

REMARKS BY CARDINAL CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS PLENARY ASSEMBLY
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Dear Brothers in Christ,

I greet you in the name of Pope Francis, assuring you of his closeness, fraternal support and prayers as you gather for this Plenary Assembly. I thank His Excellency Timothy Broglio, Archbishop for the Military Services and President of the USCCB, as well as Fr. Michael Fuller and the staff of the General Secretariat, for the invitation to speak to you.

As always, it is good for us to be together, and to ask ourselves the question: since our last gathering, what has been our experience, and where are we on our journey? Obviously, this journey has been guided by two initiatives for the last couple of years: the national **Eucharistic revival**, and the global **call to synodality**. I would like to focus my remarks on the close relationship between the Eucharist and synodality.

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The Eucharistic revival, which came from the pastoral desire to rekindle people's faith in the Eucharist, has been gaining momentum in parishes and dioceses, and will culminate in the National Congress next summer. The call to synodality, an essential means of spreading the Gospel in today's world, has also been working its way through the Church. To be sure, adopting this synodal method has been a challenge for us. Yet, with the first General Assembly recently concluded, we have an important opportunity to reflect on the Assembly's questions and proposals in a "climate of mutual listening and sincere dialogue."¹

Perhaps we started out by looking at Eucharistic revival and synodality as two unrelated things. However, I would propose that these two realities belong together by their very nature, and they shed light on one another. There is a familiar Gospel story that illustrates this: the encounter of Jesus and the disciples on the road to Emmaus (cf. *LUKE* 24:13-35). The Emmaus story shows how the synodal process leads to an eye-opening encounter with Jesus in the Eucharist, and how the Eucharist sends us on a mission characterized by synodality. Let's look again at this story from Luke's Gospel.

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After the passion of Jesus, two disciples were going away from Jerusalem, disappointed and depressed. They were talking about what had happened, but they missed the point. Their idea of things was inadequate to help them understand the reality that *Jesus was alive*. They were separated from the community of believers and blind to the mystery of Christ's presence.

But then someone encountered them on their way. This encounter changed everything for the two disciples, because it was an encounter not with their own limited idea which had led them to despair, but with the person who had given birth to their hope. How did Jesus effect this change? Let's look at the specific elements by which he evangelized the two disciples.

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First, he *joined them on the way*. If we want people to know Christ, then we must encounter them where they are. That's what Jesus did with the two disciples. He and the disciples were "together on the way", which is the meaning of *synod*.

Next, he *listened to them*, by inviting them to share their story: "What are you discussing?" Commenting on this passage, Pope Francis said:

"He asks and listens. Our God is not an intrusive God. Even though he knows the reason for the disappointment of those two men, he gives them time to be able to deeply fathom the bitterness which has overcome them."²

"Listening," says the Pope, "corresponds to the humble style of God. [...] God loves humanity: that is why he addresses his words to them, and why he 'inclines his ear' to listen to them."³ Listening is essential for a synodal Church, because it "is a dimension of love."⁴

One of the things that makes listening so hard is that, when we listen, we hear things we don't want to hear. Contrary opinions. Troubling ideas. Even falsehoods. Jesus had to put up with this from the two disciples. They said: "Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know of the things that have taken place there in these days?" *Imagine*: they think that he is the one who is ignorant, and they have a lesson for him!

But notice: this was not yet the moment for him to rebuke them for their foolishness. They were still on a journey from unbelief to belief. He was there to accompany them on that journey, not to force its conclusion. So he keeps the conversation going with a question, "What sort of things?" Yes, he knows what happened in Jerusalem better than they do – after all, he was the main character in the story! – but he is not there to tell them how much he knows. Rather, **he is there to help them discover the truth.**

This manner of listening is essential for evangelization. We must have the courage to listen to people's perspectives, even when those perspectives contain errors and misunderstandings. If we stay on the journey with people, the moment of enlightenment will come as a work of God's grace.

The moment of enlightenment *did* come for the disciples going to Emmaus. It came when Jesus reminded them of all that the prophets had foretold. They needed to remember that the path of victory for the Messiah was destined to go through the Cross, and therefore his followers must pass through

darkness into light. Because Jesus had encountered them, listened to them, and accompanied them, their minds were finally open to the truth. They were able to receive the truth as a grace, not as an imposition.

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What Jesus does with the disciples on the way to Emmaus is precisely the synodal path in its essential elements: encountering, accompanying, listening, discerning, and rejoicing at what the Holy Spirit reveals. As a result of this process, the disciples' minds were enlightened, their hearts were set on fire, and then, through the breaking of the bread they were able to see what they had missed: *Jesus was alive and he was with them!*

This Eucharistic encounter with Christ changed the direction of their lives. It was a mystery intended not only for their contemplation, but it moved them into mission. Filled with joy, they hurried back to join the other disciples. For the first time they were able to proclaim the Gospel: *Jesus is alive!* They were bringing others to faith, just as the risen Christ had done for them.

