

# **Mass for the Opening of the Diocesan Phase of the XVI Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops**

**Homily of Bishop John O. Barres**

**St. Agnes Cathedral**

**Sunday, October 17, 2021 11:00am CFN Mass**

1. The Second Vatican Council bequeathed many gifts to the People of God. Throughout his pontificate, Pope Francis has highlighted one in particular: synodality.

If the word is unfamiliar, the Holy Father offers a definition. He says, “Synodality is an expression of the Church’s nature, her form, style and mission...[before reminding us that] the word ‘synod’...means ‘journeying together.’”<sup>1</sup>

Understood this way, we can see with the Pope that synodality - *journeying together* - has been the way of the Church since tongues of fire came upon the first Apostles and the Holy Spirit drove them to proclaim the Good News that Jesus Christ is Lord.

As we heard today, the *Acts of the Apostles* relates this wondrous Pentecost moment. It then proceeds to tell “the story of [the] journey that started [that day] in Jerusalem, passed through Samaria and Judea, then on to the regions of Syria, Asia Minor, Greece, [before] ending up in Rome.”<sup>2</sup>

The story of the *Acts of the Apostles* – indeed the story of the Church through the centuries – is a story that, in the words of Pope Francis, “reveals how God’s word, and the people who heed and put their faith in that word, journey together.”<sup>3</sup>

2. Since the close of the Second Vatican Council, the Church has *journeyed together* at every level: be it parish or diocesan, regional or national, continental or

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<sup>1</sup>Address of Pope Francis to the Faithful of the Diocese of Rome, Paul VI Audience Hall, September 18, 2021.

<sup>2</sup>Address of Pope Francis to the Faithful of the Diocese of Rome, Paul VI Audience Hall, September 18, 2021.

<sup>3</sup>Address of Pope Francis to the Faithful of the Diocese of Rome, Paul VI Audience Hall, September 18, 2021.

universal. This journeying has called for listening and dialogue among the entire People of God - pope, bishops, clergy, religious, and laity. While the term might not always have been employed, synodality certainly has been operative, and how frequently the Church has benefitted from being true to her nature!

In a more formal way, synodality has been lived through the Synod of Bishops, which Pope Saint Paul VI instituted on September 15, 1965. In the almost six decades since its inception, this body of bishops, assembled from around the world and informed by lay, religious, and clergy experts, has gathered with and under the Holy Father to reflect on particular concerns “requiring special knowledge and judgment for the good of the whole Church.”<sup>4</sup>

In recent years, the Synod of Bishops has offered its wisdom on topics such as Young People (2018), the Family (2015), the New Evangelization (2012), the Word of God (2010), and the Eucharist (2005). Additionally, a number of Special Assemblies of the Synod of Bishops have focused on the life of the Church in specific regions of the world: for example, Africa (1994 and 2011), America (1997), Asia (1998), the Middle East (2012), and most recently, the Amazon (2019).

3. In October 2023, the Synod of Bishops will gather once more to discuss the topic of synodality itself. To prepare for that gathering, Pope Francis has called for the participation of the universal Church. In this process, as indeed in the life of the Church, the Holy Father says, “Everyone has a part to play; no one is a mere extra.”<sup>5</sup>

In a recent gathering with the Diocese of Rome, Pope Francis explained the nature of the synodal process. He said: “The whole Church will reflect on the theme: *Towards a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission*: those three pillars. Three phases are planned, and will take place between October 2021 and October 2023. This process was conceived as an exercise in mutual listening... It is an exercise of mutual listening, conducted at all levels of the Church and involving the entire People of God...Listening, speaking and listening. It is not about garnering opinions, not a survey, but a matter of listening to the Holy Spirit.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Episcopalis Communio, Apostolic Constitution of Pope Francis on the Synod of Bishops*, September 15, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> *Address of Pope Francis to the Faithful of the Diocese of Rome*, Paul VI Audience Hall, September 18, 2021.

<sup>6</sup> *Address of Pope Francis to the Faithful of the Diocese of Rome*, Paul VI Audience Hall, September 18, 2021.

The first of the three phases, the preparatory phase, engages every diocese around the world. Specifically, from today until the end of April 2022, the Holy Father has asked each diocese to contribute to the upcoming Synod

Last Sunday, during Mass at St. Peter's Basilica, Pope Francis opened the synodal path for the universal church. This Sunday, at the Holy Father's request, dioceses around the world are celebrating a Mass to open the diocesan phase of the synodal process.

This is what we are doing at this Mass in our Cathedral Church of St. Agnes. In union with the Holy Father and local churches throughout the world, in the midst of our Sunday encounter with the Lord in the Eucharist, we are asking the Holy Spirit to come upon us and bestow his gifts as we set forth on this path. We are asking for the *Spirit of truth to guide us to all truth* (John 16:13).

