

# SYNODALITY IN ACTION

## Keynote Address to FutureChurch

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I am grateful for this opportunity to address FutureChurch because I am quite impressed by your love for the church, for taking your baptismal dignity so seriously and for dreaming about how this expression of the Body of Christ might better promote God's reign in this world and how our institutional church could better live the Gospel values we proclaim so boldly. Your vision of inclusivity, complementarity in ministry and in responsibility, your understanding how we are remade in Christ and how the divisions that seem so important have been washed away.

FutureChurch provides a hopeful alternative to the lackluster experience that so many people have had in our faith community and that fails to engage the young—even in our own families. To address synodality in this format is on the one hand, to speak about so many of the values Future Church already embraces, yet on the other hand, is to be challenged by the reality of this long synodal journey begun in our church which does not yet produce the fruits for which we have been hungering for so long.

Yet at this moment, I think it is especially important to step back from the future for a brief moment and address the present moment. I have always been moved by the spirituality of the Jesuit Jean Claude de Caussade and his emphasis on the grace of the present moment. My seminarians can tell you how frequently I remind them not to be so focused on their future that they can't live in the present. I, like many of you, am trying to find the grace of this present moment, after our devastating presidential election, and I cannot yet claim to have done so. But we are together tonight, despite our geographic distances, and are united by our love for a church that has broken our hearts repeatedly and has not been the bold example of Gospel values that we want it to be. We are together with our anxieties and fears, with our worries and our shock, with our disappointment and our disgust... but we are together, and that counts for a lot.

I don't know about you, but I feel like I have become a stranger in my homeland. I was wondering why yesterday morning the words of Psalm 137 (and some lively musical renditions of them) kept coming to mind: "By the rivers of Babylon- there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. For their our captors asked us for mirth, saying 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!' Oh how could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" I thought maybe this comes to mind to be in solidarity with migrants and refugees after witnessing a long campaign built on the foundation of hatred, discrimination and dehumanization of these children of God claim victory. But the more I reflected on it, the more I realized I was the one in a foreign land; because the United States I learned to be proud of in history and civics classes, the USA that I felt a certain patriotism for as a Boy Scout long time ago and at many a fourth of July fireworks display ever since—and never so profoundly as when sitting the gallery of the House of Representatives as the first pope to ever address a joint session of the US Congress said in heavily accented English how pleased he was to be "in the land of the free and the home of the brave."

The America that was home to me taught me that dissent and non-violent protest were cherished expressions of democracy, that huddled masses arriving at our shores or crossing the Rio Grande were welcome to join in our prosperity and in building up a more perfect union, and that barriers were meant to be broken and glass-ceilings shattered because of our belief in equality—even if we have never practiced it perfectly. I thought that protesting wars in Central America fought with American dollars and weapons was patriotic- surely we could do better. I thought that marching against wars in the Persian Gulf and in Iraq was the appropriate expression of American values when duplicitous motives and bypassing appropriate channels for declaring war went unchallenged because of our fomented hatred towards terrorists. I thought that standing with and marching with the undocumented who were already working hard and paying taxes as well as into our faltering Social Security system was an expression of the hope that this nation could do the work of comprehensive immigration reform for the common good. I even thought that getting arrested for trespassing on land that was owned by Native Americans but used for the development and testing of nuclear weapons was in the service of a higher good... my list, and yours, could go on and on.

But I feel pretty homeless when the necessary electoral college votes were called for a man who has already demonstrated his disregard for women and bragged about his right to assault them, who stage directed a violent insurrection on our capitol when his ego was bruised by not getting the votes in the last election, when someone who had categorically excluded Muslims from entering the country, put immigrant children in cages, separated families and made every effort to prevent their unification, makes friends with dictators, sends necessary Covid supplies to Putin, tries to bribe Zelensky for aid in exchange for dirt on his opponents, end climate change accords, and again the list is endless... but to see this nation willfully and knowingly elect him once again to the highest office in the land, makes me feel quite out of my element.

