



ELEPHANTS IN THE LIVING ROOM

Website: elephantsinthelivingroom.us



**St. Blase
Sterling Heights, MI**

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Report on the October Synod in Rome

Introduction

Fr. Tom Lumpkin

Today, we want to talk about what happened in the Synod in Rome last October; and what are its implications for the Church and us in the coming months and years.

We all know that for centuries the task of discerning what God's will is for the Church; and then, directing it was confined to a very narrow group of people that we call the hierarchy [laughter] and that's just what we got, probably all got used to it. But what we're witnessing in our lifetime now is a distinctive shift in that task, those double task of discerning what the spirit is leading us towards, and then directing it, in that, and more and more. It's your baptism that gives you the credence to be able to do that, not your ordination to the hierarchy, or even to the priesthood.

So, this is a significant change, and one of the big examples or instances of bringing about this change has been what Pope Francis has called the Synod. He wants us to become more and more a Church where just the hierarchy isn't the only one that's giving direction and discerning what God wants to the Church; but that we all do it's part of our baptism; and this is something we really are just taking in, little by little, as we go. But part of this whole process, this listening process in the Church has been a number of small individual group meetings, and stuff like that, all over the whole world Church, and the whole world, and then would be kept up to date each year by a meeting in Rome, a gathering of different delegates from all over the world would be to Rome for a month and work things out.

And there was an initial one in 2023 in Rome in October; and we, our diocese, we didn't even actually take part formally in the whole synod process before that, because they said we had done it a couple years earlier, but not as a part of the worldwide Church. So, anyway, it's kind of been one of the *elephants in*

the living room; and why we kind of taken up the topic; and actually, the Elephants in the Living Room just started a number of years ago; but it basically started because we felt like we, being a group of priests in the diocese felt like the diocese was not addressing the big issues like:

- The lack of women's involvement in the Church
- The lack of lay involvement in the Church
- The the issues of sexual orientation.

I mean all kinds of things that they just didn't want to address them; and somebody should these were the elephants in the living room; and that we needed somebody to address them. And that's how the Elephants in the Living Room got started. Why, if you didn't ever know why we got our title, that's why we got our title. But anyway, so the Synod took place, the Synod gathering. The first Synod gathering was in October 2023; and we wanted to have somebody come who would give us a good input as to what happened, because the archdiocese wasn't telling us. So, the person to talk to, we decided was, to ask Chris White to come and make a presentation to us. Chris, if you are not aware of it, is the Vatican correspondent for the National Catholic Reporter; and he's very good.

And he came; and it was a wonderful presentation. He really helped us. When you give a report like that, he not only talked about what actually happened and what actually didn't happen; but he gave his understanding of why this happened or why this didn't happen. It was an attempt to not only give us the facts about what happened at that monthly gathering, but to give some understanding of how it happened, why it happened that way, and so forth. So, it was a wonderful afternoon that when he came and gave that presentation to us; and it was just natural for us to want to invite him back to give a report on this recent October Synod, the second Synod gathering, of all the people in Rome for that for a month; and he was more than willing to do it; and we are so happy to have him here. And I think you're just going to have a really good session listening to him and what he has to say. And then we'll have some time for questions and answers afterwards.

So, I'm not going to go through his whole bibliography, or whatever, but he's just been recognized as a wonderful journalist, a reporter; he does some presentations on podcast, things like NBC stuff, like that; and he's written articles that, a number of other papers besides NCR have published. But just for now, we just want to say that we're so happy to have him with us; and we I feel you're

going to get a really good understanding of what happened at the Synod in October, this last most recent one, so we invite Chris to come and join us.

Report on the October Synod in Rome

Christopher White

Thank you, Tom. It's great to be back in Detroit. It's a real honor. I told Mary Dumm when I arrived that I was excited about the snow, because we don't get snow in Rome. [laughter] And she told me I would be the only one, because I remember the last time I was here there was a snowstorm coming in as well. So, I don't know what that means about my movements in Detroit. But the last time I was here, Bishop Tom Gumbleton was still with us; and I just want to say what an honor it was to be able to speak at his invitation, and how much he gave life to synodality long before it was a word that was tossed around and used in common parlance in the Church and this Archdiocese and has a long history that you should be proud of. And we can talk about that, and anything is fair game during the question and answer you're already seated in synodal style tables,^{1/} these round tables, so we can have much more of a conversation in the Q&A.

