

**ADDRESS OF HIS EMINENCE CARDINAL CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
“THE VISION OF POPE FRANCIS FOR A SYNODAL CHURCH”
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Introduction

Dear Friends in Christ,

Good evening! I am very happy to be with you to speak about the vision of Pope Francis for a synodal Church. I am grateful to Dr. Greg Hillis, Executive Director of the Aquinas Center, for inviting me to Emory University to give this talk. Allow me, first of all, to convey to you the affection and spiritual closeness of our Holy Father. I hope that by reflecting on some of the main themes that have characterized the Pope’s teaching from the beginning of his pontificate until today, you will gain a sense of how you yourselves, in your own “corner of the vineyard”, can live the “pastoral conversion” that the Holy Father is calling us to – a conversion to a more “synodal” way of being Church, which is to say: a method of journeying together, listening to each other and to the Spirit, and discerning the paths on which God is calling us to carry the light of the Gospel in today’s world.

The way in which the whole world was fully introduced to Francis’s pastoral vision was the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, released in November of the first year of his pontificate, 2013. For those, like myself, who had been carrying out the Church’s mission in Latin American countries, much of the teaching that he laid out in that document was already quite familiar, since it was closely linked to the “Aparecida Document” of 2007. That document was the concluding statement of the fifth General Conference of the Latin American Bishops, in which the Church of Latin America entered into a transformative dialogue about the needs of evangelization in a radically changed Latin America. With *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis, who as Cardinal in Argentina had led the drafting of Aparecida, extends this missionary vision to the entire Church. He says:

“I dream of a ‘missionary option’, that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation. The renewal of structures demanded by pastoral conversion can only be understood in this light: as part of an effort to make them more mission-oriented, to make ordinary pastoral activity on every level more inclusive and open, to inspire in pastoral workers a

constant desire to go forth and in this way to elicit a positive response from all those whom Jesus summons to friendship with himself.”¹

In order to transmit the Gospel in today’s world, the Pope is convinced that it is necessary that we proceed in a “synodal” style. While you have all undoubtedly heard about synodality, I expect that among you there are different levels of understanding and experience regarding what it means to be a synodal Church. Perhaps it is a concept that you are still trying to comprehend. Perhaps you have read discussions by commentators in the Catholic media, including some sharp criticisms of the Holy Father’s call to be a synodal Church. Perhaps you have gotten involved in synodal structures in your own parish, or at the university level, or in the Archdiocese. To be sure, this way of being Church – even though it is rooted in the Gospel – is something that we are all getting used to!

Pastoral Conversion in a time of Epochal Change

To understand the Pope’s desire that we be a synodal church, it is important that we grasp what he means when he calls us to a “pastoral conversion” – a term that he used in the section from *Evangelii Gaudium* that I just quoted. From the very beginning of his pontificate, Pope Francis was calling us to look at our contemporary world – the very reality in which we are sent to proclaim the message of Jesus. And upon honestly observing this world, to make a judgment: to recognize the immense changes that have occurred, and that those changes must necessarily impact the way in which we seek to transmit the Gospel. In our time, the Pope says, “what we are experiencing is *not simply an epoch of changes, but a change of epoch.*”² In this context the Holy Father quoted Cardinal John Henry Newman, a convert to the Catholic Church and a patron saint of Catholic ministry in university settings. In writing about the development of Christian doctrine, Newman famously said: “Here below to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often.”³ The Pope explains:

“For Newman *change was conversion*, in other words, interior transformation. Christian life is a journey, a pilgrimage. The history of the Bible is a journey, marked by constantly new beginnings. So it was with Abraham. So it was too with those Galileans who two thousand years ago set out to follow Jesus: ‘When they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him’ (*LUKE 5:11*). From that time forward, the history of God’s people – the history of the Church – has always been marked by new beginnings, displacements and changes. This journey, of course, is not just geographical, but above all symbolic:

¹ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24 November 2013, 27.

² Pope Francis, Christmas Greetings and Address to the Roman Curia, 21 December 2019.

