

- Topic: Reflections on the Synods and the Upcoming Synod for America
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In this presentation I would like to reflect with you on the following points:

- A. the synod as a post-Vatican Council II institution;
- B. the development of synodal texts;
- C. some aspects of the context of the Synod for America which would include the phenomena of:
 1. religious illiteracy,
 2. aggressive secularism, and
 3. the new thirst for the Spirit;
- D. the need for a renewed and accepted vision of human life: individual and communal.

There is a sense in which the words "synod" and "council" are synonymous in the history of the Church. The earliest recorded references to a gathering that could be a model for Church conferences is found in the Acts of the Apostles noted as the so-called "Council of Jerusalem."¹

The word "synod," however, as it is used today is not interchangeable with an ecumenical council or even a provincial or other council in the Church. An ecumenical general council, a provincial council or a regional council duly constituted in law is an entity with its own identity and authority.² Such a gathering of bishops as, for example, the Council of Orange or the first Plenary Council of Baltimore, could make and implement ecclesiastical law. To that extent councils or synods participate in the collegial responsibility for the governance of the Church.

The postconciliar synod is quite different. On 15 September 1965, Pope Paul VI promulgated the "motu proprio" *Apostolica Sollicitudo* creating a new instrument with the purpose of advising the Pope on matters of importance to the whole Church.³

Apostolica Sollicitudo amounted to a constitution for the newly instituted structure. The importance of the document rests not only on its normative nature as the instrument by which synods would be held but also in its theological references. Although the specific theological quality of a synod and its place in the Church is still open to development, it is clear that the synod represents a further stage in developing a structure in the Church that takes into account the principle

¹Acts of the Apostles 15:1-12.

²*Code of Canon Law* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1983) can. 439-59.

³AAS, vol. LVII, no. 775. For a complete English translation of the *motu proprio*, see "Canon Law Digest," T. L. Bouscaren and James T. O'Connor (Bruce: Milwaukee) supplement 1965.

of collegiality and both the affective and effective aspects of the relationship of the members of the college of bishops.

The introduction of the "motu proprio" establishes a context for the synod. The episcopate and the doctrine of collegiality form the background against which the details of synodal procedure are set. The aims of the synod are listed as:

- (1) To encourage close union and valued assistance between the Sovereign Pontiff and the bishops of the entire world;
- (2) To ensure that direct and real information is provided on the questions involving the internal action of the Church and its necessary action in the world today, and
- (3) To facilitate agreement on essential points of doctrine and on methods of procedure in the life of the Church.⁴

In this statement of the aims of the synod, we can find some indication as to the nature of the service the synod is to perform and also the theological quality of its statements and decisions. It is apparent that the "motu proprio" establishes the synod to give advice and offer information. Since the members of the synod are to come representing every quarter of the globe, the information presumably would represent a world view on any specific subject. Out of this general overview, the bishops could offer recommendations relative to the matter under study.

The council had stressed the fact that the college of bishops had a responsibility to work together forming with the Pope a unity.⁵ This emphasis on "collegiality" calls attention to the dual obligation of each bishop. He is charged with the care of one diocese and yet shares with all other bishops the concern for the whole Church. The synod offers an instrument through which this concern can be channeled into practical efforts.

On 29 September 1967, the first synod opened to discuss the problems presented to it by the Holy Father: the revision of canon law, the question of doctrine, seminaries, mixed marriages, and liturgy. While it addressed a number of issues, the synod also offered proposals about refining the procedures of the synod itself. It was clear that there were too many agenda items and that the synodal fathers felt that the work of the synod should be more clearly focused.⁶

In response to the recommendation, Pope Paul VI appointed a commission to collate the proposals and a revised *Ordo* was ratified by the Pope in June of 1969 which clearly indicated the authority of the Pope over the synod's direction

⁴Ibid., LVII, 775seq.

⁵Austin Flannery, O.P., ed. *Lumen Gentium in Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (New York: Costello Publishing Co., 1980) ##22-25. See also *Christus Dominus*, ##4-10.

⁶Caprile, Giovanni. *Il Sinodo dei Vescovi* (Rome: Edizioni La Civiltà Cattolica, 1968).

and decisions and, at the same time, established a general secretariat for the synod, as well as a governing body made up of a number of bishops from around the world to coordinate the preparatory work for future synods.

