

Introduction by Bishop Tom Gumbleton



Good afternoon! It sure is a blessing to be here and see so many of you and to celebrate this talk we're going to have today from Christopher White.

Christopher is the NCR reporter from the Vatican; and it's a marvelous position to have. Rome is one of the best places to visit in the world; and then travel with the pope whenever he goes someplace. But then, I also found out that once in a while he gets to make other trips. And he went to Ukraine in the midst of the war situation; and thank God, he got back safely. But now he is with us this afternoon.

And he is qualified to come to us to speak to us about synod and synodality, because he is carefully attentive of what pope Francis is talking about, writing about. And so, he will chat with us today. This is to listen to the point of the pope so that we understand, telling us the change, that means to the Church, and the change in our lives to live up to it.

So, I am very [pleased to be able to present to you Christopher White. (applause) Bishop Gumbleton, thanks so much for the kind introduction. It's wonderful to be here in Detroit with all of you. (*Applause*)

Christopher White

I want to begin with a disclaimer. I've been asked to talk on "Becoming a synodal church: what needs to change?" As a reporter, I often joke that my job isn't to fix the problems, just to describe them and help people make sense of them.

But I've been fortunate to cover two full synods in Rome — Pope Francis' 2018 synod on young people and the 2019 synod on the Amazon — and have been currently covering the ongoing synod since it began in 2021.



All of this has given me a front row seat to the dynamics at play here, as Pope Francis has clearly identified synodality as his vehicle of reform for implementing some of the long delayed processes that emerged from the Second Vatican Council.

So what I want to do today is three things. First, to take stock of where we're at — a practical look at what has happened to date in the synod process, both in Rome and around the world and how we got here. Secondly, I want to try and make some observations and what we're learning from this moment and what major themes are emerging. And then finally, I want to look at the challenges ahead — to begin to try to answer this question of "what needs to change."

Where we're at and how we got here:

As we just heard in the video, Pope Paul VI established the synod process at the end of the Second Vatican Council. It was an effort to extend collegiality among the bishops and invite greater conversation about topics of importance in the life of the church.

But for a number of reasons, the synod of bishops were never really known to be contributing in a critical way to the life of the church. There's an old joke that's been shared a number of times that during the synod discussions under Pope John Paul II when he was reading and praying his breviary, he was actually reading the final report on the synod, that in other words, the outcome was already a foregone conclusion.

I think it's also fair to say that both Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI were afraid of starting conversations that they couldn't contain or that they didn't know how they would conclude.

But while the synod process is a fruit of the Second Vatican Council, I think to really understand what is happening now, we have to go back to 2007, when the bishops from around Latin America met in Aparecida, Brazil.

Those two weeks in May of 2007 left an indelible mark on then Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio of Buenos Aires, Argentina that I think has profoundly affected the direction in which he's trying to take the global church.

When the bishops met in Aparecida, it came as a conclusion or capstone to a two-year listening process from all over the global south where church leaders were taking stock of the world around them, or to use the language of Vatican II, they were trying to read the signs of the time.

There was tremendous income inequality, Catholics were hemorrhaging numbers from the rise of Pentecostalism and there was a general consensus that the church had not only lost its way, but that the church had left its people — the people of God — behind.

If you talk to those who participated in Aparecida, they said it was a time of great humility and some confusion, because, frankly, they didn't know what to do.

But in listening to each other and listening to their people, they experienced what has been described by some as "a sort of Latin American pentecost."

This is, in many ways, the birthplace of Pope Francis' understanding of synodality, and in many respects, his entire pontificate.

Jorge Mario Bergolio served as the lead writer of the final document. His elevator pitch or summary, at the conclusion of the meeting, was that the mission of the church in Latin America should be "helping each Christian have a personal encounter with Christ, living with the simplicity and humility taught in the Gospel, a preferential option for the poor and marginalized, a serious concern for the environment, and prayer, especially popular cultural devotions"

If you listen to that description, I think it's also a pretty terrific summation of what we've witnessed as the program for the Francis papacy over the last ten years.

Francis was deeply moved and affected by how he saw the Latin American Church transformed itself at Aparecida and immediately after becoming pope he began to use this similar process of listening and discernment to shape the global church.

