



## *Elephants in the Living Room*

ST. BLASE

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First of all, I want to thank the Elephants who, I feel, have been part of our partners and have been working very hard for Church reform for a very long time. Certainly, it's always a great honor to be in solidarity with the grassroots Catholics who care about the future of the Church; and so, we've worked together on many projects for a very long time. So, it's a great honor to be here with you; and I hope my remarks today will be life giving. I would have to do a personal reflection on the state of the Church today; and I'll look into the future.

Now, you have to know, part of my background is in science. So, I had to ground my thinking; and what's going on, what's going on right now. So, I'm a member of different groups, like I said; so, maybe, before I do them, it should just give a little bit state of the Church today. You're sort of quite a few topics here. I hope I'm not gonna race through too fast; but, looking at the state of the Church today, looking at the reality is, I'm pretty sure, it's parish closings and what happened, and parishioners pushed back, which I'm having from my

book. I wanna talk about the legacy of Pope Francis, which is amazing, some general observations, a bit about the Synod, and synodality, Pope Leo XIV; and then, you'll get Chris's crystal ball.

So, I learned during the pandemic that people, if they're looking at you, you know in a little window on this computer, talking heads get really, really boring. So, I started doing all my stuff with PowerPoint; and that's what I did today, because I think it's always good to have two kinds of ways of hearing and seeing. So, I have to apologize ahead. It is a lot of data; but I'm thinking that most of you know already and probably just happened.

So, we'll just start. Guess who wins worldwide? More Catholics in 2023, an 18% increase from 2010; more parishes, increased by 2.13% from 221,000; and this is a worldwide, to 225,000 fewer priests worldwide, a decrease from of 512,000; and, of course, the statistics never talked about the people, who I think are really the ground troops of the Church; and these are pastoral ministers and catechists. When they look, we've got 2,850,000 catechists, fertile ground for leadership in the future worldwide. Even though we've had all these increases in Catholics, sacramentally, it's going the other direction, that in this statistic, - by the way, are from the Center for the Applied Research in the Apostolate; and actually, they're from the Vatican statistics.

So, baptisms. In 1970, 14.7 five million; in 2023, just 10.7 million; marriage is 360,466 worldwide, 190 thousand in 2024. I'm not sure that's what they're saying, but I think it's an important point to point to it should be for those of us who wonder, why don't they get it about the priesthood here. This was enlightening to me; and these are the most recent statistics showing percentage increase of Catholics what percentage of Catholics there are in each of the continents and what percentage of increase, OK? So, here in Africa, 20% of the world's Catholics only had 13.2% of the world priests. The Americans, which are South America, Central America and North America, 47.8% of the world's Catholics 29.2% of the world 3 and we're gonna break this out further Asia they didn't telecom maybe 11% of the world they didn't list the priests through Europe, 20% of the world's Catholics, 38% of the world's priests. And I just want to highlight North America here, which is the US and Canada, 6.6% of the Catholics 10.3% of the priests. So, from this is the global perspective from Rome; Europe and North America have more priests compared to other parts of the world, which makes

you wonder why we're importing priests from Africa. But anyway, I won't pass that. OK?

For the United States, there's more Catholics, again increased by 7.4 million in 2024; fewer priests again, decreased since 2000 by 26%; fewer parishes - bishops closed almost 3000 parishes. Since in the last 24 years, in lay ministers 50,000, and that's from the National Association of Women; and it's just sort of breaks it out further; and for those like the priestly ordinations are also down from 1970s from 805,000 to 432,000; and, again, passing from this, OK? parishes in the US declined from over 18,000 in 1970 to 15,000 in 2024. Over 3500 do not have a resident priest, and some are administered by some other person. Again, in the US, sacramentally, the baptisms are down, the marriages are down. It's really, if you wanna look at Mass attendance, praying, who say they are strongly affiliated with the Catholic Church, to get a different story, 1970, 54% of Catholics said they attended every week. Now, as of January 2025 attendance is at 24%. It's coming back to pre-pandemic levels to praying once a week; 76.6% will have different mass habits, who say their religious affiliation is strong and it's at 42%, based on survey information. So, here we have Catholics are not going to Mass, but still have a pretty faith link. So, we have this sort of, I think of it as a somewhat chaotic reality in the United States and Catholic people not going to church, but apparently, finding meaning and spiritual nourishment somewhere place else, but while retaining their Catholic identities. And I love this quote from Emily Dickenson, "Some people say about going to church; I keep it staying home with a Bobolink for a Chorister and an Orchard for a Dome." So, Emily Dickenson is not alone today.

