



# **Rejoice in the Lord**

## **By Cardinal Joseph W. Tobin, C.Ss.R.**

### **Archbishop of Newark**

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Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

On April 21 of this year, I offered reflections on the topic “Synodality: the long game of Pope Francis” during a webinar offering of the annual Cardinal Bernardin Common Cause lecture sponsored by Loyola University Chicago’s Hank Center for the Catholic Intellectual Heritage. Because the full “script” for this lecture is very long—probably too long for an online presentation, but certainly for this newsletter—I summarize it below.

I hope that my reflections offer some helpful insights into the importance of the term “synodality,” which literally means “walking together,” both for the teaching of our Holy Father Pope Francis and for the life and ministry of the Church at all times but, perhaps especially today. Christians are called to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, but we never do this alone. We are fellow travelers, sojourners, with each other and with Christ Himself. We walk together in good times and in hard times, in rough weather and on clear, sunny days. We support and encourage each other, especially when one of us stumbles and falls. Synodality is, or should be, the way our Church journeys through time with open hearts, attentively listening to the needs of God’s people as they are expressed in gestures (often more than words) and in longing to see the face of God revealed in Jesus and in all of us, His missionary disciples.

I invite you to reflect prayerfully on the understanding of synodality that Pope Francis has proposed (in continuity with his predecessors in the Petrine ministry). I believe that it speaks powerfully to the challenges and opportunities of our time. And I pray that all of us here in northern New Jersey and beyond can “walk together” with Jesus and with all our brothers and sisters on our journey to our heavenly home.

Sincerely yours in Christ the Redeemer,

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Archbishop of Newark

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## **Selections from: “Synodality: the long game of Pope Francis”**

**Cardinal Joseph W. Tobin, C.Ss.R.**

**Chicago, April 21, 2021**

“Synodality” means “walking together.” This has become a key theme of Pope Francis’ pontificate, which has raised some questions and even confusion. With this in mind, I would like to offer some reflections on how synodality is, in fact, the long game of Pope Francis, how it challenges us, what it calls us to be, where it is leading us and how that process will require changes in how we do and be as Church. And what we will find is that this is a focus on the journey of the Body of Christ through history, a journey that fosters ongoing conversion and, ultimately, calls us to mercy.

### **I. JOURNEY**

When dealing with Pope Francis, it’s advisable to have mercy as your guide. In this case, I’d like to turn to a Sister of Mercy. Sister Prudence Allen is one of the women appointed by Pope Francis to the International Theological Commission, the body that advises the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on key and emerging issues in the life of the church. In 2018, the commission produced a document, *Synodality in the Life and mission of the Church*.

Reflecting on the import of this document, Sister Prudence wrote an essay that I’d like to echo for you here – not analytically, but simply highlighting some phrases:

... disciples journeying together...

... companions on the journey are to be in mutual service to one another...

... People walking in history towards the fulfillment of the Kingdom...

... Walking together with Christ in a new boldness of speech with humility of heart...

... a ‘journey of dialogue’ in which we learn how to recognize ‘the presence of Christ walking beside us’...

At the beginning of his pontificate, the newly elected Pope Francis stood on the balcony and spoke of “bishop and people, walking together.” Many have pointed out Francis’ fondness for the idea of the accompaniment on a journey, the encounters that occur, the complications, the surprises. In fact, one of my favorite definitions of faith is “the capacity to be surprised by God.”

Pope Francis seeks to recover a more collaborative Church of a time when we didn’t have two millennia of institutional inertia caked onto our Tradition. The Vatican II term was *ressourcement* — reconnecting with ancient roots of our traditions in order to draw new life into them.

We cannot deny that, for centuries of our existence as a Church, synodality was, in fact, used to kick people out. With every early ecumenical council, for example, Church leaders would come together to repudiate this heresy, define that dogma, and the body of Christ lumbered on through history.

But I would posit that we have entered a new stage of the journey, one in which acts of synodality do not look so much like sweeping dogmatic definitions as they do fine-tuning of how the Gospel is applied to the signs of the times. And with that comes the next important point of Francis’ long game: conversion.

## II. CONVERSION

When I say conversion, I'm talking about the Church's own conversion, a new way of understanding and approaching how we carry out our mission. Pope Francis has rightly decried the mindset of "But we've always done it this way." When you're towing two millennia of baggage after you on the journey, it behooves you to be intentional about which tools you have at the ready and which ones you've socked away in some forgotten luggage compartment.

Pope John XXIII famously said that we in the church are not called to guard a museum but to tend to a flourishing garden of life. Think about that — those two jobs and the tools involved. If you show up to tend a garden with implements for cleaning and preserving artifacts, you're going to have a lot of dead plants. The same goes for a synodal Church. You can't show up with an imperious attitude where you have all the answers.