First there were the two synods on the family in 2014 and 2015, then the synod on young people in 2018, followed by the special synod on the Amazon region in 2019.

And finally, in 2020, the pope decided to tackle things head on with a synod on synodality, this multi-year, three-phased listening process that is building up to two-high stakes meetings in Rome in October 2023 and October 2024.

And the most important thing that both Pope Francis and Cardinal Mario Grech, who is the head of the synod office, continue to repeat is that the synod is no longer an event. It's about an approach or a process — a new way of being church.

To quote from Archbishop Mark Coleridge of Brisbane, Australia, synodality has shifted from "some of the bishops, some of the time to all of the bishops, and in fact, all of the church, all of the time."

Or as Cardinal Roche, the head of the Vatican's worship office, put it to me in a recent interview:

"It is a call for the church to be "an instrument of metanoia, not of paranoia."

"Metanoia opens us up, it goes toward God, it goes to others," said the cardinal.

"Paranoia is obsessive and closes down and we're locked within ourselves."

What we're witnessing:

I want to share with you two recent stories:

First, I just cited my recent interview with Cardinal Roche (which will soon be live in NCR, so make sure your subscriptions are up to date!).

When I went in to see the cardinal, we sat across from each other in his office and in between us was a coffee table with copies of a little booklet for visitors to take.

The book was titled "Enlarge the space of your tent" after the passage in Isaiah, which is the working document for the continental stage of the synod, which is about to conclude next week.

In 45-pages, it distills a number of the major themes from listening sessions held with millions of Catholics across the globe over the last year and it reckons with with a

number of topics once considered taboo in the Catholic Church, including women's ordination, LGBTQ relationships, sexism and clergy sexual abuse.

While the document is careful to note that it is not magisterial church teaching, it is arguably the most comprehensive and candid expression of the Catholic Church's relationship with the modern world yet released by a Vatican office.

The document states that "What emerges is a profound re-appropriation of the common dignity of all the baptized."

It continues: "This starts from a desire for radical inclusion — no one is excluded."

Again, I want to underscore that while the document is not official church teaching, it contains so many neuralgic topics and asks so many questions that not so long ago, Vatican officials went out of their way to silence individuals, especially theologians, for even raising. And yet, today in Rome, this document is sitting on the coffee table of a Vatican official.

Another story:

Last fall I attended another Vatican sponsored conference, this one organized by the Vatican's Dicastery for Integral Human Development. It was a conference to report on the findings of the theologians that had spent several years listening to voices on the margins. For several hours, they told story after story of migrant children separated from their families, gay and lesbian individuals feeling as if they could not participate in church life, especially the sacramental life, and women who have at multiple turns been shut out of leadership positions in the church.

In some respects, these stories were not shocking, nor are they uncommon.

But what was shocking or uncommon was the venue: these stories and findings — some of which directly called for changes in church practice and teaching — were presented at a Vatican sponsored event, and in the presence of the Vatican's foreign minister, about ten cardinals and bishops, including a high ranking official from the Vatican's doctrinal office.

Why do I share these two stories?

I think they provide a glimpse at what we're witnessing in the global Catholic Church right now, that there is a new spirit of listening that is happening, even at the highest levels of authority.

In the United States, the U.S. bishops reported that across the country, some 20,000 synodal reports were submitted. There were over 30,000 opportunities to participate in the synod process, and more than 700,000 individuals did so.

May I ask for a show of hands at how many people in this room participated in a synod listening session, either in person or virtually. Now leave your hands up if you regret it.

Let me share with you this passage from the US bishops' final report:

“Many who conducted listening sessions described being transformed by the process of listening to others’ stories and hearing about their faith journey. Those who shared their stories, especially those who participated in small group sessions, stated that they felt listened to by the Church for the first time.”

Of course the US synthesis document wasn't the only report, and the continental working document that I just mentioned, "Enlarge your tent," provides a summary of

major themes from 112 out of 114 episcopal conferences from around the world.

And what's amazing is how many of the themes are the same.