But I was telling some friends, I was spending a few days at home in New York before I came here to Detroit, and some friends of mine, who are classic, you know, secular non-believing New Yorkers, said to me, "You came to America to talk about religion. Why don't you just stay in Rome to do that, you know, stay in Italy to do that." And it reminded me of a joke that's often told in Italy, and especially around Rome, that the Father, the Son, the Holy Trinity had won a free trip; and they could decide to go anywhere in the world; and God the Father said, "I want to go to Africa." It came to Jesus; and he said, "I want to go to Palestine;" and it came to the Holy Spirit, and he said, "I'd like to go to the Vatican:" and they said, "Why?" He said, "I've never been there." [laughter]

Now, despite some people, especially people in this room, thinking that might be the case, what I want to try to do this afternoon is to talk about Pope Francis, who is a pope that believes the Holy Spirit is leading the Catholic Church in the 21st century to undergo a deep conversion; and the pope has chosen and identified synodality as the main vehicle for driving this reform in the Catholic Church. The reforms that Pope Francis is trying to bring about today really have their roots in the Second Vatican Council; and the Pope, I think, is trying to give new life to that. So, when we talk about the Synod, I think we'll talk about where the Church is going. But before we do that, I want to kind of go back to say how we got here; so that we have just a common and shared understanding; and

we're all on the same page. And I've got some photos of that I'll use as sort of postcards from the synod that, and kind of give you a sense for those of you who weren't there, what it looked like on the ground. So, as a reminder, there have been multiple synods of bishops throughout Francis's 12-year papacy, and indeed, since the council; but in 2021, Pope Francis opened what was called the synod on synodality, and unlike past synods, which meant that bishops and a handful of priests and theologians would meet in Rome for a month or so to discuss an important topic Francis wanted, this case on synodality, to involve all the people of God. This was a three-phase process that involved tens of thousands of listening sessions across the world. at the diocesan level. So, perhaps some of you participated here, whether through formal listening sessions or informal ones, that were organized online through outside groups like Discerning Deacons. I know some of you have been very involved in that group, but this gathered tens of millions of people from around the globe; and then, next came these continental assemblies; and only after that did the synod finally come to Rome in October 2023 and October of 2024.

And while that process might not seem that revolutionary, in a world in which anyone can go online and offer their opinions on social media, I think it's fair to say that in the Catholic Church it was pretty revolutionary to have an invitation from the pope, to have an honest conversation about some topics in Church life that have long been considered taboo, you might say these topics were the *elephants in the living room*. Now some have even dubbed this exercise to the synod as the largest consultation exercise in human history, because it gathered so many people at the same time to weigh in; and during these years since it first began in 2021, the faithful, all of us in the pews, have had a lot to say. We've made it clear that the Church has a need to expand ministries for the laity, and especially for women, to become more welcoming to LGBTQ people, to have a deeper reckoning with the clergy sexual abuse crisis, to commit to greater transparency, to become less hierarchical, less clerical, listen, and be more willing to listen to all of its members.

At last October's first session of the Synod, some 400 delegates gathered from around the world in Rome to discuss these findings; and no major consensus was reached on some of the major hot button topics that surfaced, while the members, both the ordained and the clergy and the laity, including 54 women, who for the first time ever were given a right to vote, recognized, "an urgent need for women's leadership." There were deep divides over whether this could include restoration of the female diaconate or consideration of a women's

ordination. In the end, the final report in 2023 did not even use the acronym LGBTQ, even though it had been widely used throughout the discussions, but it acknowledged that on questions of sexuality and identity the Church's "anthropological categories" are currently insufficient and need to be better informed by scientific developments. Other proposals that surfaced last year including the idea of job performance evaluations for Catholic bishops and priests, [laughter] the possibility of women preaching, and much more

Now, although the goal of last Rome's of last year's meeting in Rome was to put all these issues on the table, when the delegates, returned home at the end of 2023, it became increasingly clear that there were battle lines, battle lines that were being drawn ahead of the 2024 Synod. Traditionalists warmed that the pope was on the cusp of overturning and overhauling all of Church teaching; and many progressives feared that Pope Francis might punt on the opportunity to make some serious changes. Things got even more complicated, when last March, Pope Francis announced the formation of ten different study groups to consider some of the Synod's most divisive topics, including a much-discussed group on women's ministries; but we'll get to that in a few minutes.