³ St. John Henry Cardinal Newman, *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, Chapter 1, Section 1, Part 7; cited in Address to the Roman Curia, 21 December 2019.

it is a summons to discover the movement of the heart, which, paradoxically, has to set out in order to remain, to change in order to be faithful.”⁴

Our mission as Christians is always to transmit the Gospel. That is the same as it was yesterday. But unlike a generation or two ago, we find that the Gospel is not being transmitted as “automatically” as it used to be from one generation to the next. This is because of changes to the structure of families, changes in the culture, all sorts of new challenges. This time of epochal change, says the Pope,

“entails decisions that rapidly transform our ways of living, of relating to one another, of communicating and thinking, of how different generations relate to one another and how we understand and experience faith and science. Often we approach change as if were a matter of simply putting on new clothes, but remaining exactly as we were before.”⁵

“The more healthy approach,” he says, “is to let oneself be challenged by the questions of the day and to approach them with the virtues of discernment, [joyful assurance], and [steadfast patience].”⁶ And so the Holy Father says, as it were: *I want a Church that is different, to fit a different world. I want a new approach.* And this is what is meant by a “pastoral conversion”. This call to conversion is at the heart of the Second Vatican Council. Pope Paul VI expressed this call in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* when he announced “a new period of evangelization”.⁷ Pope John Paul II explained that this “new evangelization” would be “new in its ardor, in its methods, in its expression.”⁸ Pope Benedict XVI reminded us that the beginning of evangelization is a personal encounter with Christ.⁹ Pope Francis is telling us: *Okay, the time is now. We need to do this new evangelization, and this is what it looks like!*

Perhaps it was predictable that when the Pope should call us to such newness there would be a lot of resistance. Nobody likes to be taken out of their comfort zone. But to Francis, leaving our comfort zone and being a Church that “goes forth”, instead of a Church that remains closed in on itself, is absolutely essential if we are to transmit the Gospel to those who have not yet appropriated it into their lives.¹⁰

⁴ Address to Roman Curia, 21 December 2019; cf. Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, “Lenten Message to Priests and Religious”, 21 February 2007, in *In Your Eyes I See my Words: Homilies and Speeches from Buenos Aires, Volume 2: 2005-2008*, Fordham University Press, 2020.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Pope Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 8 December 1975, 2; cf. Address for the Closing of the Third General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, 26 October 1974.

⁸ Pope John Paul II, Opening Address of the Nineteenth General Assembly of the Latin American and Caribbean Episcopal Council (CELAM), 9 March 1983.

⁹ Cf. Pope Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas Est*, 25 December 2005, 1.

¹⁰ Cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 20-24, 27, 39, 46, 48, 49, 87, 95, 172, 259, 261.

The Holy Spirit as the Protagonist

Pope Francis always speaks of the primary importance of the Holy Spirit in the action of the Church. Renewal in the Church, he makes clear, is not something that can be achieved merely by a human agenda. He emphasized this at the opening of the General Assembly of the Synod last October when he said:

“Here we do not need a purely natural vision, made up of human strategies, political calculations or ideological battles.... This we do not need. 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.”¹¹

Three “Moments” of Pastoral Conversion

We could look at this pastoral conversion as having three “moments”. First, we must understand that the Church is missionary by her very nature: she doesn’t just “have” a mission; she *is* a mission. Second, we must recognize and accept the reality that we are living in a new epoch – as we have already said – and so we must adapt our method of evangelization to this new reality. And third, there is the moment when we must actually “go out”, in a synodal style; and this becomes the vehicle for people’s encounter with Christ.

We can say something about each of these “moments”.

First: it is so important for us to understand that the Church is “missionary by her very nature”. This is precisely how the Second Vatican Council defined the Church in its Decree *Ad Gentes*.¹² What does this mean, then, for our ordinary life as Catholic disciples? It means that we don’t just come to church and pray, or go to our church function or parish social gathering, and then, as an afterthought, ask ourselves: “I wonder if there is some mission for me to do?” No! It can’t be that way. Rather, because the very *nature* of the Church is missionary, this means that our nature as Christians is also to be missionaries. Mission is at the heart of our Christian identity. When we come to the Lord, we come as his disciples – to learn from him, and to be saved by his grace. But while remaining a disciple, we also become an “apostle”, meaning one who is “sent”. This is the dynamic that unfolds in the Gospels: people have an encounter with Jesus, they are drawn into his company as his disciples, and then they go forth to tell the good news about Jesus to others. That is the model for us. We have encountered the Lord, we have spent time in his

¹¹ Pope Francis, Homily to open the Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, 4 October 2023.