Allow to again quote from the report: "Among those who ask for a more meaningful dialogue and a more welcoming space we also find those who, for various reasons, feel a tension between belonging to the Church and their own loving relationships, such as: remarried divorcees, single parents, people living in a polygamous marriage, LGBTQ people, etc."

The document goes on to highlight the need for the church to reach out to excluded or neglected communities, among them: the poor, the elderly, Indigenous peoples, migrants, street children, those suffering from addiction, victims of human trafficking, prisoners, victims of racial or gender violence and individuals who have left ordained ministry.

And the document also notes that for the church to fully achieve its goal of synodality, which the Vatican describes as "walking together," there must be greater attention to the church's ecumenical engagement with other Christian communities.

In particular, the document highlights that in responding to social and environmental challenges, the alliances forged with other Christian confessions, religions and people of goodwill have fueled the desire for deeper collaboration, both theologically and practically.

Other pastoral matters include the desire for greater access to the Eucharist and concern about it becoming a source "for confrontation, ideology, rift or division," the need for better homilies from priests, the persecution of Christians and the global shortage of priests.

Simply put, as Cardinal of Luxembourg, Jean Claude Hollerich put it: The tent is open to "all the people created and loved by God."

What does it mean?

What we've seen, especially in the last two years of this synod process, is that almost no one is indifferent about synodality. Love it or loathe it seems to be the motto.

Allow me to give you a snapshot from each perspective.

British theologian Anna Rowlands, who was one of the main drafters of the current working document for the continental stage of the synod process, believes that one of the main projects of the Francis papacy to date is taking the core theological teachings of the council and "turning those teachings into accessible, meaningful processes so that by recovering the teachings and the process, they become the practices of the institution."

For Rowlands, and those who are championing synodality, one of the major shifts to come from the Second Vatican Council is that the church can no longer be viewed as a monarchical or vertical institution. 60 years later, the structures and processes, it seems, are finally beginning to catch up.

And for Rowlands, the key to understand what Francis has been doing over the last 10 years and where he might be going — from understanding his travels or how he navigates tensions over hot-button culture war issues, and especially the synodal process — is that he is trying to initiate new processes with an emphasis on encounter.

"Francis," says Rowlands "in many ways, believes the world has become detached, disengaged, yet simultaneously an angry generation.

And For Francis, the only antidote to that virus is encounter. It has to be unmediated, it has to be immediate, face to face, small scale and building to a scale beyond that over time."

For others, however, this has caused tremendous backlash.

Take for example the late Australian Cardinal George Pell who termed the Francis papacy a "catastrophe" and the synod process a "toxic nightmare."

Here's Pell in his own words: "What is one to make of this potpourri, this outpouring of New Age good will? It is not a summary of Catholic faith or New Testament teaching. It is incomplete, hostile in significant ways to the apostolic tradition and nowhere acknowledges the New Testament as the Word of God, normative for all teaching on faith and morals. The Old Testament is ignored, patriarchy rejected and the Mosaic Law, including the Ten Commandments, is not acknowledged."

"So far the synodal way has neglected, indeed downgraded the Transcendent, covered up the centrality of Christ with appeals to the Holy Spirit and encouraged resentment, especially among participants," he wrote.

Francis, however, seems unfazed, responding that "criticism is a human right."

The pope, drawing on his experience at Aparacedia, along with his training as a Jesuit, is unafraid of conflict. While he knows that not all conflicts are good, some will yield fruit and the church must discern the conflicts in a spiritually healthy way.

In his typical Ignatian spirituality, he believes that the bad spirit only bothers to attack if the good spirit is working in the world. It's a healthy, good thing for the church to enter into these conflicts to see what emerges when people truly encounter each other. He really believes that something greater, something that transcends the conflict, is possible.

Francis, who loves peppering his speeches and interviews with literary references, loves to quote from *Don Quixote*: "If the dogs are barking, it's a sign that we're moving ahead."

So what needs to change for the church to become more synodal?

In conclusion, I'm going to point the finger in two different directions: first to the institution and then to the laity.