And yet... it is absolutely certain that as a disciple of Jesus, I must heed the words in the first letter of Peter (3:15) to “always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting of the hope that is in you...” And I know I will get there, even if I am not there yet, because we are a people of hope and our salvation does not come from any earthly leader or nation but from Jesus who shared fully in our humanity. But for now, I am at the rivers of Babylon. Acknowledgement of the pain, mourning and lament are necessary before we can move towards hope and rebuilding. A good friend sent me this last night, although I do not know its source:

Today, I grieve. Tomorrow, I rally.

We do not need to turn to joy.... yet.

We do not need to find hope.... yet.

We do not need to organize..... yet.

Today, we can howl at the moon,

Cover our mirrors,

Rend our garments.

There will be time to reignite,

To fight for our country,

To protect the vulnerable with everything we have.

But, today, we grieve.

Our mere gathering and the work of FutureChurch nonetheless is a reason for hope. The papal biographer, author and journalist tweeted yesterday that while the US went in a direction towards exclusion, violence and division; the Church, through synodality, is moving in the opposition direction: towards inclusion, peace, and unity through communion, participation and mission. I know quite well that for many of us, the Synod has moved too slowly, has not given us tangible fruits, and has seemingly removed much of the controversial matter from the discussion table. I understand the attitude of those whose response to the final document of the synod was “so what?”. I understand, but I do not agree.

As a bishop in the United States, I have plenty of frustration about how the church in our country and continent, managed to fumble up just about every step of the process. In the consultation phase, when the noble goal of creating the largest consultation in the history of the world was underway, when people were being asked to share their reflections on the church as it is today and be listened to- we had people claiming that there was an agenda, or complaining that we didn't know where this was leading, or objecting that this is going nowhere, and many other whines from the ranks of the church. We could not appreciate the importance of gathering together, sitting at table together, praying and reflecting together, listening to each other and speaking our truths. Those places that did, found it meaningful and discovered a greater unity than they knew existed in our diversity. We were then given a summary and material for further reflection called “expand the space of your tent”.

After those sessions on various levels and after submitting reports from diocese and regions, we were to produce a report on the fruit of listening across the nation- and then have a continental assembly with Canada to discuss our hopes and expectations as well as difficulties with the church. We were the only continent not to have an in-person assembly, and too many of the delegates on the virtual assembly were people on diocesan payrolls rather than representatives of the diversity of our local churches. After clumsy and belated attempts to include priests, ecumenical partners and theologians, there was an initial assembly of the Synod of Bishops in Rome in October of 2023. The working document, a series of questions, led to deep discussions around roundtables as women, priests, religious, laity and the pope himself discussed them in open and sometimes difficult dialogue. This was something altogether new in the history of the church. A report was composed and the topics were presented back to the local churches classified as areas of agreement, concrete suggestions for going forward, and topics that required further study.

With complex questions, the local churches were to discuss these findings and ask the participants about whether or not the churches structures as they exist were sufficient for dealing with these questions. Perhaps more importantly, participants learned the method of conversations in the Spirit, which are designed to facilitate discussion that is not debate, argument or parliamentary consensus, but an actual listening to what the Holy Spirit is saying to the churches.

After another month long assembly of the synod of bishops with the same variety of delegates as the previous year, the assembly produced another document, truly a Final Document, because Pope Francis declared it part of the magisterial teaching of the church, sufficient in itself, without him having to write an apostolic dissertation about what was said. Naturally, the document was called, “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission” which had been the purpose and the theme all along. This document is divided into five parts, each introduced by a reflection on an Easter theme beginning with Jesus’ appearance to the apostles. The reflections trace the Easter experiences of the apostles including the unsuccessful return to fishing led by Peter to the abundant catch when directed by the Risen Lord, who then sends his disciples into the world.