So, given what we've just seen with the statistics, I want to talk a little bit about systemic responses to US parish closings, owing to the priest shortage, and clergy sex abuses - and this is from my book, ***Bending toward Justice***. And just to review, in August 2023, a total of 32 U.S. dioceses and 3 religious orders had filed for bankruptcy protection as a direct result of clergy sex abuse lawsuits. The marked increase in bankruptcy filings was due to the lifting of the statute of limitations in many States; and since the sex abuse issue first came to light, total settlements reached \$3 billion by late 2023 and are projected to reach 4 billion; and the vast majority of that has been since 2002, when the issue happened in Boston.

I'm just going to leave Boston. It's because this has been the beginning, I think, of a wave of parish closings. In the summer of 2004, the Boston archdiocese administrator, Bishop Richard Lennon, announced he would suppress 83 parishes if they promised none of the money from the sale of the parishes will be used for clergy sex abuse. This led to massive resistance. Catholics in nine parishes occupied their churches 24 hours a day; and some of those occupations continued for nine years. Much later, the Vatican did admit pending the closings of the separate churches. They had to do it, because there was financial ruin necessitating the sale of Boston churches; because now, this is basically shedding the light on the reality that the most staunchly faithful of Catholics felt completely powerless in Church decision making, even though it was their own time talent and treasure that got their church communities help; and I'm gonna just finish up here.

This is when FutureChurch got involved, because our board realized very quickly, because we were founded with the recognition that the Eucharist is more central to Catholic worship than the gender or marital status of the priest. And so, we were founded in 1990, when this happened in Boston. We knew it was just a matter of time; so other dioceses all over the United States will begin to close parishes, because it's all true problems for the bishops: one, they didn't have enough priests to staff the parishes they had, Two: they needed money.

So, that's when we started Our Savior parish community effort and began to work with Sr. Kate Kuentler, beforehand a canon lawyer, who was educated in Rome at the *Angelicum* with her doctorate. And her story is covered in the book, because, frankly, she was on fire with the rights of the laity. And so, we partnered with her, because, just saying merging parishes and closing and selling churches is not an answer.

In 2003 a national study showed that 40% of merged parishes lost parishioners, whereas parishes kept open with lay parish directors were more likely to increase parishioners. No one's done any studies since then; and, I think, institutionally, it's because the institutional leadership doesn't really want to know what you know; however thanks to the 2008 converging models of parish leadership, we have identified at least seven other models: using collaborative paths routines; parish life coordinators discussing merging mega parishes, which wouldn't be my favorite, commission led parishes come back to what's happening with the closings between 2006 and 2011 Sister Kate Kuentler assisted hundreds of

parishioners and lodging at least 75 canonical appeals opposing the closure of their vibrant, solvent parishes. Every single recourse was denied by the Vatican; first by the diocesan bishop; and later, by the Vatican's constitution for the Cergy. And the reason I know is we kept track of that. We were working with Kate; and so, we tracked everything.

I'm sure there were others that we didn't know about it; however, in 2011 the tide turned, when, thanks to Kate, that expertise, Catholics in Camden the Syracuse, Allentown, Springfield, and Buffalo began to win their appeals; and these were soon followed by victories in Cleveland, the Archdiocese of New York, Indianapolis, many others, just have to show their celebratory thing; because, in Cleveland, we closed 52 parishes; 13 appealed. Every single parish who appealed won their appeal. We thought we should learn coming to Cleveland from Boston. So, we knew we were in for it; and we did it the right way. So, the deal was, it was for the first time. Not only did they win on saving their church, which usually the Vatican would not uphold the merger. The merger had to happen; but, at least, had to keep the church in Cleveland. We won on both the merger; and so, that was the landmark thing. It led Kate to forge a new path in Canon Law; and basically, she identified the Vatican procedures around parish mergers and closings. No longer would Rome rubber stamp whatever any given bishop wanted. Today, Catholics can exercise appropriate canonical leverage to preserve their parish and church homes. And we can't forget that thousands of parishioners, and more than a few good priests, who's bravely stood in the breach and fought for the scores of parish and church communities that remain open today because of them.

Now, just a little bit, getting in the weeds a little bit. But, in March 2012, Katee went public for the first time. She worked underground for the first six years because she didn't want the bishops going after her religious leadership to tell her to quit. Now her leadership tells me they would not have done that; but who needs the hassle. So, finally, when we got all these wins in Cleveland, she went public; and hers was the first public explanation of Rome's rapidly changing rules around parish mergers and closings. And just what she said in that commentary is that and both the Congregation for Clergy and the Apostolic Signatura, there's a clear distinction between legitimate reasons to merge parishes and close a church; and that there's shortage of priests diocesan, and diocesan challenges, and demographic issues are not sufficient to close churches.