The second synod, called an extraordinary session, met 11-28 October 1969, to discuss the wider participation by the bishops with the Pope and each other in the governance of the Church.⁷

In 1971 the third meeting of the synod of bishops took place with two agenda items, the ministerial priesthood and justice and peace.⁸ Out of this synod came two documents: *The Ministerial Priesthood and Justice in the World*, both approved by Pope Paul VI.⁹ With few minor exceptions such as the declaration on the part of the synodal fathers at the end of the 1974 Synod which dealt with evangelization and the "Message to the People of God," of the fathers of the 1985 Synod, the 1971 Synod was the last to prepare documents for publication in its own name.¹⁰

Certainly according to the constitution as set forth in *Apostolica Sollicitudo*, a synodal document is not a binding piece of ecclesiastical legislation.¹¹ However, as an expression of the "counsel" of the college of bishops enhanced by the teaching authority of the bishops, it does represent a rather unique statement of the Church's reflection on a specific question. Like the reflections of theologians, the synod's statements should be the result of some penetration into the mystery of the Church in her doctrine and daily life. Like the statement of a gathering of bishops, it should reflect the pastoral care and concerns of those who are the official teachers of the faith. What gives this form of teaching such importance is its universality. The synod does not represent a few minds addressing a problem that touches all the Church, but rather a representative body of the whole Church facing a specific problem. Therefore, in theory, the synod should yield a statement that in a maximum way expresses the consensus of the magisterium on any given question at a given time.

⁷Caprile, Giovanni. *Il Sinodo dei Vescovi 1969* (Rome: Edizioni La Civiltà Cattolica, 1970).

⁸Caprile, Giovanni. *Il Sinodo dei Vescovi 1971* (Rome: Edizioni La Civiltà Cattolica, 1972).

⁹Ibid, 679; Synod of Bishops, *Convenientes ex Universo*. "Justice in the World" in *Vatican Council II: More Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, O.P. (New York: Costello Publishing Company, 1982). "Sanctitas Sua iam nunc probat atque confirmat omnes conclusiones, quae in praedictis documentis cum vigentibus normis congruunt." AAS, vol. LXIII, no. 1971, 898.

¹⁰Synod of Bishops, "A Declaration from the Synod," *Origins* 4/20 (November 1974): 305; Synod of Bishops, "A Message to the People of God," *Origins* 15/27 (December 1985): 441.

¹¹AAS, vol. LVII.

The procedure is not a unique one. Collective pastoral letters on the part of national hierarchies have been used to show the thinking and teaching of an entire hierarchy of a nation. In the case of a pastoral letter issued in the name of all of the bishops of the United States, there is a strong presumption in favor of the document and its teaching even though it cannot bind individual believers since the conference in itself is not a freestanding, teaching entity but rather its documents derive their teaching force from the office of the individual bishops who in their own dioceses are the official teachers of the faith.

In a parallel manner, the propositions or even the statements of a synod are not vested with teaching authority in themselves but rather derive their moral authority from the consensus of such a large representation of bishops and their ecclesial authority from the Pope who confirms or publishes his own statement using the synodal material.

In any case, the settled manner for expressing the deliberations of synods on through the most recent one that produced the document *Vita Consecrata*¹² has become the postsynodal apostolic exhortation. Clearly the authority of the document is that of the papal magisterium.

In discussing the importance of a synod, it is clear, I believe, that we are talking about an example of affective collegiality at the service of the papal magisterium. The classic distinction of "effective" collegiality and "affective" collegiality serves us well.¹³

The ecclesiological term "affective collegiality" has come to the fore as a description of the bond among bishops, as well as the pastoral activity of groups of bishops. Distinct from collegiality exercised by the entire college of bishops united with the Pope (effective collegiality), the activities among bishops and/or groups of bishops, particularly those of a given national or geographic region, are recognized as expressions of affective collegiality.

In this sense, affective collegiality is a very real articulation of the collegial responsibility that bishops have one with each other and together for the whole Church. It does not lay claim to exercise either the authority of an individual bishop within his diocese or that of the college of bishops as a whole. Such inherent limitations, however, do not empty this level of association and initiative of significance.

