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SYNODALITY and VATICAN II
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INTRODUCTION

Welcome and thank you so much for coming this evening.

Tonight's topic is extremely important and yet, many Catholics really do not understand the meaning of synodality. I hope my talk will provide you with helpful information.

Part of my plan is to address three issues that are intimately related to synodality:

- What is the relationship between synodality and the Second Vatican Council?
- Why is synodality so important for the life of our church as we move forward?
- And finally, what exactly is synodality?

SYNODALITY AND VATICAN II

Recently, the *National Catholic Reporter* newspaper listed their top ten religion stories from 2021. Two of them caught my attention:

The first was entitled: "Pope Francis is preparing a radical reform of the church's power structures."

In this article, the author takes us back to the year 2001. Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio, now Pope Francis, attended a Synod of Bishops at the Vatican and he did not like what he saw.

The Catholic Church had adopted a top-to-bottom approach that stripped bishops of local churches of any decision-making power and the synod was reduced to nothing more than a stamp of approval for prepackaged decisions made in Rome.

When Bergoglio emerged as Pope Francis at the 2013 conclave, the synodal process was high on his list for reform.

On Oct 9-10 of last year, he inaugurated a three year process for the 2023 synod, which will focus on how the church across the world can become synodal.

It has been called the largest consultation exercise in human history. (Brian Fraga)

The preparation process and the 2023 synod, with the theme, "For a synodal church: Communion, participation and mission,"...

...will have the potential to revolutionize the way decisions are made in the Catholic Church and promote a more decentralized structure of authority.

The other article that struck me was entitled: “Francis: ‘No concession’ to those who deny Vatican II teachings.”

Speaking to a group of catechists connected to the Italian bishops’ conference on January 30, Francis told them to “consider the teachings of Vatican II as sacrosanct...

...saying that to be a Catholic ~ one must adhere to the reforms brought about by that landmark event.”

He went on to say: “You can be with the church and therefore follow the council, or you cannot follow the council or interpret it in your own way, as you want, and you are not with the church.”

“The council is the magisterium of the church. On this point we must be demanding, severe. The council cannot be negotiated.”

A quick point of clarification: the word magisterium as used by Francis in the above quote is intended to mean “official teaching of the Catholic Church.”

When something is taught at that level, the faithful are expected to give full assent to the teaching.

As theologian Massimo Faggioli has noted:

Francis is appealing to Vatican II to open the way for a synodal Church that was not quite born at Vatican II, but was theologically conceived there. (Commonweal, “From Collegiality to Synodality,” Nov. 23, 2018)

Before looking more deeply at the meaning of synodality, I would like to read a poem by Leslie Dwight. It was written in the midst of the pandemic.

I chose to include it because I think it sets the tone for my presentation. A synodal church is a new way of being church.

And this poem highlights why **now** is the appropriate moment for that to occur.

It was entitled: “What if 2020 isn’t cancelled?”

What if 2020 isn’t cancelled?

What if 2020 is the year we’ve been waiting for?

A year so uncomfortable, so painful, so raw...

...that it finally forces us to grow?
 A year that screams so loud, finally awakening us
 from our ignorant slumber.
 A year that we finally accept the need for change.
 Declare change. Work for change.
 Become the change.
 A year we finally band together, instead of pushing each other further apart.
 2020 isn't cancelled...but rather
 ...the most important year of them all."

And each of us has a role to play in this moment

BECOMING A SYNODAL CHURCH

Becoming a synodal church will not be easy. It will involve many challenges.

Pope Francis has acknowledged this fact. The day he launched the synod he asked "Are we fearful of the unknown? Do we prefer to take refuge in excuses such as...it's useless or...we've always done it this way."

He knows that a synodal model of church will require us to unlearn the way various groups in the church relate to each other.

The preparation phase for the 2023 Synod is intended to inspire people to dream about the church we are called to be, to make our hopes flourish, to learn from one another, to build bridges and restore strength for our common mission.

But, sadly, we are not well prepared for synodality. We have no tradition (at least in modern church models) of meaningful encounter and dialogue.

A centralized and controlling hierarchical church has taught us that there is a **teaching church** (ecclesia docens)... the ordained hierarchy...

...and a **learning church**...the laity (ecclesia dicens).

In other words, the hierarchy **has** the truth and the laity are to **receive** that truth.