¹² Vatican Council II, Decree *Ad Gentes*, 7 December 1965, 2.

company, and we “go out” to give others the chance of encountering him. As the Holy Father says: “Let us go forth, then, let us go forth to offer everyone the life of Jesus Christ.”¹³

The second “moment” of today’s pastoral conversion is to accept the reality that we are living a new epoch for the proclamation of the Gospel. Importantly, to see a changed world is not a reason to lose hope. On the contrary, it is a chance to embrace a kind of “apostolic” age, in which we are presenting the message of Christ as if for the first time. Some of you in this audience are young enough that you have never lived in a society that acted as a natural channel for the transmission of the Gospel. You don’t need to be convinced that we are in a “new epoch”; you are already living it. For those of us who remember a time when the faith was passed on through largely intact families and through a society that encouraged religious values: well, we are being invited to a conversion of mind. We cannot live with nostalgia for “the way it was”, hoping to get back to some “better time”. Let’s be honest: not everything was perfect in those days either! By accepting a new reality, we are not being asked to surrender anything that is essential to our Catholic faith. Instead, we need to surrender certain assumptions about the mindset of those whom we hope to evangelize, and adapt our witness accordingly.

The third “moment”, if you will, in this pastoral conversion is that we actually *go out* as missionaries. And that we do so in a synodal style. That is to say, we are always together on a journey with the Lord and with one another. “Together” as fellow disciples, but also “together” with those we meet along the way. No one is excluded from the invitation to be a disciple of Jesus; therefore, everyone we encounter in our life’s journey is to be welcomed alongside us. We are to enter into others’ reality, even if that reality is “messy”. In the Pope’s well-known words:

“The thing the Church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity. I see the Church as a field hospital after battle. It is useless to as a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars! You have to heal his wounds. Then we can talk about everything else.”¹⁴

Accompanying others on a shared journey with the Lord means *listening to them*. Yes, we invite others to listen with us to the Lord, but we can’t hear fully what the Lord is saying unless we also listen to what others are saying. Every person’s story has value. Every person’s story has meaning. And we can only be a bridge between a person and Christ if we are willing to let that person’s story find a connection with the story of Jesus and his saving mercy. A Church that is open like this will find itself “bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets”, as the Pope says, but this is preferable to “a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from

¹³ *Evangelii Gaudium*, 49.

¹⁴ Interview with Pope Francis by Fr. Antonio Spadaro, S.J., 30 September 2013.

clinging to its own security.”¹⁵ The sufferings that the Church experiences because of its proximity to wounded sinners is not something to fear. On the contrary, this kind of suffering is the mark of authenticity for those who claim a Savior who was “pierced for our offenses” and “crushed for our sins”.¹⁶

Living a Pastoral Conversion and Synodality in Our Daily Lives

In coming to this talk, you are right to ask the question: *How do we live this pastoral conversion, and this synodal style, in the concrete circumstances of our daily lives as Catholics: in our parishes, in our communities of faith, in our Diocese or Archdiocese?* It is not as though I can prescribe for you the exact programs to implement in your own situation. In fact, the synodal method entails discerning the specific needs in each case. There are, however, a few guideposts for looking at your situation in a synodal way.

The first thing is to look for the ways in which your Church structures are already fulfilling this call to be missionary in a synodal style. What groups and movements are already walking together with an “outward” posture, open to the world and the people around them, actively discerning where the Spirit is leading, not only within their own “closed circle”, but in the people and the faces who are “outside”? When you see missionary discipleship unfolding in a synodal style, be a part of it. Encourage it. And help it to remain so.

At the same time, we need honesty, humility and courage to see activities within our faith communities that do *not* speak “mission”. Examples of this are groups or structures within the parish or diocese that are “self-referential”. In other words, when we interpret everything through the lens of our own limited ideas, instead of seeing the “bigger picture”. When we spend much time and energy just to “keep things going”. Sometimes our groups can become more concerned with preserving their own existence than with spreading God’s love and light to others. When Christian life resembles a “club”, then we need to ask: *where is the mission?* Pastoral conversion requires us to ask ourselves: *Who are we, and what does Christ want us to be about? Are we his light in the world?*

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, after introducing the theme of pastoral conversion, Pope Francis summarized what being a missionary Church means at the level of the most basic Church community that most people are part of: the parish. Allow me to quote at some length the paragraph on parish life, because it can serve as a guide for bringing missionary synodality into our parishes. The Pope said:

¹⁵ *Evangelii Gaudium*, 49.

¹⁶ *Isaiah* 53:5.