John XXIII read the signs of turmoil and destruction that had followed humankind out of the first half of the 20th century, saw that the Church had to be as intentional and missionary as it possibly could with its witness — and the way to achieve this was through a council. In effect, he called on the council to create a blueprint for the engine that would power the Barque of Peter for the Third Millennium. Pope John cast a vision: This is what we need to build! Vatican II produced a blueprint. Pope Paul VI set to work constructing it. Pope John Paul II made sure it kept to the exact specifications required. Pope Benedict XVI put the finishing touches on this propulsion engine, and now, Francis has flipped the switch to ON.

As superior general of the Redemptorists, I was privileged to participate in five synods under John Paul and Benedict. It was as if they were tuning up an engine. You can't leave the functions of such a crucial machine to chance.

And so it's interesting, now that Francis has started revving up the engine to see what it can do, that the folks who seem most threatened from the beginning have been the ones with the most engineer-like grasp of all the norms and canons. If A = irregular union and B = not living as brother and sister, then A + B = can never be admitted to the Eucharist. To this, I would posit that you can be the most knowledgeable mechanic on earth and still be a rotten driver.

But seriously, like a good driving instructor, Francis has been versing us in the rules of the road, the little things that make a big difference: Don't toot your horn so much! Stay in your lane! Don't cut that person off! Not just the traffic laws, but the human interactions of this world we are setting out into – sometimes serenely, sometimes on a high-speed chase – but on the road... together.

I think of the words of Pope Benedict XVI's resignation, in which he described today's world as "subject to so many rapid changes and shaken by questions of deep relevance for the life of faith." The institutional Church moves at a notoriously glacial pace, but as someone famously put it, "Life moves pretty fast. If you don't stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it."

We're not merely challenged to move faster. The deeper institutional conversion also involves being nimble and strategic in our discernment. As one writer has observed, Pope Francis knows which dams are inevitably going to burst. It does not make much of a difference if one man, even if he is the pope, is jumping up and down on top of the dam, trying to hasten — or halt — the change.

But it does make a difference if someone in a true position of leadership — again, the pope — is leading others in reinforcing the banks where the water is inevitably going to come crashing down and flowing through. We have to build that together, mindfully, authentically, in a spirit of discerning where the Spirit wants us to go.

Look at the phenomenon of Vatican II and the conversion that synodality fostered among the Council Fathers. The Roman curia had labored to ensure that the working documents of the council would not be hospitable to sweeping reforms. But once you got 3,000 bishops in the same very large room and invoke the Holy Spirit, something happened.

Pope John XXIII's private secretary, Loris Francesco Capovilla, who, at the age of 98, was made a cardinal by Pope Francis, recalls Pope John saying, "It was very good that after World War II, three international institutions were established: the UN for peace, the FAO for bread, UNESCO for culture. Why can't we also get together and talk?"

And it's precisely this postwar period, in which the world had been turned upside down, that points us to the final conversion of the long game of Francis: the conversion to mercy.

### **III. MERCY**

One thing that synodality and a world turned upside down have in common is that both afford us what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "the view from below." One way we could look at this: The election of Pope Francis opened up the rest of the world to the rich theological ferment of the Church in Latin America, with its strong sense of mission, encounter, the peripheries and mercy. And many, including Church leaders in this country, have found that shift uncomfortable.

They shouldn't, because it didn't start with Francis, and I believe it isn't going away anytime soon. When Pope John XXIII opened Vatican II, he spoke of the Church today preferring "the medicine of mercy" over a spirit of severity. Pope Francis has picked up on this theme, calling a Jubilee Year of Mercy back in 2015 and dubbing the emerging epoch an "Age of Mercy."

Another way to understand Bonhoeffer's "view from below" is to think in terms of the peripheries of the marginalized oppressed. Pope John famously said he called the council to open a window. We always associate this with letting in fresh air, but something else happens when you open a window — you can hear what the people outside, those below your window, are saying.

Ideally, a synodal environment should give us a living snapshot of where the Holy Spirit is active in the life of the Church at this moment: an ecclesial cardiogram, if you will. And as author Anne Lamott notes, "The Holy Spirit very rarely respects one's comfort zones." When we invite people in

to reflect and weigh in on the hard questions, we're going to get answers we, as a hierarchy, or even an entire Church, find difficult, even offensive.

We can see signs of this synodality-fueled conversion to mercy all around us in the Church today if we're looking for it:

- Pope Francis writes in his latest encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, that “Public discussion, if it truly makes room for everyone and does not manipulate or conceal information, is a constant stimulus to a better grasp of the truth.”
- Sister Nathalie Becquart, an under-secretary of the Synod of Bishops, noting that her historic appointment is indeed a sign that the Church is heeding the call to center the voices of women.
- The most recent document from the Migration Section of the Dicastery for Integral Human Development, which focuses on the plight of people who are forced to migrate due to climate change.
- And last month, in marking the 150th anniversary of St. Alphonsus Liguori — the founder of my religious family, the Redemptorist missionaries and a Doctor of the Church, Pope Francis lauded the saint’s approach of “listening to and accepting the weaknesses of the men and women who were most abandoned spiritually.”