The belief that each group has **much** to teach the other does not come easily.
 (Sr. Nuala Kenny)

The move toward a synodal church is both a result of and a response to the post-pandemic world and marks a necessary development in the relationship between clergy and laity.

We will have to discover and live with a new set of virtues, especially mutual trust.

On the one hand, the sexual abuse scandal has done great damage to the trust that the clergy once enjoyed.

And on the other hand, most members of the clergy have little experience relying on the wisdom of the laity.

But we need to recognize what is called the “sensus fidelium”, which refers to the sense of the faith in all the faithful. I will say more about this term in a bit...

In fact, Francis believes that listening to the people of God is the starting point for discernment.

The cornerstone for the mutual trust that is required for a synodal church is found in Acts of the Apostles, Chapter 15, where it is acknowledged that ALL baptized members have been anointed with gifts of the Holy Spirit.

We call these gifts “charisms”...which provide the faithful with a diversity of gifts to be used for the common good. (Cf. 1 Corinthians 12: 4-11 for the charisms list...)

As stated by one of the consultants to the bishops: “This is a moment for us to be co-creators with the Holy Spirit.” (Julia McStravog)

Pope Francis agrees, stating: “If the Spirit is not present, there will be no synod.”

SYNODALITY

Synodality is not a new concept. It has its roots in the ministry of the first followers of the Risen Christ in the Acts of the Apostles.

It was the form and style of the early church.

The preparation documents developed for the Synod highlight this fact.

They also acknowledge how Vatican II sought to recover that model of church...

But for a multitude of reasons over the years, synodality was squeezed out of the church, leaving the authority structures looking **less** like what we find in the New Testament...

... and more like absolute monarchies and corporate command and control centers of the modern world. (Car. Grech)

The term synodality is generally understood to represent a process of discernment, with the aid of the Holy Spirit, involving clergy and laity alike, each according to the charisms of their vocation.

The key word in that sentence is “process” because synodality is a **process**, not a product.

Francis is not seeking a democracy but rather a platform of participation so that **all** voices can be heard.

He has acknowledged that one of the problems we face in this process is clericalism which downplays the voice of the laity.

Francis has called clericalism a perversion.

Speaking to the curia in 2019, Francis said “this change of times requires a change of pastoral mindset.”

When John XXIII announced he was calling Vatican II, there were those who resisted it, never imagining the kind of outcome it would have.

There is the same kind of resistance today to Francis’ synod. We have seen a great deal of that resistance toward his recent document which restricts the use of the Latin Mass.

But nostalgia for the past can no longer serve as a pastoral model. (Gregory Solari)

So, this will not be easy for some bishops. Sad to say, one bishop referred to the synodal preparations as “garbage.”

Francis also warned against rigidity and the temptation of becoming prisoners of the past.

In that same address, he told the curia:

“Tradition is not the worship of ashes...it is the preservation of the fire.”

Pope Francis has told Catholics not to be afraid to take a new path when inspired by the Holy Spirit...

... (similar to the Magi when, in a dream, they were told to take a different direction on their return, so to avoid King Herod.)

The synod must be seen as a new way of being church, one with an openness to the Holy Spirit that could transform the world.

There is a Scottish proverb that I love: “Were it not for hope the heart would break.”

Our hearts are well cared for because we are Christians, a resurrection people and the central story of our faith leads from a brutal crucifixion to a wondrous, previously unimaginable new life.

Can we believe that this story continues in our midst? Scripture tells us that it can. (GSR)

As Proverbs tells us: “Trust in the Lord and lean not on your own understanding.” 3:5-6

Bishop Malcolm McMahon from Great Britain wrote:

“We are not going to be able to return to business as usual and we need to put our trust in what God is doing. The only thing we know about the future is that it won’t be the same as it is now. If we walk with each other, God is walking with us too.”

He continues: “This is the most important moment in the life of the church of the third millennium.

We need to become the church God is calling us to be.”
(Liverpool bishop Malcolm McMahon)

As theologian Massimo Faggioli has said: “The path is not there, it is to be made by walking.”

Francis sees the Christian faith as a journey. In fact, in his address to the faithful in St. Peter’s square on the evening of his election, he used the idea of journey.

And on the feast of the Epiphany this year, he asked fellow worshippers: “Where are we on our journey of faith?