That was 2013, and in 2020, another set of Vatican instructions sent those three criteria which also apply to parish mergers, not just to church, to church functions, and all three reasons are often cited by bishops' reasons today. And so, there has to be distinct canonical processes for closing a church, alienating church property, or merging a parish. There had to be a just cause for modifying a parish, grave cause for closing a church. And see what was happening when they were doing these massive reconfigurations. The bishops were issuing decrees that were basically, "We don't have enough priests; we've got financial challenges; therefore, in this parish history;" and it was the same decree that went to every single parish; and the Vatican is now saying, "No, no, you've got to individualize the situation." That means, at least, the situation of that parish. And I'm happy to say, "Look, here's a picture of Kate receiving the Louis J. Trivison Award from FutureChurch. Kate was swamped with new clients; and her commentary impacted diocesan policy in the dioceses of Kansas City, Grand Rapids, Miami, Indianapolis and Houston; and they were downloading just so by hundreds of parishioners in other U.S. dioceses, as well as in England, Ireland, Australia and Canada, many more resources; and what happened is, people downloaded stuff from the FutureChurch website; and I still have stuff from FutureChurch and sort of walks people through how to do the whole recourse process.

Anyway, Kate won out of the 100 appeals to Rome, Kate won 55% of them; and out of the 35 at the diocesan level, Kate won half of them. So, this is how we tracked it. We wanted to find out now, because that was cases of the past. What helped, in 2019, we had planned to write this book together; but because of her illness, she wasn't able to. But I was able to go over and be with her this summer before she died, in person interviews about her early life, and which is amazing. So anyway, after 2019 she and I would say that this project is still ongoing. We have Canon lawyers who are helping us. So, if you're interested in this, visit this website. But we wanted to see, did the changes that Katie fought for, and all those parishes and priests fight for, are they still going on? because it's still happening; and so, I did a survey of the five dioceses with recent reconfiguration processes between 2019 and 2024, for Chicago Cincinnati, Saint Louis, Joliet, and Columbus. And, as we can see, this is the other thing, there's so much information; but, at least, at three-fourths of the time, bishops would not give parishioners the decree closing emerging for their parish; so that, therefore, they could not pursue Canon Law. This happened in Detroit. Kate had to go to

Rome to get Archbishop Vigneron to release the decrees. This was six or seven years ago. You guys remember? OK? Now, you're not telling me anything you don't know. So, these are the things that we have a right to as lay Catholics in the Church; and all this stuff was being withheld.

But now, in all four of the five dioceses, they're making these screens available on the website. They're providing education about Canon Law. They provide individualized data for each parish. They're educating about rights for the five and explicitly named the parishioner right to seek recourse. So, she made a difference. She totally changed how this happens; and so now, that these people have some leverage in being able to exercise their rights; and today, smaller parishes which they were always vulnerable with mergers, are being upheld in their merger decrees, in Saint Louis, on three parishes, the Vatican reversed Archbishop Rozanski's mergers, and they are still open. In the Archdiocese of New York, this is fantastic, the Dicastery for the Clergy revoked Cardinal Dolan decree merging Virgin Immaculate Conception parish in Yonkers it's about three weeks ago now, maybe two months; and in Buffalo, in a meeting with the Dicastery for the Clergy, ordered the bishop to keep 14 parishes who were appealing their mergers to the Dicastery for the Clergy, they ordered them, they must stay open while the merger appeal progressed. And that never happened before; they always closed them down; and then, three years later, it was going to have to open up. So, there's substantial progress; and I think it's only thanks a lot to Francis, in also Pope Leo as in the Congregation's provisions of pointing a very good pretext for the Dicastery for the Clergy; and that the decree from the Archdiocese of New York was explicit. Everything I've ever seen was amazing.

Here's the big picture for this part. Even if it is becoming increasingly difficult for bishops to merge parishes and close churches, I think this makes it more hopeful that they may turn to better options, such as clustering, using pastoral teams and, I think, appointing parish life coordinators, rather than breaking up faith communities, which are the Body of Christ. One of the things Kate found, again and again, is that the parishioners were looking and evaluating their parishes according to a whole other kind of understanding of the faith community, and how effective they work with evangelization, human spirituality and the like, whereas the bishops, in their dioceses, were looking at it as corporations, how are they doing financially, how are the capital improvements happening. So, I think they were looking at them like a bunch of Starbucks franchises; (laughter)

and it's sad, but true. So, hope that gives enough people like you, to appeal to the Vatican continues on this trajectory, which could change how things progress.