“The parish is not an outdated institution; precisely because it possesses great flexibility, it can assume quite different contours depending on the openness and missionary creativity of the pastor and the community. While certainly not the only institution which evangelizes, if the parish proves capable of self-renewal and constant adaptivity, it continues to be ‘the Church living in the midst of the homes of her sons and daughters’.... The parish is the presence of the Church in a given territory, an environment for hearing God’s word, for growth in the Christian life, for dialogue, proclamation, charitable outreach, worship and celebration. In all its activities the parish encourages and trains its members to be evangelizers. It is a community of communities, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey, and a center of constant missionary outreach.”

Parishes, the Pope says, are to be “completely mission-oriented”.¹⁷

If every parish were to reflect on these words and to examine its life and activity on the basis of this summons, it would have a good deal of guidance as to how to adapt and grow its mission. The question could be asked, by every apostolate within the parish (the youth ministry, the men’s and women’s groups, the liturgy, everything): *Is this apostolate missionary in its structure and purpose? Does this ministry proceed in a synodal style: always listening, always open, always discerning the Spirit’s action?* Based on the answers to these questions, parishioners can see what modifications need to be made.

Openness and Listening

Openness and *listening* are key aspects of being missionary and synodal, especially today. When looking at our parish’s groups and activities, we must ask how open they are to the wider community. Do we have an “outward” posture? Do we look for participation beyond ourselves? Do we “scan the horizon”, as it were, for people whose presence among us, and participation with us, would enrich our mission and bring greater efficacy to it? Using the Pope’s language: do seek to bring the “peripheries” closer to the center of our life and mission? And for that matter, does our way of living and carrying out the mission attract others?

Listening goes hand-in-hand with openness. If we have closed our ears to every expression, every idea that challenges our usual way of doing things, then how can we grow? We must listen, without preconceived judgments, and in a way that is genuine. This means listening in a way that might prompt us to ask the person a further question – about their story, about their experience, about the influences that have led them to their current convictions. To listen in this way is the right thing to do because it is the way of our Lord. Furthermore, it is the way in which a person feels invited into an encounter with Jesus and his disciples. Every person must know that

¹⁷ *Evangelii Gaudium*, 28.

the Church has room for them. The only way they can know this is by being seen and heard, and thus welcomed, by members of the Church.

None of this – if it needs to be said – is to diminish the essential place of catechesis, both moral and doctrinal, which is also part of the Church’s mission. Before ascending into heaven, Jesus told his disciples to teach all people to observe his commandments.¹⁸ As Pope John XXIII said when opening the Second Vatican Council:

“It is necessary first of all that the Church should never depart from the sacred patrimony of truth received from the Fathers. But at the same time she must ever look to the present, to the new conditions and new forms of life introduced into the modern world which have opened new avenues to the Catholic apostolate.”¹⁹

To be open, to be welcoming, to listen, to accept the company of those who do not conform perfectly to the Gospel ideal, should not make us fearful that we will lose the purity of Christ’s teachings in the process. What we should fear, rather, is to lose people because of our failure to demonstrate the welcome that Jesus himself showed to sinners. In fact, this is the kind of welcome that we ourselves have received from him. Listen again to Francis’s words at the opening Mass of last October’s Synod Assembly:

“In such a complex time as ours, new cultural and pastoral challenges emerge that call for a warm and kindly inner attitude so that we can encounter each other without fear. In synodal dialogue, in this beautiful ‘journey in the Holy Spirit’ that we are making together as the People of God, we can grow in unity and friendship with the Lord in order to look at today’s challenges with his gaze; to become, using a fine expression of Saint Paul VI, a Church that ‘makes itself a conversation’ (ENCYCLICAL LETTER *ECCLESIAM SUAM*, 65). A Church ‘with a gentle yoke’ (CF. *MT* 11:30), which does not impose burdens and which repeats to everyone: ‘Come, you who are weary and oppressed, come, you who have lost your way or feel far away, come, you who have closed the doors to hope: the Church is here for you!’ The doors of the Church are open to everyone, everyone, everyone!”²⁰

Some Catholics are afraid of words like these. Hearing this open invitation to encounter Christ in his Church, they fear that people will interpret it to mean that moral change is not necessary. Some people are anxious that such a posture will lead to the “watering down” of our faith. But to beckon sinners in this way, in the same spirit in which Jesus made the invitation, does not imply a dismissal of the call to conversion. On the contrary, a turning to Christ with the acceptance of his merciful love is the first step of any Christian conversion. Yes, some in the

¹⁸ Cf. *Matthew* 28:19-20.