Have we been stuck too long, nestled inside a conventional and formal religiosity that no longer warms our hearts and changes our lives?

Do our words and liturgies ignite in people’s hearts a desire to move towards God?”

Francis sees the synod as a journey to find ways and paths to bring the gospel to the hearts of those who are distant, indifferent or without hope.

This journey is at the core on Francis’ synod, which has been described as the most ambitious project for church renewal since the Second Vatican Council.

Francis is convinced that synodality is what God expects of the church of the third millennium and each of us is called to be midwives in the birthing of a synodal church. (GSR Panel)

There is no pre-packaged plan for us to follow. And this may be a concern for some.

But we forget that for the earliest followers of Jesus, being surprised and overwhelmed by God was a way of life for them.

You and I have the luxury of 2000 years of hindsight. We know the story. We know that it worked out alright. We know that the cross was not the end, but the beginning.

That was not the case for the first disciples.

Think of Mary Magdalene. She went to the tomb and was surprised by the Risen Christ. She did not recognize Jesus at first.

Perhaps we need to discover a new way of recognizing divinity. Maybe we need to adjust our assumptions about finding Christ in our midst, assumptions about discerning the presence of Sacred activity in the current state of our church.

After the crucifixion, the disciples were devastated. Their hopes were dashed. This was not what they expected.

When it did not go as planned, they were crushed.

And they were convinced that the power and presence of Yahweh could not possibly exist in the tragedy they witnessed in Jesus' death.

But in a fraction of a second, their whole world changed. Leaving the tomb, they moved out into a new reality.

And this transition would not be an easy one. They had no blueprint to follow. Their place of worship was a synagogue...not a church!

Their stunning experience is meant to be ours as well. Perhaps it may entail leaving behind previous perceptions, even misperceptions about what it means to be church ~ in order to find the Risen Christ in the midst of a new reality.

As Sr. Joan Chittister has written: "God is waiting for us to discover divinity where we never thought it would be."

Isn't it possible that like the first disciples, we are in fact standing on the threshold of a magnificent new age?

As quoted above, Francis has said:

"Tradition is not the worship of ashes, it is the preservation of the fire."

To preserve our fire, the Gospel, for a new millennium, we must remain open to the manifestation of the Divine in our time.

Like the first disciples, we too are struggling to see God working in our lives during this synodal process.

Maybe we are struggling because we are looking to the past, to the way things were...

...a time when things were simpler, when a mindset of certitude about our faith prevailed...

...when we were so sure we knew the mind of God, that we had God all figured out.

But the Risen Christ is with us **now** in the very real and very challenging 21st century. There is no turning back.

Our God is a God of promise. As we read in Ps. 89: "I will not violate my covenant; the promise of my lips I will not alter."

Pope Francis believes we need to bring about a missionary conversion which cannot leave things as they presently are."

We will not find Christ by simply repeating the way we always did things. The resurrection began something new for the disciples.

The devastation caused by the crucifixion and death of Jesus became the threshold of a new age and, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, they were sent out to preach the gospel.

Pope Francis believes we too have been given that mandate.

Synodality is an ecclesial way of moving forward, grounded in the ecclesiology of the people of God described in Chapter 2 of *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church.

This is the key to interpreting the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council.

During Francis' papacy, the reflection on synodality has unfolded as an exercise of deepening the vision of Vatican II.

A synodal vision challenges us to transform clericalist practices which makes decisions without listening or consulting with the faithful.

Synodality demands that we listen and engage in dialogue.

It is an invitation to foster processes of conversion as we listen to one another and to the larger society while reading the signs of the times together.

The early church had a more dynamic and inclusive model of being church. We can learn much from their example.

As it unfolds, the synodal model today seeks to retrieve the practices of the early church.

It is **NOT** about eliminating the decision-making power of the pope and bishops. It affirms that and strengthens it...

...but it requires that their decisions emerge from sincere consultation with the people of God.

Synodality empowers the laity in light of our baptism...

...acknowledging the need for representation in the various structures of discernment in our church

It invites us to create ecclesial processes that involve the largest possible number of baptized persons and seeks to change mentalities.

Theologian Hosffman Ospino, who is an expert in the synodal process wrote the following:

“We should not be surprised that many Catholics in the US do not understand or resist adopting a synodal conversion. A clericalist mentality seems to permeate many of our church structures and pastoral practices. This applies both to the ordained and to lay ministers who sometimes act as if they were beyond the rest of the faithful.