### Pope Francis' Legacy

Now, I'd like to talk about Francis' legacy, because I think it will create a future full of hope and he left us in very, very good space in terms of where we are now. His appointment from the global South, just moving away from traditional centers of power in the US and Europe, there's been a reorientation of Church perspectives toward poor nations and poorer people, rather than intramurals doctrinal litmus tests, which we have all lived through, and had stopped happening under Francis. And it's largely because of the reform of the Curia, which has made significant progress; for instance, do you emphasize the power of the Dicastery for the Faith? He made pastoral appointments most of the time. I'm sorry. It's going to change if somebody from Japan becomes now the prefect of the Dicastery for Clergy. But he also appointed Cardinal Prevost for the Dicastery for Bishops, again, appointing bishops with greater pastoral sensibility. That's right! He also imposed, this is one, sort of lesser known; I was amazed when I looked at all of the financial regulations imposed to enhance transparency, the Vatican finances which admitted were total mess of the scandals under Pope Benedict. Even the major financial institutions of Europe would not do business with Bank of the Vatican; they even shut down all the ATM's in Vatican City and London. Thanks to Francis - this was not Benedict. Let's just say that Francis had already done a lot of cleanups in Buenos Aires. They knew what they were doing when they elected him. He brought modern, common standards at competitive bidding procedures, cut salaries from cardinals, from caps on what gifts they could accept, and federalized the assets and investments in one office with the unified ethical and green investment policy. This will continue to be. He also appointed the Secretary for the Economy to supervise the finances, staffing mostly lay experts. He authorized, in terms of accountability, sweeping and criminal trial of botched investments in the London real estate office that lost millions of euros, some financial issues continue. There, I think, the Vatican isn't in financial red this year; and I also read some offices, to avoid all of the new transparency requirements, were squirreling away euros in cash; and I don't know, under the mattresses, I don't know. (laughter) So, obviously, the fact is that standards are vastly different from what they were.

He also increased the appointments of laity and women in Church decision making at this synod and in the curia, and I believe will continue, because, I don't think, this is reversible. Sr. Simon Brambilla is now the prefect for the Dicastery for Religious Life; and there are so many nuns in this room; and we thank God, we finally have one of our own, because for centuries, literally, there have been three to five times as many non-religious, female religious than there were religious brothers. So, this should have happened, probably two centuries ago; but at least, it happened. An Italian, Sr. Raphael Petrini, is now head of the Vatican City State. We've all heard of Sr. Valerie Richard, Under Secretary of the Synod on synodality. He opened the Synod to voting by lay people and women. More about that later. He gave three women to the Dicastery for Bishops so the female insight will be brought to bear on who will be leading their diocese around the world. He also appointed women to lead half of the seats on the Vatican economic council. He gets criticized because of the female deacon thing; and, I think, rightly so; but you have to also praise systemically what he's done to integrate women into the structures of our Church government.

Of course, we can't forget about St. Mary Magdalene, put her on par with male apostles and changing her July 22nd celebration from a memorial to a feast day. But in 1996 everybody thought that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute, right? And not the first witness to the resurrection. So, this is the big thing, OK? You see, he developed new norms for holding bishops accountable, with required clergy to report allegations, created back in August, disciplines of accusers, defrocked Cardinal McCarrick, made documents; and this is huge, made documents from internal Church files and available, which most of our diocese have not lived up to, demanded the resignations of Chilean bishops complicit with and sex abuse cover up; and this was after he defended him vigorously; and then found out he was wrong. He had the humility to ask for forgiveness of this Chilean Bishops' issue.

This is another little-known thing I think that came out of his encyclical with *Laudato Si*. He noted the imaginations of younger Catholics to engage in creating and supporting an economy that works for both our people and the planet. In May 2019 Francis invited young economists, entrepreneurs and thought leaders from all over the world to brainstorm ways of making the global economy more responsive to the poor and to the planet. It's called the

Economy of Francesco; and since its founding, the initiative has challenged and inspired thousands of young economists and entrepreneurs, one of whom is right here in Detroit, Elizabeth Garland, to create a new economic paradigm that values the earth and the earth's people and not only financial profit. And Elizabeth founded the Francesco Collaborative and has now joined with Catholic Global Impact Investing Network and the Francesco Collaboratives. It's just one of an ever-expanding cohort of organizations working collectively to create a new economic paradigm that serves people rather than sacrificing them to a profit, first mentality, according to the Global Impact Investing Network; and I think this is key impact. Investments are made with the intention of generating positive measurable social and environmental impact, as well as a financial return. So, these are very reasonable investments,

LGBTQ. Francis, "Who am I to judge." Who will forget that statement? He authorized same-sex blessings in a definitive document *Fiducia Supplicans*. He allowed trans-gender people to be baptized, and to serve as godparents; and he opened the way for divorced and civilly remarried Catholics to receive communion; and I go through the internal form and most creative paths for ministers, that I know of, have been doing this for years; but he made it OK. He also streamlined the annulment procedures. He fostered interfaith dialogue, and with all people of good will, and forged ties with Islam, the first Pope to visit both the Arabian peninsula and Iraq.