Part I is called the “Heart of Synodality: Called by the Holy Spirit to Conversion” and describes the Second Vatican Council’s ecclesiology, sacramentology, and offers a basic understanding of synodality for the church. The conversion described is for the whole church and requires the ability to listen. The disciples, including Mary Magdalene, racing to the tomb on Easter morning and Mary’s encounter with Jesus provide the lead in.

Part II is called On the Boat Together: the Conversion of Relationships and it essentially describes the apostles’ failed attempt at fishing and the church’s failure to be a truly relational church or church of relationships. The Third Part is called “Cast the Net: the Conversion of Processes” where the Risen Lord’s instructions to the weary apostles produces an enormous catch. This becomes the metaphor for becoming a mission oriented church, and I believe contains the most hope for a FutureChurch because it acknowledges the need for less autocratic and clericalist decision making and describes the appropriate kinds of decision making processes with the accountability and transparency required to ensure their authenticity.

The Fourth Part is called “An Abundant Catch: the Conversion of Bonds” and offers a beautiful ecclesiology and theology of ministry under the rubric of an exchange of gifts. This includes the structures of episcopal conferences envisioning an expansion of their role which would result in greater diversity in the various countries or regions of the world, and introduces ecclesial assemblies, which would be more like the continental assembly- especially as they were celebrated outside North America. Finally this part renews the plea of Saint John Paul II in Ut Unim Sint for the Petrine Office (papacy) to be imaginatively exercised in an ecumenical context.

The last section “So I Send You” is about formation for missionary discipleship.

Although we’re not going to get into all of the content of this Final Document, in the spirit of the theme of this virtual gathering, we should take a look at some hopeful indications and think about where and how they can be implemented already.

Throughout the document there is an emphasis on baptism as the foundation sacrament, the means for becoming part of the church and the source of mission. “There is nothing higher than the baptismal dignity, equally bestowed upon each person.” [21] And it insists that all baptized believers possess an instinct for the truth of the gospel, a *sensus fidei*, not to be confused with public opinion or the consensus of the faithful [22] It acknowledges the areas of discussion that have been entrusted to appointed study groups and the need for a canonical commission to study what impact on canon law the ideas emerging from the synod will have. The Second Vatican Council’s images of the Church as the People of God and the Sacrament of Unity are employed, emphasizing the need

for communion at every level. The Sunday celebration of the Eucharist celebrated with full, conscious and active participation is the source of the church, charisms and mission. It describes the connection between synaxis and synodos. The synodal way is living in friendship, in community. The church should be directed like an orchestra and unconscious bias must be confronted. A synodal church is a listening church, because Jesus listened!

The document does not shy away from the difficult topics, it insists on male-female reciprocity and calls the exclusion of women “painful” [52] it mentions the consequences of the abuse scandal as it must and lists a number of groups of people that suffer from exclusion. It acknowledges that women confront more obstacles in the church and in paragraph 60 calls for full implementation of all the opportunities already provided for in canon law with regard to the role of women, “particularly in those places where they remain under-explored”. And here it states, the question of women’s access to diaconal ministry must remain open. But note well, it says “diaconal ministry” not “ordination to the diaconate.”

Regarding the diaconate, the document notes that a large part of the church is unfamiliar with the ministry of permanent deacons and it calls for deeper reflection on the role of the deacon and the understanding of diaconate as an order of its own and for those preparing for priesthood. I was hoping for clearer language about the priority of the ministry of service and charity, but here it is completely intertwined with liturgical ministry.

The bishop is described as one responsible for integrating the gifts of the Spirit in unity and rightly emphasizes the servant dimension of the role. There is an encouraging, if vague, statement in paragraph 70, “This is why the Synodal Assembly desires that the People of God have a greater voice in choosing bishops.” But there is no specific idea proposed and the document spends much more time on the recommendation that bishops be ordained in the diocese where they will serve rather than in their home diocese. This is already the norm in the United States.