It is crucial that we as a church not merely listen, but that we actually hear from people. That is what softens our hearts and primes them for conversion, and gives us bishops the confidence to know that, yes, that new thing we are discerning is a movement of the Spirit because our people hear it too.

One important word in how the Church approaches mercy, and one that is helpful in understanding synodality, is integration, the question of what needs to be integrated. And I would say in this case, it’s helpful to integrate the head of the Church and the rest of the body of Christ. Imagine a body where the outer extremities are cold and gray. The heart may be beating, but the lifeforce is not reaching all the capillaries.

I think of the line in *Amoris Laetitia*, that “not all discussions of doctrinal, moral or pastoral issues need to be settled by interventions of the magisterium.” One interpretation, which I think was willfully obtuse, suggested this meant *Amoris* itself is not part of the magisterium. No, what Pope Francis was saying was that the Vatican is not the only part of the body of Christ. Francis has been clear; he sees his role as to protect the tradition.

The head is good for thinking, looking around, perhaps setting our vision on the far horizon and occasionally butting our forehead against the wall in frustration. But we can’t lift things up, we can’t embrace people with just our heads. Where are the outstretched arms of the body of Christ?

A circulation between the center and the peripheries needs to be more part of the daily goings-on of the Church. And as we continue on this mission from God, we have to keep attuned to our whole body, to the tension points, and even to the unhealed wounds that risk going septic and gangrenous, making our witness toxic — racism, misogyny, clericalism, sexual abuse.

But God transforms everything. What is an unhealed wound that is touched by God? It's something another man named Francis bore on his body: the stigmata, the wounds of Jesus Christ. A Church of authentic synodality that walks together, listens and brings mercy to all we encounter, inside and out, is one that never forgets our wounded parts and the power they have to inspire faith, as they did with Thomas.

We are the body of Christ, wounds and all. But remember, equality with God is not something to be grasped. But rather, he emptied himself. So, in an effort to model a listening Church, I will close not with my words but with the words of a woman of color I had the joy of encountering in my ministry in the Midwest. You've heard enough from the cardinal. I must decrease; she must increase.

I first encountered Marcia Lane-McGee when she was a youth minister in Indianapolis, a spirited young Black woman who has the distinction of bestowing on me the nickname "J-To."

Marcia now lives in Chicago, works with at-risk youth, and is a leader of Catholics United for Black Lives. And in this month's issue of U.S. Catholic magazine, she is quoted in an article dedicated to this nascent, post-conciliar Age of Mercy. And Marcia, I think fittingly, talks about something that sounds a lot like synodality:

"In order to make this actually work and get what is needed for the whole Church, the Universal Church, they [that is, the leaders of the Church] have to be comfortable with being uncomfortable." Amen, Marcia. Amen.

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## A Message from Pope Francis: Words of Challenge and Hope



It is certainly true, as the Second Vatican Council teaches, that “when Bishops engage in teaching, in communion with the Roman Pontiff, they deserve respect from all, as the witnesses of divine and Catholic truth; the faithful must agree with the judgment of their Bishop on faith and morals, which he delivers in the name of Christ; they must give it their adherence with religious assent of the mind.” [18] But it is also true that “for every Bishop, the life of the Church and life in the Church is the condition for exercising his mission to teach.” [19]

Hence the Bishop is both teacher and disciple. He is a teacher when, endowed with the special assistance of the Holy Spirit, he proclaims to the faithful the word of truth in the name of Christ, head and shepherd. But he is a disciple when, knowing that the Spirit

has been bestowed upon every baptized person, he listens to the voice of Christ speaking through the entire People of God, making it “infallible in credendo.” [20]

Indeed, “the universal body made up of the faithful, whom the Holy One has anointed (cf. 1 Jn 2:20, 27), is incapable of erring in belief. This is a property that belongs to the people as a whole; a supernatural sense of faith is the means by which they make this property manifest, when ‘from Bishops to the last of the lay faithful,’ they show universal agreement in matters of faith and morals.” [21]

So the Bishop is called to lead his flock by “walking in front of them, showing them the way, showing them the path; walking in their midst, to strengthen them in unity; walking behind them, to make sure no one gets left behind but especially, never to lose the scent of the People of God in order to find new roads. A Bishop who lives among his faithful has his ears open to listen to ‘what the Spirit says to the churches’ (Rev 2:7), and to the ‘voice of the sheep,’ also through those diocesan institutions whose task it is to advise the Bishop, promoting a loyal and constructive dialogue.” [22]

(A selection from the Apostolic Constitution of Pope Francis, *Episcopalis Communio: On the Synod of Bishops*, September 15, 2018)

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## My Prayer for You

Lord, teach us to walk together as pilgrims on a journey. May we listen to each other with open minds and hearts. May we grow in mutual respect and compassion for all our sisters and brothers, especially those with whom we disagree. And may the grace of the Holy Spirit help our Church’s leaders—all of us—learn to be comfortable with things that make us uncomfortable.

Cardinal Joseph W. Tobin, C.Ss.R.