This is a favorite theme of Francis; and God only knows how much we need it today. He denounced global indifference about migrants. He visited Lampedusa; it's one of the first things where so many migrants were being killed or dying in their attempts to find, to survive. Syrian refugees. He decried the internment conditions of migrants at the US - Mexico border. He said, "Building a wall is not Christian," that the penalty inadmissible in all cases clear weapons mere possession is immoral. And so, all of these are advances of what in terms of something that we already had, OK?

### General Observations – Present and Future Trends

This is just some of my own things that I think are important to both now and for the future: One. From each side of hope are the strength of our Catholic educational institutions. In the future I think as the nation founded on solidarity, bearing these volunteers. These are all sustaining, and growing, and providing

new leadership in the Church. I could talk a long time about nuns, because we are in decline as much as the priest; but it's been out of awareness that maybe what we had, was what we needed at the time. Maybe what we need now, maybe we have, what we need for now; and I can only attest to the younger women, who are joining my congregation. It gives me great hope for the future, and in particular, there's this whole thing, receiving religious life, not RECED, but REXEDING, with the recognition that we're an increasingly global sisterhood; and it gives greater cultural diversity, which is a sign of hope. I also think, and again I'm aware of that in this room we stand on the shoulders of giants, among our women, theologians and biblical scholars; and this is continuing, because for, once again, the biblical and classical interpretation, and historicizing happening through the lens, through that of those historically on the margins; and one is the female theologians; and just to note, how much of what that wisdom is being integrated into the Synod and elsewhere.

I'm gonna give a shout out to my own book, *Chrispina and Her Sisters*,<sup>17</sup> which we're covering for the first time. It's now available. There was a study of the archaeological evidence for women in early Christianity, in women's exercise of authority, based on exhaustive study of 4th century tombs, showing women in preaching, proclaiming teaching positions on there too, at a time when women were being told to be silent. So, the literary text tells you one thing, and the archaeology tells you something else. So, that was fun, OK? And I also wanted to shout out, thinking to Catholic women priests. It was an initiative started by FutureChurch and others, I think, it might be about 8 or 10 years ago; and they have now gone through the entire lectionary. You can find it online; and again, if women prepare competent women pastoral ministers, biblical scholars, some, many of whom, are in this room, preaching scripture through the lens of female experience; and, I think, in some ways, that initiative alone may be one of the engines making it safe for female liturgical leadership in the Church, because it's not something to be afraid of. It's a new opening on different aspects of the text can work at Discerning Deacons, while we kept women priests, Women's Ordination Conference, all of Dignity USA, New Ways Ministry, all of those will continue. Another side of hope, people of color, women and black, theologizing: Sr. Shawn Copeland and Diana Hayes. This is all part of now; but it's also part of the future; and if it's the same situation.

## Synod on Synodality

Now, I want to go to where my favorite topic is. Here, the synod is fitted inside synodality, because this program is made to happen, having lived through what I think of as the burning times, and every service property on the planet. It's the synod on synodality. If you'll forgive me, suddenly it was OK for FutureChurch to have all our information on the Synod website, and when this organization conference too. And so, to quote, and I think this is the other thing that just shows you how things happen. Many of you may know in our book, *Church, Charism and Power*, and Leonardo Boff's whole idea that the role of the leadership to facilitate the flaring up of the comparisons of all of the people of God. So, it's really good for history; and that it's not to be up here telling what you do, it's to me, "Let's notice what the gifts are, and let those up." So, if you wanna hold different idea of how Church authorities should function in the Church, in his book *Church, Charisms and Power*, liberation theology, and institutional churches attracted a lot of negative attention from Cardinal Ratzinger, who had been his teacher. So, we don't like that; but the Synod on Synodality is a direct outcome of the boss recognition that leadership in the Church derives from the charism; and first of all, not from some top-down person. So, he said, "There are powerful and living forces, particularly the grassroots, that are not sufficiently recognized; for the grassroots are asking for a new structure, the new ecclesial division of labor, the religious power for this new vision of the Church is necessary." So, that's the quote from this book. There's a reason to believe that Boston phraseology influence Francis own vision of synodality in Church governance. Francis met with the father of liberation theology, Gustavo Gutierrez, that encyclical for the earth. He also called in Leonardo Boff to consult with him on *Laudato Si*. So, here's evidence.

So, this was a three-year process in which conversations in the Spirit and parishes, and diocese all over the world. This included Church reform communities like FutureChurch, Women's Ordination Conference, Dignity, New Ways Ministry, all of our religious communities, kind of why some do the grassroots all over the continental conversations; and then, we had two sessions.