Now, some of this brings us up to this past October Synod; but before we do that, I want to talk about something that happened just before it began. Now, many of you who follow Vatican news closely will know that in September, Pope Francis took the longest and most ambitious trip of his papacy. It was a four-country trip through Asia and Oceania; and I was on the trip; and I'm happy to talk about that during the Q&A. But just on the eve of the Synod, he took a much shorter, much closer trip within Europe the week before the Synod began; and it really got overlooked by a lot of people. It was a three-night trip to the tiny countries of Luxembourg and Belgium; and the main purpose of that trip was to celebrate the 600th anniversary of the historic Belgian University of Louvain. Even before the Second Vatican Council, Louvain was known for its commitment to educating lay theologians, and is today, still one of the leading theologian theological faculties in the world. And on that particular Saturday in late September, during the Pope's visit, we sat in this beautiful 15th century building in Louvain, where the University's rector and the pope held a dialogue about what it means to be a Catholic university. You can see the here in this photo; and as someone who gets to travel around the world to hear Pope Francis at all of his international events, I can tell you this was unlike most papal events. It wasn't just an exchange of mere pleasantries and niceties; instead, the director gave a very impassion speech drawing on his own love of J.R Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*,

Frodo's Great Adventure in that wonderful novel leads to many paths. He said, "Some of these paths don't always make sense; some are dangerous, but all of them are in the search of truth." "This," he said, "was the same for Catholic education." He said that Catholic education has a need to respect tradition, but also to be open to innovation; and then, in a pretty remarkably bold address, he did, right next the Pope Francis, he pleaded for the pope to reconsider the Church's stance on the ordination of women, to become more welcoming to LGBTQ people, and to have a deeper reckoning with clergy abuse, and its cover up. I'm going to quote him. He said, "Why do we tolerate this considerable gap between men and women in a Church that is so often carried on the shoulders of women? Would the Church not be a warmer community if there was a more prominent place for women in it, including in the priesthood?" he asked.

It wasn't all criticism. The rector praised the pope for his own efforts to make the Church more hospitable to the LGBTQ community, before adding, "Would the Church not gain more moral authority in our corner of the world were to have a less forced approach to the topic of gender diversity, and were it to show more openness? Too often," he said, "the Church only provides once, and for all universal answers." And then, he used the line from J.R. Tolkien that, "Not all who wonder are lost." In another era, in Church life not so long ago, these sort of candid and frank challenges could get one silenced by the Vatican's doctrinal office. One needs to look no further than the history of this own diocese to know that but in two instances in 2024, they're taking place openly, sitting side by side with the pope. And I share this story, because I think it's important to keep this in mind when assessing what it means to be a synodal Church, where the goal is to make the Church more welcoming, more participatory, more inclusive, and better capable of listening to the voices of all of its members.

Now, let's travel from Belgium to Rome, where prior to the start of the Synod, just like in 2023, Pope Francis asked Dominican Fr. Timothy Radcliffe, who's now Cardinal Timothy Radcliffe, to lead a two-day retreat for synodal delegates. And during one of his talks, Radcliffe offered an image that I think is one of the real interpretive keys for the pope's synodal project. Radcliffe encouraged delegates to think of a fishing net; a fishing net, he said, "is held together by a rope that creates strong bonds, but has plenty of open spaces to allow the water to flow free, free flowly through it. "This, he said, "is what the synodal process is: reckoning with, a Church, where in places like the United States and Germany, many Catholics believe that the Church is behind the times when it comes to the way it treats marginalized communities. In Africa, as we saw from the fallout from

the Pope's decree allowing priests to bless those in gay marriages, there are different cultural considerations to take into account. The Synod," said Ratliff, "must ask what are the necessary bonds of communion to keep the Church together; and where might there be open spaces, like in that fishing net, for pastoral creativity and freedom practices, and disciplines can and should look differently in the Democratic Republic of the Congo than they do in Detroit."

Now as the Synod started, there was a mandate from the pope to focus not on particular issues but rather on the practice of synodality itself. He wanted to wrestle with what concretely must happen for the Church to become more synodal. Once again, the delegates were like, we are here today meeting in round tables, where celibate cardinals sat next to married men and women, and each had an equal vote and an equal voice. Throughout the month, even though the inner proceedings were closed off from the press, I met with scores of the delegates that were inside the room; and almost to a person, they attested to the fact that this atmosphere that had been created over the past two years had been one of slow building of trust and respect, where people could share different life experiences and different opinions. It was what the British theologian, Anna Rins, has characterized as a Church that is healthy on the inside but is outwardly facing; and it looks more like that scene in Lent, the month before of a Church that is defined more by dialogue than by being concerned just about being a doctrinal watchdog. That being said, it was an all-smooth sailing.

