of “moving beyond ourselves” as individuals, families, parish communities, dioceses and the Universal Church. If we take seriously the call to encounter Jesus in His people, to listen respectfully to those we disagree with, and to discern what the Holy Spirit is asking us to be and do as the Pilgrim People of God, then the synod will succeed in its purpose. If the synod produces this kind of humility and openness to grace, it will indeed cause us all to move beyond ourselves and, so, yield a rich harvest of fraternity and social friendship.

Sincerely yours in Christ the Redeemer,



Cardinal Joseph W. Tobin
Archbishop of Newark

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. 2, 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!*

A Message from Pope Francis: Words of Challenge and Hope



Dear brothers and sisters, let us have a good journey together! May we be pilgrims in love with the Gospel and open to the surprises of the Holy Spirit. Let us not miss out on the grace-filled opportunities born of encounter, listening and discernment. In the joyful conviction that, even as we seek the Lord, he always comes with his love to meet us first.

As we initiate this process, we too are called to become experts in the art of encounter. Not so much by organizing events or theorizing about problems, as in taking time to encounter the Lord and one another.

True encounter arises only from listening. Let us invoke the Holy Spirit with greater fervor and frequency, and humbly listen to him, journeying together as He, the source of communion and mission, desires: with docility and courage.

My Prayer for You

Let us pray with Pope Francis:

Holy Spirit of God, our Comforter and our Guide, empower your people with the ability to meet one another, to listen attentively to the Word of God and each other, and to discern God's will for His people. Through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and all the saints, may the synodal journey we are beginning now unite us with You, and with each other, so that we may discover joy and peace—now and in the world to come.



- Cardinal Joseph W. Tobin