Therefore, a synodal perspective challenges the culture of clericalism and proposes a culture of dialogue and consensus.

To understand it, we must return to the texts and the spirit of Vatican II.”

The most respected contemporary theologians believe that Vatican II **reappropriated** and restored the church’s authentic tradition, that of the early church

And Francis is reorienting us on the path pointed out by the bishops of Vatican II.

“Like many others, Francis is convinced that Vatican II set in motion a trajectory of change that is reshaping Catholicism.”

Familiarizing ourselves with the documents of Vatican II will serve as a foundation for us to embrace synodality. “(Grimm)

In a letter to the German bishops last June, Pope Francis wrote the following:

“The Second Vatican Council marked an important step in the awareness the church has both of herself and of her mission in the contemporary world. This journey, which began over 50 years ago, continues to spur us on in its reception and development, and it has not yet come to an end, **especially** with regard to the synodality that must operate at the various levels of church life.”

He went on to warn against three temptations:

1. Thinking that if we simply retouch or reorganize a few things, all will be well.
2. The church must not lose her originality and her prophetic mission in this process.
3. Synodality needs a living “*sensus fidelium*”, a common feeling for the whole church. The voice of all participants is precious.

Sensus fidelium, the sense of the faithful, was addressed in article 12 of *Lumen Gentium* and I would recommend that you read that article.

It provides the justification of the voice of the laity in all matters pertaining to church.

With regard to Francis' emphasis on Vatican II, it should be noted that some of the documents have lost some of their relevance for the 21st century, e.g., the Decree on Social Communication. Today's social media has made much of that document not as useful.

But there are four documents that are **absolutely central** to understanding Vatican II, the four Constitutions: *Dei Verbum*, On Divine Revelation, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, on the Liturgy, and the two documents on the church, *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes*.

This is truly a watershed moment for the church.

In fact, Pope Francis is staking the future of the church on the implementation of synodality throughout the global Catholic community. (Louis Besmond de Senneville)

And I think we need to ask ourselves three questions:

1. How well are we prepared for our role in the Synod?
2. How much do we understand about the role of the bishops in this process?
3. How well can we be messengers of the Gospel in a world that aches for meaning?
(Frank Callus)

Something new is being born and it will require new behaviors from all participants. The synodal process will be gradual and it will not be easy.

In so many ways we are in a time of renewal, adjustment, a coming to terms with new circumstances...

...and Francis has acknowledged that he knows his call for synodality has caused concern for those who find themselves unable to face the challenges ahead.

But the poem I read at the beginning..."What if 2020 isn't cancelled?" is for me a sign from the Spirit or as John XXIII used to say...reading the signs of the times.

CONCLUSION

Let me offer some closing thoughts...

Twenty years ago, poet Ben Okri wrote a poem to usher in the new millennium. I believe his words apply to us today.

Never again will we stand on the threshold of
a new age.

We who are here now are touched in some
mysterious way with the ability to change and
make the future.

It can be daunting to believe in new life when we are so often surrounded by signs of death in the world around us.

But we need to be witnesses to the resurrection, to the Divine Promise to make all things new.

We have to go where we have not walked before...marked only by the footprints of the one who said: "Follow me."

The Risen Christ is calling us to accept a new and creative way of doing things.

I am reminded of a passage from the OT, in the Book of Esther.

Her people were about to be victims of genocide and Esther is persuaded by her uncle to make a courageous move to save them...telling her:

"Remember who you are. Perhaps it was for this very moment that you were created." 4:14

Those words could be said to all of us today as we embark on the synodal journey. Remember who you are. Remember too that we are not alone on this journey.

We are accompanied by the God of Promise...who, in the prophet Isaiah, has assured us:

I am your God.
I have made you.
I will carry you.
I will sustain you. (Is.46:4)

We are being challenged to risk change to create space for the new to emerge.

Others will come after us and take our place in the church...

...but this is **OUR** particular time.

This moment belongs to us...never to return again.

"In the course of history, there comes a time when humanity is called to shift to a new level of consciousness...

...a time when we have to shed our fear and give hope to each other. That time is now."
(Wangari Maathai)

Thank you.