The synod of bishops has given rise to a whole new form or expression of the papal magisterium—the postsynodal apostolic exhortation. A number of these have been influential reflections of the work of the synod: the 1988 postsynodal apostolic exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, the vocation and the mission of the lay

¹²Pope John Paul II. *Vita Consecrata* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1996).

¹³See: Thomas J. Reese, S.J., ed., *Episcopal Conferences* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 1989); Thomas J. Reese, S.J., *A Flock of Shepherds* (Kansas City MO: Sheed & Ward, 1992); Hervé Legrand et al., *The Nature and Future of Episcopal Conferences* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1988).

faithful in the Church and the world, the 1992 *Pastores Dabo Vobis* on the formation of priests in the circumstances of the present day,¹⁴ and as I have already mentioned, last year's postsynodal apostolic exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, the consecrated life.

What enhances the value of these documents is not just the petrine teaching office exercised in the exhortation but the fact that the exhortation itself consists of and explicitly applies a number of faith/theological propositions agreed upon by the synodal fathers as reflecting the thinking of the Church on a specific issue. Another factor that adds to the significance of this new teaching instrument is the regularity with which such documents will be issued. Presumably, the 1997 Synod for America will produce a document published some time before the year 2000.

What will the postsynodal apostolic exhortation on the Church in America contain? Obviously, at this point we can only speculate. Our speculation is necessarily riveted to what we anticipate to be some of the themes of that gathering.

While I would not be so presumptuous as to predict what the Synod for America will have as its overall theme or the issues that will be gathered under that theme, I am suggesting that we consider several serious matters that form the background for this synod and what I take to be a need that those of us who are charged to proclaim and explain Christ's revelation face as a true challenge.

I suggest for our consideration that there are a number of interrelated characteristics of our age. To begin with, I would characterize the present moment as one of religious illiteracy. It is also a time of aggressive secularism. Thirdly, even in the face of the powerful attractiveness of materialism, there is a resurgence of a hunger for the Spirit—the things of the Spirit.

Against this background I think the Church is called, certainly in the more industrialized and technologically advanced areas of the western hemisphere, to present a vision of life that is balanced between individual development, freedom and personal fulfillment and a recognition of communal obligation within the dictates of the common good. Some speakers today refer to the pendulum's swing back from excessive personal autonomy to a recognition of objective norms of obligation and the compelling principles of collectivity.

It seems to be now a truism that we have a generation characterized in part as religiously illiterate. Those involved in pastoral ministry do not need to be convinced of this. They experience it every day. Without attempting to assess fault for the condition, the remedy of it begins with recognizing its reality.

The stepchild of religious illiteracy is indifference. Its most common ramification is "drifting away." In the ecumenical organization to which I belong, not

¹⁴Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1988); Pope John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1992).

too long ago one of the Protestant judicatory executives suggested that I should pay dues twice. "As head of the local Catholic Church," he asserted of me, "You represent the largest single body in this group. The second largest group in our community are fallen-away Catholics. You ought to pay dues for them as well," he suggested.

Humorous as the exchange was, there is also a growing recognition that a significant portion of the population in North America is composed of people who were baptized Catholic but have since drifted away from the practice of the faith.

Another piece of the backdrop is what I describe as the aggressive secularism. Historically, every culture has recognized basic human qualities that are regarded as good and those characteristics and actions that are rejected as bad. Human nature created by God is directed to certain ends or goals. Our intellect is satisfied by truth. Our will and, therefore, choices are directed to the good. Loyalty, fidelity, kindness, courage, temperance are all easily recognized in every age and in most societies as qualities that enhance human existence. The task of society has always been, in the past, to strengthen the struggle for human virtue and the search for what is true and good.

Only in recent years have we seen the struggle for personal virtue and the role of society in nurturing virtue, as well as the rich pluralism of religious voices speaking in defense of both virtue and society's obligation to foster it—only recently has this been increasingly muted by the emergence of a monolithic secularism.

The separation of Church and state is a far cry from the exclusion of God from any expression in public life. Separation of Church and state, until very, very recently, was never understood as the separation of God from our communal lives—our society. The attempt to interpret the separation of Church and state to mean the elimination of any mention of God from public life is not only new, it is having a devastating effect on the life of our nation. By the bleaching out the mere mention of God we wash out as well the source of moral responsibility and the foundation of moral obligation.