Let's start with the institution: It's not a great secret that the bishops in the United States are not fully on board with Francis agenda and I think it's fair to say that the majority of the resistance to this papacy comes from the English speaking world. It's a minority, but it's a vocal minority and it is well funded, which helps amplify the resistance. In order for synodality to take hold, it has to be practiced at the highest levels of authority in the church.

Relatedly, it remains to be seen how synodality is being integrated into the seminary formation process. Has it caused seminaries to rethink their curriculum? It seems we have seen tremendous participation from universities in the synod process, but from my vantage point in Rome at least, that appears not to be as reflected in the seminaries. Do seminarians know what it means to walk alongside the people of God or are they siloed off from them? What does synodality look like in parish life? Are priests allowing for synodal leadership to flourish?

Secondly, I think it's important to ask what has to change with the laity to advance synodality. Some 700,000 people participated at some level in the synodal process. That's a good number, an enviable number that I think most Fortune 500 companies would be thrilled to have in terms of participation in a new initiative. But there are 62 million Catholics in this country, so we have a participation rate of just over one

percent. For each hand that was up earlier for those that participated in the synodal process, it may be wise to consider what you did to encourage participation — and not just among those that are like-minded.

I want to end with a final story.

Last August, at a Vatican press conference, Luxembourg Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich used the words of a U.S. priest to capture the essence of Pope Francis' ongoing synod consultation with Catholics around the world:

"Reading over the reports and reflecting on them, I found myself thinking how blessed I am to be pastor of a parish that is full of people who love the Church so much that they embrace it, affirm it, celebrate it, and thank God for it, but at the same time are not at all afraid to criticize it, challenge it, question it, and express anger, disappointment, and frustration with it."

Those words were penned by Fr. Michael Ryan, the longtime legendary pastor of St James Cathedral in Seattle, Washington synthesizing the listening sessions held at the city's cathedral where he is pastor.

About a month after those words quoted by cardinal Hollerich in Rome, Mike was present in the Eternal City to concelebrate the 60th anniversary Mass of the opening the Second Vatican Council.

Over coffee a few days later he told me a number of stories, but two main things were present on his mind: being a student in Rome at the Second Vatican Council and feeling that the ground was shifting. That the church would be forever changed. The other was of his longtime friend and collaborator, the great Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen, who had just been made a bishop right before the council began, making him one of the youngest bishops at the council.

Hunthausen, Ryan told me, "absorbed everything the council was about. Not just the teachings, but, if I can use the word that's still considered suspicious by some, its spirit. He always talked about shared responsibility and listening to the people."

Not everyone in Rome felt the same way. For over a decade, from 1977 to 1988, Ryan served as Hunthausen's chancellor and vicar general, a tumultuous period where the archbishop was placed under investigation by the Vatican over liturgical and doctrinal concerns, among them advocating for greater leadership roles for women and support for the LGBTQ community, which led to his early retirement.

Now, Francis' emphasis on synodality, one of the fruits of the council, has allowed the very topics that Hunthausen was once silenced over to be openly discussed in official Vatican documents.

Mike still doesn't know how his synodal reflections ended up on Hollerich's desk, but said it only boosts his confidence that the Vatican's synod office is truly committed to reading all of the reports from around the globe. That happy shock, he told me, is evidence that the church is still capable of surprising, and that everything that was once considered old is very new again.

I'll conclude with the rest of his letter, which was read by Cardinal Hollerich and I believe answers the very question of how the church becomes more synodal.

"The gospel tells us that "With God, all things are possible." I can't say that the same is true for the Church! We have to be realistic in our expectations. But isn't it wonderful that Pope Francis is determined to hear from the whole Church and not just the hierarchy? The idea is revolutionary. To my knowledge, an effort of this sort and on this scale has never been undertaken by the Church—not even in its earliest days when the numbers were modest. And not only does Pope Francis want to hear

from the whole Church, he wants us—who are the Church—to listen to each other. And that is precisely what happened during our parish' s synodal process. And it is clear that those of you who accepted the invitation and came together to listen to each other in prayerful, respectful dialogues, were surprised by what happened, delighted by what happened, changed by what happened. I think our parish can never be quite the same as a result, and I' m willing to bet that the same is true for the entire Church."