The document argues that the laity, men and women, need to be given more opportunities for participation, in new forms of service and ministry in response to the pastoral needs of the time “in a spirit of collaboration and differentiated co-responsibility”. As vague as this sounds, I do find it promising in light of the whole synodal project. And this is precisely where the hope for a synodal church has to be acted upon: paragraph 77a calls for increased participation of laymen and laywomen in church discernment processes and *all phases of decision-making processes*. How do you think that might happen in your local church? With that there is the call for greater access of the laity to positions of responsibility in dioceses and ecclesiastical institutions, including seminaries and to more fully enact existing positions. A similar plea for consecrated men and women follows. Specifically it asks for qualified lay people to serve as judges in all canonical processes (I assure you that would be a great help) and what should not require a synod to enact, but very importantly “effective recognition of the dignity and respect for the rights of those who are employed in the Church and its institutions.”

From my perspective, the most encouraging part of the Final Document comes in Part III. It begins with the quote from John 21:5-6 about the disciples unsuccessful fishing, and Jesus telling them to cast the net to the right side of the boat. The Synod delegates are describing the lack of success of the contemporary church in communion, participation and mission and states that the

listening being employed is in search of the directive from Jesus about how to be successful. “In prayer and dialogue, we have recognized that ecclesial discernment, the care for decision-making processes, the commitment to accountability and the evaluation of our decisions are practices through which we respond to the Word that shows us the path of mission.” [79].

All decision-making processes need ecclesial discernment. That is a significant statement and a far cry from what we are accustomed to in practice. Not arbitrary autocratic decrees, but carefully discerned decisions enlightened by the Holy Spirit, Scripture and Tradition and the voices of those to be effected. This is the real heart of Francis’ synodal innovation. I always return to the voice of the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew in a Synod of Bishops before the election of Pope Francis when he attempts to respond to the question posed by John Paul II about how there might be a fruitful exercise of the papacy in an ecumenical church, and he suggests that papal primacy must be balanced with synodality. Francis sees this as the appropriate exercise of his office and the path to a healthy decentralization of the church’s authority structure. Building on the ecclesiology of Vatican II, establishing the bishop as much more than a branch office of the corporate headquarters in Rome; Pope Francis wants bishops to be informed by listening to their people and engaging them in the discernment of the direction forward for the Church. The pope does not diminish the role of the bishop as the decision maker, just as he has no difficulty exercising papal authority, but decisions should not be made autonomously. The Synod says, “..an exercise in authority is not without limits: it may not ignore a direction which emerges through proper discernment within a consultative process, especially if this is done by participatory bodies.” [92] Throughout the current synod process, the pope has repeatedly reminded the bishops and the Church, that the synod functions *cum Petro et sub Petro* (with Peter and under Peter) the pope is a member of the church and is not above the church. The bishop is obviously a member of the church and not above the church. I can’t help myself from drawing the contrast with the election of someone as Chief Executive whom the Supreme Court has effectively decreed is above the law in our country.

The pope, drawing on scripture and tradition, has used the model of synod in Acts 15. From the outset of the process, and now echoed by the synod delegates, the pope has wanted the Church to move into the future with decisions that can be truthfully prefaced by “it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” as announced in Acts 15:28. The “us” is no longer the imperial plural of the papacy, but meant to be a true fruit of discernment from the whole Church. This ecclesial discernment, necessary for decision-making processes- in turn requires listening in a climate of trust that is supported by transparency and accountability. How might we restore (or create) this climate of trust in an environment affected by abuse and a culture of secrecy?

Such discernment must also depend upon the *sensus fidei* bestowed upon all the baptized by the Spirit. “In this Spirit,” the synod says, “the life of a missionary and synodal Church must be re-envisioned and re-orientated.” The Synod gets specific about the process, mechanics and overall the spirituality needed for ecclesial discernment, acknowledging a rich treasury of spiritual discernment methods in our history and with attention always given to the context, with all its complexities and specificities” in which the discernment takes place. E.g. “reading the signs of the times.”