¹⁹ Pope St. John XXIII, Address for the Solemn Opening of Vatican Council II, 11 October 1962; cited by Pope Francis at Opening Homily of Synod, 4 October 2023.

²⁰ Opening Homily of Synod.

Church may offer “welcome” but then obscure certain demands of the Gospel. But this misappropriation of the Pope’s teaching does not nullify the teaching itself. Francis has warned against this error, such as when he addressed the problematic aspects of Germany’s “synodal way”.²¹ The real point, the “primary task of the Synod”, says the Holy Father, is

“to refocus our gaze on God, to be a Church that looks mercifully at humanity. A Church that is united and fraternal – or at least seeks to be united and fraternal –, that listens and dialogues; a Church that blesses and encourages, that helps those who seek the Lord, that lovingly stirs up the indifferent, that opens paths in order to draw people into the beauty of faith. A Church that has God at its center and, therefore, is not divided internally and is never harsh externally. A Church that takes a risk in following Jesus. This is how Jesus wants the Church, his Bride, to be.”²²

Discernment

Another key to understanding the synodal method of mission is *discernment*. One of the gifts that Pope Francis brings to his pastoral office is the wisdom regarding discernment that comes from his Ignatian training as a Jesuit. The Pope knows that discernment is about more than just deciding between options. Discernment is what happens when we observe the reality, when we listen attentively to the Word of God in order to make a judgment; and then we are able to act.²³ Through this process, we become attuned to the Holy Spirit’s action so that we can follow His lead. I am convinced that Pope Francis is a man of spiritual discernment in this sense. To be a part of a synodal Church, we must be a people of discernment. The Pope says:

“Discernment...involves hard work. According to the Bible, we do not find set before us, pre-packaged, the life we are to live. No! We have to decide it all the time, according to the reality that comes. God invites us to evaluate and choose: He created us free and wants us to exercise our freedom. Therefore, discerning is demanding.”²⁴

While discernment is necessary for the individual Christian, it is also needed on the part of the Church. The “gaze of the Lord that blesses,” he says, “also invites us to be a Church that, with a glad heart, contemplates God’s action and discerns the present.”²⁵ To be synodal is to remember that we walk together in order to establish “a place of grace and communion” whose protagonist is the Holy Spirit. Again from the Holy Father’s homily at the start of the Synod:

²¹ Cf. Pope Francis, Letter to the Pilgrim People of God in Germany, 19 June 2019.

²² Opening Homily of Synod.

²³ Cf. Pope Francis, General Audiences, Catechesis on Discernment: 1. *What does it mean to discern?*, 31 August 2022, and Catechesis on Discernment: 2. *An example: Ignatius of Loyola*, 7 Sept 2022.

²⁴ Catechesis on Discernment #1, 31 Aug 2022.

²⁵ Opening Homily of Synod.

“The Holy Spirit often shatters our expectations to create something new that surpasses our predictions and negativity. Perhaps I can say that the more fruitful moments of the Synod are those connected to prayer, an atmosphere of prayer, through which the Lord works in us. Let us open ourselves to him and call upon him, the protagonist, the Holy Spirit. Let us allow him to be the protagonist of the Synod! And let us walk with him, in trust and with joy.”²⁶

Where We Are and Where We Are Going

The universal Church has completed the first of two General Assemblies of the Synod on Synodality, and the second will convene in the fall of this year in Rome. Now is the time for all of us to accustom ourselves to operating according to this “style” which marks synodality: openness, listening, and shared discernment, rooted in prayerful communion with the Holy Spirit, and characterized by adoration of the Lord in our midst. As the Holy Father said in the closing Mass of the Synod, and I feel that this is a good way to conclude my reflections with you today:

“Brothers and sisters, the General Assembly of the Synod has now concluded. In this ‘conversation of the Spirit,’ we have experienced the loving presence of the Lord and discovered the beauty of fraternity. We have listened to one another and above all, in the rich variety of our backgrounds and concerns, we have listened to the Holy Spirit. Today we do not see the full fruit of this process, but with farsightedness we look to the horizon opening up before us. 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.”²⁷

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Homily at Holy Mass to Conclude the Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, 29 October 2023.