So, it was interactive, which is far different from previous synods, that was really wrong for both the synod on the Eucharist; and then, then the synod on the Word; and it was deadly dull; and now it's synod members sitting around the table, when they shop after some other favorite input. That's what happens; it was dead; nothing happened. This took about 364 members: 96 were not bishops; and they were given the right to vote. There were 54 women, 25 nuns,

29 lay women, 14 lay men, 27 priests, and two religious brothers. And what seeded all of their conversations is what had gone before, the input from all over the world; and I have to give a shout out to the Synod office, the office on the Synod of Bishops, that we created an incredible website that made it very easy for people to do their own processes, even if nothing was happening in their diocese, which was sadly too true for too many in the United States.

So, the final report issued in October 2024, and I just want to highlight this, is the first time in history that the Synod of Bishops, usually what happens with these synods, and the synod of the Word and the synod of the Eucharist, first, everybody gives their input. They come up with 20 or 30 propositions. They all go into some nebulous black hole in some Vatican offices; nobody hears anything about it, again, until two years later, when the pope issues it in that apostolic exhortation. It hardly touches with what the propositions were; and I can just tell you, because I watched it. Francis said, "No! This final report is the report this is part of the ordinary magisterium of the Church." This is huge, because it now has official status as Church teaching. I can't even tell you how monumental that is, because it has the input for the first time from lay people, women, others.

I'm just gonna hit some of the highlights: transparency and accountability, because this is really what's gonna see the future. That's why I wanna spend some time with you. It's revises from my normal perspective to Church law revision, to mandate greater transparency and accountability throughout the Church; and the monitors are improving financial best practices, finance councils, involvement of leading and pastoral financial planning; and again, this is definitive teaching. So, this is supposed to happen: annual audits, the centralization of decision making, more study to determine what matters, that doctrinal authority should be reserved to the Pope, and what matters can be decided or enacted by Episcopal Conferences.

This has been placed into one of ten study groups that were not dealt with in depth. We have trouble saying it; but we're supposed to have report in July or in June about this. So, people wondered if this didn't come up at all in 2024, even though it was named in the Synod report. Well, what about celibacy? What about mandatory celibacy? What is going on? Well, my own thought is, celibacy is a disciplinary situation; it's not doctrinal. We have a long history of male celibacy in the Church. This is something that theoretically could be

addressed by the Bishops' Conferences of the world, according to the meetings. So, stay tuned. We'll see what happens in June 2025, as a result of further unpacking of what this could mean: further collaboration of continental groupings, and the physical episcopal conferences. In other words, they want more connecting around practices, central practices, consulting, more consultations from Roman dicasteries, with Bishops' conferences, more collaboration from young members of the College of Cardinals, establishing a council of patriarchs. This is sort of all of the internal organization, things that are gonna allow people to know one another.

These were in the final report: greater involvement of lay people in selecting bishops, form of implementation of all leadership opportunities, already live in Canon Law, for women that are currently under-employed. One of them is preaching; lay preaching is on. They also want an overhaul of training for future priests. They asked for a significant presence of women in Catholic seminaries. This is a far cry from 15 years ago, 20 years now, women were ejected from Catholic seminaries. Seminarians were told they could not have a woman as a spiritual director; they were not allowed to be teachers. So, sometimes things have to get worse before they can get better, for making parish and diocesan pastoral councils mandatory, and creating a new synodal study group to examine how the Church liturgical celebrations can offer better expression of synodality. Who knows what that will be; but these are all things that were mandated in the final report. And, I say, mandated.

They did a whole thing on safeguarding minors, vulnerable adults. They called for a Church that does not, you see. Now these are the sort of the difficult issues: LGBTQ, women deacons; but they weren't silent on it, either in the final report. It called for a Church that does not exclude people because of their marital standard situation, identity, or sexuality. They noted that women continue to encounter obstacles in obtaining a fuller recognition in all the areas of Church life; and they specifically cited stated: "The question of female deacons that remains open." Now we should note that there were energies that they did not want that on the table at all. I think there was a significant portion within a development. So, they said, "No, you cannot do this; you cannot close this down unless we remain open; and so, we've got stated. God bless them.

So, what now? Well, the synodal process will continue; and this is the local Churches and groups of Churches are now going to implement it in their

different contexts and the authoritative proposal contained in the document; noting time is still needed to arrive at decisions involving the whole Church; and this is particularly true for the topics entrusted to the ten study groups; and one of them was really because one came from the conclusion of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, and did not put an end to the synodal process.

And so, these ten synod groups were designed to address issues needing more time. It's just needed; more simply, because there were well praised juridical and pastoral repercussions. So, groups were created by the Synod office with joint agreement from each of the dicasteries involving to call pastors and experts from all continents to take part in them; and then, taken into consideration, not only existing studies, but also, the most relevant current experience in the People of God.