In a statement I think that will resonate with everyone gathered tonight, the synod says, “Without concrete changes in the short term, the vision of a synodal Church will not be credible, and this will alienate those members of the People of God who have drawn strength and hope from the synodal

journey.” [94] And then it says that local Churches will need to find ways to implement these changes. I know that my work is cut out for me! What is happening in your dioceses? Will you be asking?

There is also an important section in Part III about Transparency, Accountability and Evaluation. Given the present moment in the life of the Church, it would be hard to give too much attention to this aspect. The discernment process is not concluded once the decision is made according to the Synod, but must be followed by practices of accountability and evaluation undertaken in a spirit of transparency. This is not in our DNA as Church! This requires real conversion, this is where change would be effective. For those frustrated by the slow progress of the Synod, just think if we had such ecclesial discernment, decision making, accountability with transparency and evaluation in place.

The description of transparency I also find very helpful: “Transparency, in its correct evangelical sense, does not compromise respect for privacy and confidentiality, the protection of persons, their dignity and rights, even in the face of unreasonable demands of civil authorities. However, this privacy can never legitimate practices contrary to the Gospel or become a pretext to circumvent or cover up actions..”

The Synod has no difficulty in naming the culprit for the lack of such processes or transparency: “Clericalism is based on the implicit assumption that those who have authority in the Church are not to be held to account for their actions and decisions as if they were isolated from or above the rest of the People of God.” [98] And goes on to say, “transparency and accountability should not only be invoked when it comes to sexual, financial, and other forms of abuse. These practices also concern the lifestyle of pastors, pastoral planning, methods of evangelization, and the way in which the Church respects human dignity, e.g. in regard to the working conditions within its institutions. [ibid]

After this critical part, the document tries to envision the “abundant catch”, what the church that is truly missionary may look like when ecclesial discernment becomes the norm. I would like to highlight a few items: it calls for reconfiguring parishes, not necessarily in the way we have grown accustomed to in the US. Parishes are, canonically speaking, mostly geographic realities—boundaries determine the scope of the parish. The Synod notes that we need to take into account the mobility of people and consider the “existential territory” in which peoples’ lives unfold [117]. It considers the parish as a place of gathering for the Eucharistic celebration and a privileged place of relationships, welcome, discernment and mission. The parish should not be self-centered but mission oriented. It also sees a place for small or base communities for greater closeness and reciprocity.

Just as in the Vatican II documents, with all the emphasis on the importance of the local church, the local church is also in communion with all the other local churches. The mentality of the “exchange of gifts” is proposed as the approach to the relationship of churches. “The concrete realization of this requires each Church to share its own resources in a spirit of solidarity, without paternalism or subordination, with respect for diversity and promoting healthy reciprocity. This includes, where necessary, a commitment to healing the wounds of memory and to walking the path of reconciliation.” [121] A synodal church is also a church that is in relationship, walking along the

path, with believers of other religions. [123] Finally, looking at structures, the fourth section discusses episcopal conferences and the role of the Bishop of Rome and his curia.

The fifth and final part, emphasizing the Risen Lord sending his disciples into the world empowered by the Holy Spirit, focuses on formation for a missionary church. In North America, as in other continental assemblies, we admitted that we did not know what it means to be a missionary church and we need to be formed in this gospel principle. The Synod makes some suggestions along these lines, insisting that formation is more than acquiring theoretical knowledge but includes promoting the capacity for openness and encounter, sharing and collaboration, reflection and discernment in common. [143] This is certainly a need in whatever local Church we find ourselves and provides another fruitful starting point for implementing synodality. The Synod also states that no one should simply *receive* formation, everyone is an active subject and has something to give to others. [144]

It again emphasizes the relationship among churches and insists that catechesis promote mutual acquaintances among different churches, especially in light of the phenomenon of human migration. [145].

And near the very end of the document, there is most important assertion: discernment and formation of candidates for ordination must be undertaken in a synodal way. The Synod asks for a revision of the *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* for the formation of priests for a synodal church. If this is acted on, it is for me a sign of great hope.