4. This experience of synodality will enhance and strengthen our Catholic evangelization, catechesis, and formation. It will lead us into our national Eucharistic Revival. Indeed, this Synod is all about a new chapter of Catholic evangelization on Long Island and throughout the Universal Church!

I am grateful for the pastoral and evangelizing leadership of Bishop Andrzej Zglejszewski, whom I have appointed to lead our Diocese in the synod process. Bishop Andrzej has begun his work and will communicate the details of our participation in this synodal phase in the coming days. With his guidance and as the Holy Father recommends, we will “make use of existing ‘synodal’ bodies to organize, facilitate, and give life to the synodal process at the local level.” In addition to working with our parishes and diocesan entities in this process, Bishop Andrzej, in his characteristic spirit of contemplative listening and collaboration, is discerning creative ways “to reach out to the peripheries and to those voices that are seldom heard.”<sup>7</sup>

Being close to the voiceless is an important part in our journeying together. Indeed, a month ago, on September 17<sup>th</sup>, Bishop Luis Romero, Bishop Richard Henning, Father Daniel Rivera and I met with Cardinal Rosa Chavez. The Cardinal was a young priest secretary for Archbishop Saint Oscar Arnulfo Romero, a Catholic

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<sup>7</sup> *Vademecum for the Synod on Synodality*, Synod of Bishops, September 2021, n. 3.1.

martyr who in 1980 made the holy sacrifice of his life while celebrating the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

Our time together was a synodal moment in which we asked this extraordinary Cardinal from the Diocese of San Miguel in El Salvador for his wise counsel concerning the synodal process. Cardinal Rosa Chavez asked us to follow the path of Saint Oscar Romero in listening to and being in solidarity with the poor and suffering during the synod process.

It was simple but profound advice that we in the Diocese of Rockville Centre will follow. And Saint Oscar Romero will be a key intercessor for our synodal growth in “holiness and mission.” May he help us listen attentively.

5. When our diocesan phase ends in April 2022, we will have benefited from contemplatively listening to each other, we will have a prayerful contribution to offer the wider Church, and we will be situated to evangelize and catechize better here on Long Island. We will be a Church renewed and impelled to go forth on mission!

To arrive at that point, let us commit to three things proposed by Our Holy Father as we begin, namely: focusing on the Word of God; invoking the Holy Spirit; and entrusting ourselves to Our Lady. Being attentive to these three points will ensure fruit in this diocesan phase and lead us to communion, participation, and mission.

First, let us focus on the Word of God. Let us allow the Holy Spirit to enkindle in us an even deeper passion and fire for the inspired Sacred Scriptures. Let us pray, meditate, and contemplate the Scriptures in silence - for this is the foundation of the self-emptying and Christocentric listening we will experience with each other. Yes, listening to the Scriptures will help us listen to each other.

In his homily last Sunday, Pope Francis reminded us that the synod “unfolds in adoration, in prayer and in dialogue with the Word of God.”<sup>8</sup> Through our adoration, prayer, and dialogue with the inspired Scriptures, especially the Word of God heard at each Eucharist, may we be completely open to the beautiful gifts and surprises that the Holy Spirit will give us in the synod process.

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<sup>8</sup> *Homily of Pope Francis for the Opening of the Synodal Path*, St. Peter’s Basilica, October 10, 2021.

Second, let us continually invoke the guidance of the Holy Spirit. May we say daily on our journey together in these months the beautiful and simple prayer, *Come, Holy Spirit!*

And may we remember that “the Church...is the place where we know the Holy Spirit.” As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us, the Spirit is present: “in the Scriptures he inspired; in the Tradition, to which the Church Fathers are always timely witnesses; in the Church's Magisterium, which [the Spirit] assists; in the sacramental liturgy, through its words and symbols, in which the Holy Spirit puts us into communion with Christ; in prayer, wherein he intercedes for us; in the charisms and ministries by which the Church is built up; in the signs of apostolic and missionary life; [and] in the witness of saints through whom he manifests his holiness and continues the work of salvation.”<sup>9</sup>

This passage from the *Catechism* is an essential point of reference and guide for our experience of this evangelizing Synod, a Synod completely dedicated to proposing and re-proposing the objective truths of the Catholic Faith expressed in a spirit of humility, mercy, deep prayer and charity.

Third, and finally, let us entrust the synodal process to God through the maternal intercession of Mary, Queen of the Apostles and Mother of the Church.

Our Lady is now, as always, our intercessor and model. Overshadowed by the Holy Spirit, the Word of God took flesh in her womb. She stands as a perpetual witness to what the Lord will do in us and His Church, if we are docile to the Spirit and shaped by the Word.

At the start of Mass, I incensed this icon of Our Lady in the sanctuary. May we look to Mary in the coming months as we look to her now and ask her prayers.

Mary, our Mother, pray for us!

St. Joseph, pray for us!

St. Agnes, pray for us!

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<sup>9</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 688.