This is what I said on another occasion when I was asked to reflect on the Eucharist and ecclesial discernment: I am convinced that we need to have an eye-opening experience of the Eucharist. We need this, even as bishops, leaders in the Church. We need our perception of the Eucharist to be re-awakened to its incarnational dynamism. The Eucharist is encounter. It is movement. It is the power helping us to give new life. It makes us the living presence of Jesus to others.

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So, my brothers, **Eucharistic revival and synodality go together**. Or to put it another way: I believe that we will have true Eucharistic revival when we experience the Eucharist as the sacrament of Christ's incarnation: as the Lord walking with us together on the way.

Recall the homily of Pope Francis on October 4th to open the General Assembly of the Synod. It was also the Mass with the new Cardinals. (I happened to be there!) In that homily, I was impressed by the fact that Pope Francis, precisely at the start of the Synod, wanted to remind us, in his responsibility as Pope, being himself a part of the Synod, of certain things regarding the real purpose of the Synod. He said:

“Here we do not need a purely natural vision, made up of human strategies, political calculations or ideological battles. [...] We are not here to carry out a parliamentary meeting or a plan of reformation. The Synod, dear brothers and sisters, is not a parliament. The Holy Spirit is the protagonist. We are not here to form a parliament but to walk together with the gaze of Jesus, who *blesses* the Father and *welcomes* those who are weary and oppressed. So let us start from the gaze of Jesus, which is a *blessing and welcoming gaze*.”⁵

I encourage us to follow what the Holy Father is saying. We may have had fears or anxieties about this Synod, especially if we were focusing on a particular “agenda” or “idea”, whether negative or positive. But this is not what synodality is about. Instead, it is about the way in which we are called to be the Church of God, for the sake of evangelizing today’s world which is in such desperate need of the Gospel of hope and of peace.

While many secular leaders seem almost incapable of listening to each other and discerning a better way forward, we as Catholic bishops have something better to offer people: the hope and trust that come from being the sons and daughters of God. It is like a father who is teaching his child to swim. At a certain point, the child has to jump into the water. And what does the father do? He teaches, he explains, but eventually he says to the child: “Go...go! You can do it!” First, we need to be like the son: letting God the Father say to us: “Go...go! You can do it! Enter into the deep!” It is precisely this call that Pope Francis wishes to see re-echoed in the Synodal process. Then, we can do the same thing as fathers for our spiritual children: encouraging them to go forth, trusting in the Holy Spirit.

To go forth in mission like this – to follow, not a static idea, but the dynamic person of Jesus – is to accept new surprises. It means remaining a disciple even while being a leader. It means going beyond our “comfort zones”, but still finding joy in our communion with Jesus. This is how the Holy Spirit moves, and it is a great adventure. Saint John of the Cross expressed it this way in his *Ascent to Mount Carmel*:

“To come to the knowledge you have not
you must go by a way in which you know not.
To come to the possession you have not
you must go by a way in which you possess not.
To come to be what you are not
you must go by a way in which you are not.”⁶

My brothers, our people need us to be “adventurers” for the Lord. They need us to be united with one another. They need to see how our diversity, harmonized, displays the beauty of the Church and of the Catholic faith. They need to be reminded that salvation comes, not from one idea or another, but through a shared encounter with the living person of Jesus, who is love.

Allow me to conclude with the Pope’s words from the final homily of the General Assembly of the Synod:

“[I]t is important to look at the ‘principle and foundation’ from which everything begins ever anew: by loving. Loving God with our whole life and loving our neighbor as ourselves. Not our strategies, our human calculations, the ways of the world, but love of God and neighbor: that is the heart of everything. And how do we channel this momentum of love? ... [T]o adore and to serve. We love God through adoration and service. [...]

“The Lord will guide us and help us to be a more synodal and missionary Church, a Church that adores God and serves the women and men of our time, going forth to bring to everyone the consoling joy of the Gospel.”⁷

¹ *A Synodal Church in Mission: Synthesis Report of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, First Session, October 29, 2023, Introduction.*

² Pope Francis, General Audience, May 24, 2017.

³ Pope Francis, Message for the 56th World Day of Social Communications, January 24, 2022.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Pope Francis, Holy Mass with the New Cardinals and the College of Cardinals, Opening of the Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, October 4, 2023.

⁶ Saint John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Book 1, Chapter XIII, No. 11.

⁷ Pope Francis, Homily at the Conclusion of the Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, October 29, 2023