We struggle for racial equality, justice in the workplace and care for the poor and elderly not from a vague sense of momentary political correctness but rather from the profoundly theological reason that we are all children of the same God, sisters and brothers of one another and sharers in God's bounty—the goods of this earth. To erase God from this picture, to silence the recognition of God's place in our lives, is to remove the very substance that holds us together, gives us common purpose and calls all of us to moral obligation.

The secular model of life has not served us well in its claim to the exclusive possession of the public order and its pretention that it can take the place of God. The belief that we can sustain our human society and our communal life simply by the power of externally imposed laws enforced by police and supported by an ever-increasing number of prisons and jails is baseless.

In spite of—or perhaps as a consequence of—so much of the religious illiteracy and the aggressive secularism, there is concomitantly what I hear described from so many sources as a “new thirst for the Spirit.” Among pastors there seems also to be the uncontested assertion that we are witnessing among many young people renewed appreciation of the place of God in their lives and the need for some appreciation of the spiritual. While this may take a variety of forms it, nonetheless, seems to be an increasingly verifiable reality.

This is the uncomfortable and challenging backdrop against which the Synod of 1997 meets. Are there other elements? Yes! Poverty, massive underemployment and unemployment, exploitation and degradation of people, various forms of systemic social injustice, the collapse of the family, chemical addiction and the culture it spawns, institutional corruption and a host of other ills that plague our hemisphere. I have selected but a few, but all of these elements explain why I believe the theme of the synod, in part at least, must turn its attention to a fresh appraisal and presentation—at least in seminal form—of a vision of human life that speaks out of our Catholic tradition emphasizing both the individual worth of the human person, the inestimable value of human life, the inalienable right to self-realization and, at the same time, a compelling and realistic articulation of our communal nature and the legitimate expectations of society in our efforts to live together as rational and social beings.

The elements of such a comprehensive view of life would form only one part of what could be a very challenging synodal document. The second point would be the call for every level of the Church to address in a coherent and unified manner the problem we face.

Theologians certainly would have a significant role to play in the articulation of such a vision. So would our Catholic institutions, specifically colleges and universities. A Catholic institution of higher learning should be expected and should be capable of offering witness to the values it espouses and in such a way that the witness impacts on society. The institutional support of, as well as the personal adherence to, a vision and value system would give momentum to the teaching that would carry us into the next millennium with some hope that the vision could become a reality.

One significant effect of the inclusion of a whole range of value systems, some even contradictory to Catholic teaching, on Catholic campuses has been the silencing or at least muting of the voice of Catholic institutions of higher learning in the national debates dealing with significant moral issues. The rich heritage of Catholic moral and social teaching, while still reflected in the classroom of a great number of Catholic institutions, is not heard articulated by representatives of Catholic academia precisely as spokespersons for Catholic values. This institutional silence creates the impression that Catholic teaching and the values rooted in faith are destined solely for personal guidance rather than also for the formation of a good and just society.

Perhaps a contrast between the institutional witness of Catholic health care systems and their capacity to influence public policy will help to clarify my point. The impact that Catholic health care institutions have had on the national debate surrounding a number of moral and ethical issues has been significant precisely because the witness is not solely a personal one and has been effective in proportion to its ability to reflect institutional commitment to their Catholic faith and its application in health care. One does not see the same institutional support of Catholic teaching when we turn to the groves of the academe.

The collaboration among individuals and institutions that are involved in theoretical discourse together with those that are involved in the pastoral dimension of the Church's effort is itself an issue worthy of synodal examination but certainly the keystone to even minimal success in addressing the challenges of the human condition on the verge of the next millennium. The theologian and the pastor hold a great responsibility together for how well the next generation will accept moral imperative as directive of our technological advances. We are not morally free to do anything we are able to do. On the distinction of "ought to do" versus "can do" rests the direction of the human enterprise in the next decades—certainly as we enter the new millennium.

While this may seem an immense task, it surely is no greater than the challenge that was faced by those who gathered at that first council or synod in Jerusalem to undertake a radical transformation of the world nearly 2,000 years ago. Perhaps the 1997 Synod will not be as dramatic but it has all the potential to be.

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