So, the interim report was given in October; the final report will be given in June. And here's the 10 issues: aspects of the relationship between Eastern Catholic Churches and the Latin Church, listening to the cry of the poor, the mission in the digital environment, the revision of the document governing priestly formation in a missionary, synodal perspective. They're revising what should be intended, what's happened before. It should be happening with some on theological and canonical matters regarding specific ministerial terms; and this SR 8 and 9, They're specifically referencing items in the Synod report, that again, came from all over the world; and one of them was the charism that mission of the laity, recognizing that lay people are increasingly entrusted with tasks and ministries within the Church, theological reflection and canonical provisions that must be reconciled with these important developments.

And the deal is, we found it yet in canon law what lay ministries, what lay things are. I don't feel logical and canonical issues, and this incident, report 9, has to do with women in the life of men and mission of the Church; and again, women and need to assure that women can participate in decision making processes and assume roles of responsibility. Francis wants more women in all the decision-making structures in the Vatican. He wants this to happen in every diocese in that operation, in every country in the world.

So, Canon Law should be adapted. Accordingly, canon lawyers were appointed to the various study groups; Leo XIV is a doctor in Canon Law. So,

we'll see how that plays out. You don't have to research on women's access to the diaconate that said that the liturgical texts and levels have to be more attentive to using exclusion, range of words images, and narratives that draw with greater vitality on woman's experience. Again, condition of the documents between the relationship between bishops, consecrated life, and increasing of association. So, I'm just gonna suggest that maybe this came right out of the inquisition. (laughter) Remember when the bishops in the United States went after the nuns of the United States; and that didn't work out well for them. It didn't work out well for us either; but it's a good thing, right?

Here are some aspects of the person and ministry of the Bishop:

- The relationship between Bishop, consecrated life and ecclesial associates
- Criteria for selecting candidates to the episcopacy
- Judicial function of the Bishops
- Nature and course of *ad limina* visits from a missionary and synodal perspective
- Structure and process for regular verification of the bishop's work, with reference to:
  - The style of his authority
  - The economic administration of the diocese's assets
  - The functioning of participatory bodies
  - Protection against all kinds of abuses.

to get their functioning; and the bishops, and this is important, feature of course is the *ad limina*. That means when bishops go to the Rome and report part of the deal. Now when they go, they have to report on how they did. "We implemented what happened, the recommendations from these final documents.

So, I just wanted to say that because one of the big deals is, we've lived through too much. There's no accountability in among our leadership; and so, part of the thing that the Synod wanted to fix was the structures and processes, to regularly verify what the bishops doing, Instead of authority and the economic administration and advised assets, the function of participatory values, and protection against all kinds of abuses. This is an asset that this supports in report 12, This could have very big ramifications for bishops being held accountable for their ministry, just like everybody, just for their response.

And this is a good one that I underlined: the aspects of the person and ministry of the bishop; the question of the relationship between the sacrament of holy orders, and jurisdiction needs to be examined in depth. Right now, the only people who have, until Francis, have juridical standards in the Church are the ordained, pretty much. I'm not the first one to suggest that; but it has been suggested that we link jurisdiction or values in the Church to baptism rather than to ordination. Let's look at a whole lot of folks, like the fact that they named it from these listening sessions all over the world. It's a pretty big deal, OK?

I don't wanna go too far, but another theological how again; this comes right out of the burning times under pope John Paul II and Ratzinger, when they were going after every theologian; they didn't like what they thought. They're saying, "We need to do a better job of discerning what's happening with controversial issues in the Church". What are the conditions that make possible theological and cultural resource, research, and knowing, starting from the daily experience of God's holy people; and this is one of the big theological aha moments since Vatican II. You start with what your experience is of God. You don't go somewhere and just pull it out of your head. So, it's just to see that reference, the knowledge, the role of papal representative, and a missionary synodal perspective, the reception of the fruits of the Council.

So, next and we'll see what happens with those 10 days in June; and they may not all come to fruition. There are different timelines; but right now, as of March 15<sup>th</sup>, God bless Francis as he's entering his last days. He approved the start of a process of accompaniment, calling for the worldwide Church leadership of the worldwide Church to accompany the people of God in their reception outcomes of the synod of synodality; and so, there's a whole other process underway over the next three years, diocesan bishops conferences, many associations, etc. According to the great design principles, will work to integrate the synodal principles, with the guidance of the Vatican issued documents scheduled to be published in May, this month. It hasn't come out yet, but just so you know.

So, the synod isn't over; there's more, because further evaluation assemblies of this incumbent process will be happening from 2027 to early 2028; and progress will be discussed at the final synodal, ecclesial assembly in the Vatican about it in October 2028, where Church leaders will reflect on the similar journey.

There's a big thing to note here, the word "influential assemblies." Usually, every three years or every two years, or whatever, we have a synod of bishops. The next thing, there's no synod of bishops now until 2028, when we're having an ecclesial assembly. There's no gathering, no worldwide leadership, until 2028, when I expect it will once again, and some bishops, as well as leaders. So, I don't know how long this will last; but it speaks volumes about how Francis was thinking about the future of the Church. Again, think of it as an application of the directives as a process of reception, OK?

