

**HOMILY OF HIS EMINENCE CARDINAL CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
HOLY MASS FOR WEDNESDAY OF THE 4TH WEEK OF LENT
“THE SYNOD, LAY LEADERSHIP AND THE SOCIAL MISSION OF THE CHURCH”
GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY, WASHINGTON, D.C. – MARCH 13, 2024**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

It is good to be with you today. Thank you to Kim Daniels and John Carr for the invitation. Let me convey to all of you the spiritual closeness of the Holy Father, and to commend you for your efforts to live this synodal way of being Church. I pray that your discussions about lay leadership and the Church’s social mission will continue to be guided by what Jesus reveals to us in today’s Gospel passage.

And what *does* he reveal to us? By speaking repeatedly about his relationship as Son to the Father, Jesus reveals the Blessed Trinity as the origin of the Church, and therefore as the model for synodality. As stated by the *Synod Synthesis Report* at the conclusion of last October’s General Assembly: “According to the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, the Church is ‘a people brought together by virtue of the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.’”¹ If we as Church are supposed to live synodality, it is because being a synod is a reflection of who God is. He is a communion of persons bonded by mutual love.

Because the Trinity is our origin as Church, it is also the model for our mission. As the *Report* stated:

“The Father, through the mission of the Son and the gift of the Spirit, involves us in a dynamism of communion and mission that moves us from the ‘I’ to the ‘we’ and places us at the service of the world. Synodality translates the Trinitarian dynamism with which God comes to meet humanity into spiritual attitudes and ecclesial processes.”²

A conversion from “I” to “we”: this is at the heart of the pastoral conversion that we are called to as Church. For this conversion from “I” to “we” to occur, the Synod remarks that

“it is necessary for all the baptized to commit themselves to the reciprocal exercise of their vocation, charism, and ministry. Only in this way can the Church truly

¹ XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, First Session (4-29 October 2023), *Synthesis Report*, Part I, 2(a); cf. Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* (21 November 1964), 4.

² *Ibid.*

become a ‘conversation’ within itself and with the world, walking side by side with every human being in the style of Jesus.”³

+ + +

In today’s Gospel passage, Jesus reveals that he, the Son, is the one way through which we enter communion with the Father. For this reason, Christ must be at the center of all our discernment. Whether ordained, consecrated, or lay, we discover our mission within the Church when we make Christ the reference point. And so, when we talk about lay leadership, we must begin with *who* a lay person is in the Body of Christ. A lay person is someone who has been baptized into communion with the Blessed Trinity: someone who is a daughter or son of the eternal Father, a sister or brother of Jesus, and a temple of the Holy Spirit. And so, when Jesus says, “Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father,”⁴ this also indicates the honor that we owe to our fellow Christians, who are “sons and daughters in the Son”.

What does it mean, then, to honor women in a truly Christian way within the Church? It means honoring, not only their equal dignity to men as persons, but also honoring the *unique* gift that they are in the Body of Christ. While the ministry of women is critical to a flourishing Church, Pope Francis has said that we should not reduce the role of women in the Church to a question of ministeriality.⁵ He insists that, at an even more essential level than function or ministry, “*the Church herself* is a woman: a daughter, a bride and a mother,” and that because of this no one better than women can reveal the face of the Church. “Let us help one another,” the Pope says,

“putting aside any aggressive and divisive attitudes, and exercising careful discernment, to discover, in docility to the voice of the Spirit and in faithful communion, fitting ways for the grandeur and the place of women to be increasingly valued in the People of God.”⁶

Part of the genius of women, as Francis recently affirmed, is that they are “Builders of Humanity”, who, “with their unique capacity for compassion, their intuitiveness and their connatural inclination to ‘care’, are able, in an outstanding way, to be for society both ‘intelligence and a heart that loves and unites’”. Let us simply admit: in the midst of today’s countless wars, violence, and ideological battles, we *need* women if the world is going to have any hope of peace and communion.

+ + +

³ *Ibid.*, cf. Pope St. Paul VI, Encyclical Letter *Ecclesiam Suam* (6 August 1964), 70.

⁴ *John* 5:23.

⁵ Cf. Pope Francis, Address to the Participants in the Plenary of the Dicastery for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, 8 February 2024.

⁶ Pope Francis, Address to the Participants in the International Conference “Women in the Church: Builders of Humanity”, 7 March 2024, emphasis added.

What is true for the question of women's leadership in the Church is true for every other question that we discuss. The reference point must be Christ and his relation to the Father in the Holy Spirit. The Church comes from divine communion, and the Church's mission must always be carried out *in* communion and *for* communion, as we journey together, with one another and with our brothers and sisters in the human family, on our way back to eternal union with God. Let us not make the error that some of the religious leaders in Jesus' day did: they sought to kill Jesus because he called God his Father, making himself equal to God.⁷ On the contrary, we must affirm the Sonship of Christ, and therefore also affirm the filial relationship that we all have with God the Father, which in turn makes us sisters and brothers to one another. If we deny the fact that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is Lord, then any effort we make to advance the social mission of the Church is destined to fall short. With what shall we replace Christ once we have removed him from the center of our identity and mission? Social equality? Political balances of power? Human rights? Even human rights find their ultimate meaning when the Son of God is honored as the Lord of humanity.

“The Son cannot do anything on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing.”⁸ Let us follow the Son's lead, then, not seeking to do our own will, but the will of the one who sent Jesus.⁹

⁷ Cf. *John* 5:18.

⁸ *John* 5:19.

⁹ Cf. *John* 6:38.