As I mentioned a few times, many of the hot button issues that emerged during the first session of the Synod were relegated to special study groups including a very much discussed one on women's ministry. Now, ever since these study groups were first announced in March of last year, the infamous study group five has been shrouded in mystery study group five is the one dedicated with women's issues. Now unlike the other nine study groups, study group five did not make its membership public; and it wasn't clear how they were operating; and the October 2023 Synod described women's ministries to be "an urgent issue;" but the group dedicated to advancing that question lacked any sort of transparency or accountability. On the opening day of the Synod, Cardinal Fernandez, he's the head of the Vatican's doctrinal office, he got up and he gave an address, saying that the pope did not consider the question of women deacons to be "mature," but he didn't provide any clarification about how that group might be proceeding forward.

Already synod delegates were pretty miffed; and a special session was added to the Synod calendar to allow for clarification, so that the Synod delegates could meet with the leadership of each of the ten study groups. Except, when the delegates showed up for the meeting with study group number five, Cardinal Fernandez was not present. Not only that, but he had also sent two junior staffers from the Vatican doctrinal office, who do not even serve on the study group. They informed the room that they did not have the ability to answer questions about the study group plans; and they instead asked the Synod delegates to line up to collect a sheet of paper which on it contained an email address they could use to submit their feedback. Now, it wasn't exactly like Jesus overturning the tables in the temple, [laughter] but it was pretty close. Many of those in the room said to me that it was outraged, from the lay theologians to the high-ranking Vatican officials alike, and it wasn't simply that, everyone in the room was on the same page. Not everyone in that room even agreed on the issues at hand; but instead, there was agreement on how the Church should be moving forward on questions related to women's ministries, and that Cardinal Fernandez's group was not operating in a synodal manner a Church that is synodal. They insisted that bishops can't just make unilateral decisions, even if they are bishops, or indeed cardinals running major Vatican departments.

At a press conference a few days after the incident, Sr. Natalie Bequart, who's the number two official at the Vatican Synod Office, admitted that, "Even the Roman Curia is learning how to practice synodality. This is a pretty rare acknowledgement from inside the Vatican that the learning curve remained steep. Many delegates that I spoke with would later refer to this moment as a real turning point in the Synod, where Church leaders at the highest level were held accountable for their failings.

As the Synod approach its end, it was unclear to me as a reporter how it was all going, to how they were going to be able to land the plane. After three years in a process that invited millions of Catholics to share their voice, I have to admit that I was honestly thinking I might be writing an obituary for the Synod when it reached its conclusion. I suspected and even feared that the final document might be vague. It would probably lack specifics or real teeth; but instead, when the Synod delegates met on October 26th of last year to vote on the final text, it contained a surprising number of targeted concrete changes, among them: overhauling the training for future priests, greater lay involvement in selecting bishops, expansion of women's ministries, and a revision of Church law to mandate greater transparency and accountability throughout the local Church.

While it stopped short of proposing certain dramatic changes, such as the restoration of the female diaconate or greater recognition of LGBTQ Catholics, it did not close the door on those possibilities, either the Synod's final document notes that access to the diaconate for women, "remains open, and calls for a question and calls for a Church that does not exclude people because of their marital situations, Identity, or sexuality." Most interesting, however, was at the conclusion of that assembly, Pope Francis announced that he would not be writing his final document on the Synod itself, as he has done, with each synod that preceded this one. Instead, he said that he accepted the proposal of the Synod and asked for the documents immediately publication, saying that people - pardon me saying that - the people of God had spoken. This is the first time in his papacy that the pope had taken such a dramatic step; and that decision means that the document becomes part of his own magisterium.

Now, for those interested in the synod process and invested in its outcome, I'm here to tell you that that's pretty good news. A document that demands or a that demands for a significant presence of women in seminary formation, or for bishops and priests and ministers to receive job evaluations is now considered magisterial teaching. The challenge, however, will be that of implementation. In the corporate world, this would require an action plan with specific measurables, and an exact road map on how to get there. The Catholic Church has some catching up to do.