He also noted that this implementation plan provides a framework for implementing the results of the ten Vatican appointed study groups, which have been examining key issues. And we already talked about what these are. They're setting up structures so that they are holding themselves accountable for what they said we should be doing. Now, of course, Pope Francis, he went home to God; and I'm grateful for him. It's hard for us. We would have liked to have him here; but that's never right. God knows what God is about; but every time a pope dies, everything stops; and so, the work of the synod is suspended now. However, Cardinal Grech, who is the head of the Synod office sent a letter to Pope Leo on May 12th saying, "We stand fully available to offer our service in spirit of collaboration and obedience." Hopefully Pope Leo will continue the work of the Synod. He's a profoundly synodal man. The Synod under secretary, Bishop Moran, who is an undersecretary with Sister Natalie, He's an Augustinian, and a longtime friend of Pope Leo XIV. In May, on a May 15th interview, he described his friend as a profoundly synodal man; and he also said we must overcome the premeal clericalist and power-driven Church. Tell me how you really feel. And also, the other extreme, which I thought was the right balance of the assembly Church, where everything is the same and charisms vocations are dilute. So, you see, a great respect for the variety of charisms in the church, OK?

### Leo XIV

Now we have Leo XIV; and I don't know how many other people were amazed; but I was amazed. I did think 3 weeks before I'm looking at all and see – I'm sort of a political junkie when it comes to the Church - so I noticed this Cardinal Prevost; and he's been in Peru; and then Francis made him a bishop; and then, Francis brought him to the Congregation for Bishops; and then, I think, Francis would like this guy to take his place - words in my head and second thought. It's like water, but the Conclave will never go for it, because he's an American,

you know; but the Conclave went for it, an American pope, like, I'm grateful. So, we'll see. I'm always in a position of trust but verify.

So, Leo XIV, an American pope. I think he will continue Francis' legacy in the Synod. He is a significant global counterweight, something from which I am heartily grateful to our president, and his corruption, and callous disregard for the poor. Tell me how you really feel, Chris. I know; I'm grateful for that. I'm just happy to see an American on the world stage that I could be proud of. I honestly think this will also be very attractive to young people. He worked closely with the three women Francis appointed to the Dicastery for Bishops, He is reputedly more traditional than Francis on LGBTQ issues; but that was in 2012. And I think he may have moved; that remains to be seen. And, of course, this is me with my political thinking; whether he will permit married priests and women deacons is yet to be determined; but he could be influenced by the Synod and synod center. And again, I hope that's not the only litmus test.

### Conclusion – Chrystal Ball

So, we're finally coming to the conclusion. Here's my crystal ball: If the promise of a synodal culture truly takes place, we could really see an increased dynamism in investment by the people of God, who embrace new Church structures, leadership, and decision-making processes, that are inclusive, transparent, and accountable. This may lead to some of the changes many Catholics like us have long sought, around optional celibacy, women's ordination, and full recognition of the holiness of LGBTQ people. My other thought is, if the institutional intransigence continues about opening ordination, we will see continued attempts by U.S. bishops to close viable parish communities because of the priest shortage. That I don't think that's gonna go away. We could see Rome continue but Rome will continue to uphold parishes who exercise their rights to appeal unjust closings or mergers. This could also lead to increasingly lay led communities, at least in the global North. It can also lead to increasing negative impact on the vitality of parishes and Catholic sacramental life in our global North. And I hope I'm wrong about that.

So, there's no significant changes about increasing women in decision making in sacramental ministry, LGBTQ outreach can now, if there are no significant changes, I can anticipate – this is the bad part part of my crystal ball - I anticipate continued decline in women's output, LGBTQ, youth connecting with Catholicism And it was a recent study with younger women, that showed for the

first time in history, younger women were less likely to be engaged in the Catholic faith than younger men were; and you we will also see a continued sacramental decline, because women are the traditional carriers of faith formation in families. My nephew is the one who brings all of his kids to church; so, he's an exception, But, by and large, that's how it is.

That said, despite the chaotic reality of people not going to church, and finding meaning and nourishment elsewhere, the reality is, the Holy Spirit does her best work in chaos. The Spirit hovered over the waters, everything was a mess; and then, the Spirit did her thing. So, that's where my trust is. So, meanwhile, life in parishes, small faith communities, Catholic educational institutions, is the fertile ground for which our future as the people of God will emerge. This is a quick reminder: with a very small band of women and men who in the course of three centuries actually changed the face of the Roman Empire; so, we have to remember, we stand on the shoulders of giants. Amen. (Applause)

Transcribed by

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