

A SYNODAL JOURNEY:  
TOWARD CONVERSION AND RENEWAL  
IN THE DIOCESE OF SAN DIEGO

*Homily of Bishop Robert McElroy for the Mass Initiating our Synodal Process*

*October 17, 2021*

Two years ago this month, 100 indigenous people from the heart of the Amazon Basin led a procession of bishops, lay leaders, priests, religious and a pope from the altar of St. Peter's Basilica to the Synod Hall of the Vatican. In their hands they held photographs of the martyrs of Latin America, women and men who had sacrificed their lives for faith and for justice during the last 50 years in witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Their beautiful native hymn of praise to the Father, Son and Spirit piercingly testified to all in the procession that they were undertaking a wonderful new moment in the life of the Church of the Amazon Basin, a synod in which the palpable presence of God was to overshadow all of the planning and

strategy, all of the problems and crises which had led them to that place. The grace of the Lord would provide.

At the very same moment, in Mission San Diego, young men and women from Imperial and San Diego Counties gathered to begin a different synod, focused upon the critical challenge that the Church faces in bringing Catholic faith to a new generation of young adults. The town hall meetings, high-tech research and preparatory work that underlay this gathering formed the background for the labors of this diocesan synod, but it was the graced presence of God in the gathering together of the delegates that formed the heart of what was to unfold. For in that grace, young people of vastly different backgrounds discovered in one another rich repositories of wisdom and compassion, faith and justice.

I had the privilege to participate in both of these synods. They were radically different in their participants, their objectives and their structures. The Amazon Synod had to wrestle with the destruction of the most precious environmental treasure on earth, the devastation of indigenous societies and cultures and the utter deprivation of the Eucharist in large regions because of

the lack of priests. In San Diego, the delegates sought to chart pathways that would lead young people to faith in a secularizing culture and an atomistic world as well as building inclusive communities of faith that could provide a spiritual home amidst crushing career pressures and disintegrating support for family life.

Yet despite these differences, there was a common core that bound together these two synodal experiences, and the synod on marriage and family that our diocese held in 2016. That common core lay in the glimpses that these three synodal moments provided of what a culture of communion, participation and mission could mean in the life of the Church.

Communion, as St. Paul VI reminded us, is “cohesion and interior fullness in grace, truth and collaboration.” It is this sense of cohesion, bathed in God’s overwhelming presence and rooted in the enduring desire to work together to advance the kingdom, that lies at the heart of synodality. It was just such a cohesion that allowed us to come together on immensely thorny issues at our diocesan synods on marriage and young adults, and to do so with such a powerful sense of contentment and unity even as we recognized

that we had not solved all of the problems that lay before us. It was the communion of feeling as one in the life of the Church even while we recognized our many and enduring differences of ideology and culture, class and race. It was the communion of knowing that our unity was forged not by our own ingenuity and talents, but by the wisdom and presence of the Holy Spirit who was our constant and only ultimate guidepost.

The second foundation of grace shared in the Amazon Synod and our two diocesan synods was a profound sense of expansive and expanding participation in the life and work of the Church. The pivotal discussion on the nature of conscience in the synod on the family and the discernment of how to envision an approach to work for justice, life and peace that could bridge the crippling political divides that split our nation, were moments when new levels of invitation and participation entered our local church and transformed hearts and souls.

Finally, the Amazon Synod -- like our two diocesan synods -- was committed in apostolic labor to the world of today with all of its imperfections and challenges, sharing a passionate sense of mission to build

up the kingdom with honesty, with zeal and with compassion. This commitment to mission carries with it an unswerving dedication to looking outward, to breaking through barriers, to refusing to be captured by the patterns of how we have always functioned because they are comfortable for us even as they sap our power for renewal and change.

In these weeks, Pope Francis has called us to a far more powerful notion of synodality, to move from experiencing authentic communion, participation and mission merely as episodic moments of our ecclesial life to embracing them as the fundamental architecture of life and culture in the church at every level.

This challenge to comprehensive synodality is as uncomfortable for us as the challenge of Jesus was for the disciples in today's Gospel. Christ is upending the very settled and, on many levels, very understandable expectations of the disciples about how life in the Church should operate in the future. They had sacrificed all to follow Jesus, and thus they had every reason to believe that they would be at the center of Christ's circle, those whom the Lord would listen to, those whom he would reward.

Instead, Christ promises them only the cross. Even more distressingly, he makes clear to them that the pathway ahead will provide few certainties rooted in earthly expectations and will require a deep surrender to the grace of God leading them onward as their only guidepost.

Our synodal pathway must be steeped in this sense of surrender that calls the whole of our local church to profound self-examination and renewal. Synodality is not a set of structures, nor is it a mode of decision-making. It is a comprehensive process of conversion that seeks to bring distinctive elements to our ecclesial life: the profound understanding that we are all companions journeying together; the commitment to listen to God and others even when what they say is deeply challenging; the willingness to speak forthrightly in dialogue in confronting the wounds in our ecclesial life; an authentic sense of the co-responsibility of all in the life of the Church; an ongoing effort to bring to the center all those who presently lie on the margins of our Church; and the exercise of authority and decision-making in a manner that reflects the dignity and wisdom of all.

Our local church begins this process of conversion and renewal today by listening to the word and celebrating the Eucharist. As we have recognized anew in the past six weeks in our parishes through our homiletic and catechetical initiative on the Eucharist, every action of the church is rooted and encapsulated in the life of the worshipping community gathered around the altar of the Lord.

During the next four months, our local church at all levels will undertake a penetrating examination of conscience in order to discern the degree to which the characteristics of synodality are actually present in our local church, and where they are absent, or diminished. This information will be shared with the national Conference of Bishops and with the Vatican, to assist in preparations for the universal Synod on Synodality in 2023.

More importantly, the findings of this examination of conscience regarding the existence and strength of synodality in our local church will become the foundation for a process that will begin next February and stretch into 2022 that will seek to transform our local church by bringing the

qualities of synodality much more powerfully into the life of our parishes, schools, institutions and the diocese as a whole.

I have appointed a commission of 17 women and men to coordinate this process of discernment and renewal, including leaders in faith formation, justice, peace and life, outreach to the marginalized, and the theological community, as well as pastors and lay leaders of our parish communities. I thank them for their generous willingness to serve in this important mission, and I thank the members of the diocesan Pastoral Council, the Presbyteral Council and the diocesan Curia for the substantial contributions they have already made to shaping this synodal journey for the Diocese of San Diego. One of those contributions was the recognition that the search for synodality in our diocese would best be advanced by having distinctive processes for San Diego and Imperial Counties to reflect their individuality and communities.

Like the people of Israel journeying into the desert and the disciples in today's Gospel, we embark upon this synodal pathway unsure of where it will lead us, relying only upon the belief that our God will guide our way

and deepen our sense of the community we are called to be. And for every believer and every initiative in the life of the Church, that must be enough.