The day after the Synod ended, I spoke with Cardinals McElroy and Cardinal Cupich, who were two of the pope's closest allies in the U.S. Church. Many of you are probably aware that Cardinal McElroy was just transferred from San Diego to Washington D.C. That announcement came on Monday. I asked Cardinals McElroy and Cupich what the final document of the Synod means on a local level, and how this might affect the U.S. Bishop's Conference; and they said that, based on their assessment, it means the entire U.S. Bishop's Conference would need a permanent restructuring, including a committee on synodality that would oversee the implementation of the proposals in the Vatican Synod document

When the U.S. bishops met in November, just a few weeks after the Synod, they outlined a tentative plan on how to move forward in this; but it is only a start; and it's in its initial stages. So, it's too early to assess if it will actually go anywhere. As we know, much of the U.S. hierarchy remains at odds with Pope Francis and the broader direction of his papacy. So, the acceptance of this will be uneven at best. What it does to what it does do, however, is establish synodality as the new

norm of operating in the Church. To use the language of the its final document, which again is magisterial "synodality is a constitutive dimension of the Church" in simple and concise terms, synodality is a path of spiritual renewal and structural reform that enables the Church to be more participatory and missionary, so that it can walk with every man and woman, radiating the Light of Christ

After the Second Vatican Council, there were immediate changes in the life of the Church. Catholics in the pews could tell that something had shifted, just from the fact that Mass was celebrated in the vernacular and the priest faced the congregation. I'm sorry to say that synodality is more difficult; and will take time. Cardinal Hellerich, who was one of the chief organizers of the Synod was pretty blunt the day after the Synod concluded, Cardinal Hellerich said that Catholics will not see a change immediately because, "If the path of synodality is to be followed, change will take time, but eventually if it is followed, Catholics will see a Church where they count where they are important. I've included a few photos here of some of the Senate's youngest delegates. There's a new film that's out, "Conclave," and again we can talk about that in the Q&A if you like as well. "Conclave" is focused on the election of a pope. In the film the Cardinals are portrayed as power hungry and there's no shortage of back room wheeling and dealing the synod on synodality. It's best is an effort to change that image and way of operating in the Church. It's at its best an effort to change the Church and its very structure so that the individuals and their voices have just as much of a say in their own church as the Cardinals in the room of a synodal Church, is where there is space for dialogue and disagreement, even when it comes to big ideas because, to quote the Rector of Louvain, "Not all who wonder are lost;" and in a synodal Church, there's plenty of room for all who are honestly searching, during the final days of the 2020 of the 2023 Synods.

Another encounter between Wyatt and Pope Francis went viral. 19-year-old Wyatt, who was the Synod's youngest delegate, he's from Wyoming, he had approached Pope Francis during one of the coffee breaks of the Synod; and he had a request for the pope. He wanted the pope to sign his permission slip that excused him from missing his college classes for a month. The pope obliged; but after he received the signed permission slip back from the pope, Wyatt gave the pope a card in return. It was a small white business card with two words printed on it. It simply said, "You matter." Afterwards, he later explained to some reporters when we asked him what this encounter was like, that this card that he had given back. It was a tradition that he had started in high school where he

would go up to friends and give them that card as a simple way of reminding them, they had not been forgotten, that they matter. To use Wyatt's words, "I think sometimes you forget that the pope's human too. So, I wanted to give him a note as well, reminding him that you matter, reflecting on the Synod." Wyatt said that despite his young age, he was taken seriously by all the bishops and cardinals that he' rubbed shoulders with over the last month; and indeed the pope himself he said, "I think that's important in our whole Church to take young people seriously." We're here and we want responsibility now.

At the final mass at the Synod in St Peter's Basilica, Pope Francis said that this is a time where the Church is called to dream, "A Church that is the servant of all the servants of the least of our brothers and sisters, a Church that never demands an adaptation of good behavior, but welcomes, serves, loves, and forgives a Church that is opened with doors as a haven of mercy for the likes of Wyatt." I think that's a dream of a Church that through its pastoral outreach says, "You matter;" but whether that is more than just a fleeting dream and become a more permanent reality will be the essential question in the next conclave to come; and that is something I imagine you all might have questions about when we take questions later. But for now, thank you. [Applause]

Transcribed by

Tom Kyle

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1/ Referring to the arrangements of tables as synodal likely refers to the arrangements of tables at the Synod's conferences that were intended to facilitate conversations.

