



OFFICE OF THE ARCHBISHOP

Twenty-Ninth Sunday in Ordinary time – Year B
Opening of the Archdiocesan Phase of the Synodal Process

Homily

[*Isaiah 53:10-11; Psalm 33; Hebrews 4:14-16; Mark 10:35-45*]

If you have been following Catholic news sources, you will know that last Sunday at St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, the Holy Father formally opened what is called a world-wide synodal process. Every local Church across the planet will take part in this. Today every Bishop is formally opening the diocesan phase of this global endeavour. I am doing so here in the Church of Edmonton by means of today's liturgy. The terms "synod" and "synodal process" are unfamiliar to many people. I hope, by means of this homily, to clarify what this is, and thereby give a sense of the adventure upon which the whole Church is now embarking.

Let's begin with the term "synod" itself. From its roots in the Greek language, it basically means "journeying together". Right away we can see that the term captures the very essence of the Church. By virtue of our common Baptism, we are a communion of disciples on pilgrimage toward the kingdom of God, entrusted with the mission of making known to the world the mystery of God's love for humanity, revealed in Jesus Christ. The One who preserves us in communion and guides us along our pilgrim way is the Holy Spirit, who is always at work in our lives to unite us more deeply to Christ and one another. This means that we need to take time, precisely as members of this communion in faith, to listen prayerfully to what the Holy Spirit is saying to the Church. Throughout ecclesial history, this communal discernment has occurred through gatherings called synods.

Now let's consider the term "synodal process". Following the Second Vatican Council, Pope St. Paul VI established what is called the Synod of Bishops. Every two to three years, Bishops representing the various regions of the world gather in Rome with the Holy Father to discern the voice of the Holy Spirit with respect to some of the most pressing issues facing the Church and world. The next of these will be in October of 2023 to consider the very topic of synodality itself. How can we be a more synodal Church? Pope Francis has determined that, prior to this 2023 Synod of Bishops and in preparation for it, every Diocese around the world will enter into its own process of discerning what the Spirit is saying to us right now. The diocesan phase begins today and will continue through to April of next year. This will be followed by continental phases of discernment, with the results of all these stages summarized

along the way and given as foundational material for the 2023 gathering in Rome. This multi-phase journeying together, in a collective act of attentive listening to the voice of God, is what we mean by the term “synodal process.”

If we turn now to the Scripture readings for today’s mass, our understanding of this synodal process expands, not, however, by insight into what a synod is but what it is not. This is an important consideration, because I have already seen some media reports that seem to want to twist this synodal process into something quite other than what is intended by the Holy Father. In fact, I have noticed that Pope Francis himself often goes out of his way to explain what the synod is not. He will say, for example, that this is not a convention in which pre-determined ideas struggle to win the day in debate. Neither is it a Parliament, in which opposing parties aggressively pursue their platforms in the hope of gaining ascendancy and dominance over others. He is right to issue this warning, because, as the Gospel text for today shows, the risk of having competing understandings and jockeying for position among believers has been present in the Church even from the time of the first disciples.

The passage from St. Mark records a dialogue between Jesus and two of those disciples, James and John. Bear in mind that this follows immediately upon a prediction made by Jesus of his impending suffering and death, in fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah given in the first reading. For these disciples, though, the focus of their concern is not the redemptive suffering of their Master but their own hopes for positions of prestige in his coming kingdom. They are jockeying for position! Jesus takes this acute self-centeredness of James and John, and uses it as yet another opportunity to teach them, and all of his followers, what it means to be his disciple. When he asks them, “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink,” he is, in fact, asking if they are willing to be one with him in suffering for the Gospel, in making a sacrifice of their own lives to be sharers in his very mission. To be a disciple is to embrace the Cross, which means to put aside, every day, any ambitions, hopes, ideas and imaginings that arise from self-concern or self-reflective reasoning, and to be instead solely focused on giving oneself over entirely to advancing the mission of Jesus Christ as a member of his Body, the Church.

To do this, we need to listen with great attentiveness to the Holy Spirit, and follow his every prompting, as he works within us, individually and collectively, to change our mindsets to accord with the teaching of Christ, and conform our hearts more completely to that of our Lord. It is for this very purpose of attentive, selfless, and obedient listening to the Spirit that we now enter into our synodal journey.

Borrowing the terminology of the *Letter to the Hebrews*, let us in this Eucharist approach with confidence “the throne of grace”, that we may receive through Jesus, our great high priest,

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all the grace and mercy we need to “hold fast to our confession” of faith as we journey together in careful listening to the voice and prompting of the Holy Spirit. May this global synodal process help the Church to see with ever greater clarity how we are called in this present moment to proclaim and give witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Most Reverend Richard W. Smith
St. Joseph’s Basilica
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