



OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

DIocese OF BRIDGEPORT

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Solemnity of Easter
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My Dear Friends in Christ:

Over the past eighteen months, we have walked a remarkable Synod journey of faith as a diocesan family. It has been a journey of discovery, honest evaluation, hope for the future and a recommitment to the power of the Holy Spirit alive in our midst. It is also a journey that will continue for many years as we bring the vision of the Synod to reality. From the time when I had the privilege to convoke the Fourth Synod of the Diocese of Bridgeport on June 29, 2014 through our celebratory Mass held at The Webster Arena on September 19, 2015, the Holy Spirit has been powerfully at work, leading us to greater unity and renewal.

In this pastoral letter, I offer my reflections in two ways. First, I wish to provide a summary of the vision and mission that arose from the Synod. This vision will remain the hallmark of all that will be implemented in fidelity to the mandates approved by the Synod delegates and later confirmed by me. The initiatives of the Synod provide a roadmap that we will use to realize the work of the New Evangelization in Fairfield County. For this reason, it is essential that our initiatives remain rooted in, and return to, the vision of the Synod. Only in this way will they bear lasting, spiritual fruit.

Second, I wish to reflect in a more personal way regarding the wonderful opportunity of grace that the Lord has provided our diocesan family in and through the Synod. It is a great sign of hope that our Church remains faithful to our Lord. Despite the challenges we face, we can and will confidently and joyfully move forward.

I. Early Days of the Synod: An Assessment of the Challenges We Face

The first task that needed to be tackled was to discern the challenges we face in every aspect of our ecclesial life. In order to do this, the people of the Diocese were given an opportunity to directly and personally express their hopes, fears and disappointments. To this end, I facilitated a number of listening sessions throughout the Diocese, allowing any member of our diocesan Church to give voice to the issues that concerned them. As I reflect

back on those sessions, I remain humbled and profoundly grateful for the honesty, respect and deep passion that were displayed by those who spoke. They represented the diversity of our Diocese and began the sacred process of discerning the challenges as the Lord wished us to see them. In total, more than 4,000 interventions were received in these listening sessions and after they were recorded and organized, provided the starting materials for the formal work of the Synod.

When the delegates began their formal work, the first three sessions of the Synod were essentially dedicated to reflect upon the nature, scope and priorities of these pastoral and spiritual challenges. This was a period of both anticipation and frustration for many delegates. Frustration was often felt because of the well-intended desire on the part of many delegates to propose immediate solutions to address the challenges they saw. During those initial sessions, I counseled patience and perseverance, since what first appeared to be an obvious challenge usually had deeper roots, revealing a more fundamental challenge that a token analysis could easily miss. All the delegates ultimately agreed that the sacred duty before them required neither quick nor easy solutions but an opportunity to discern lasting, transformational initiatives that followed the mind of Christ.

The challenges we finally identified had many faces, all varied and interrelated in nature. In fact, they appeared in every facet of our ecclesial life and were as different as each parish community is different. Among them were the pastoral need to foster more joyful and reverent celebrations of the liturgies of the Church, especially Sunday Eucharist; more effective preaching; the evangelization of our fellow Catholics who no longer actively practice their faith; the re-engagement of those who remain actively involved in their parishes; an effective outreach to the youth and young adults of our Church through prayer and pastoral ministry; an expansion of opportunities for faith formation, especially for adults; support for families and parents, and many more. In addition to these pastoral issues, many gave expression to the growing financial challenges faced by a number of parishes, the administrative burden borne by pastors, the need to stem the tide of those leaving our local parishes and the two-edged sword of opportunity and challenge posed by electronic technology and social media.

The challenges we face in Fairfield County are the same challenges that Catholic communities face throughout the country: the effects of demographic changes; the need to recognize and welcome cultural and racial diversity in every aspect of our Church's life; the importance of fostering the works of charity and justice in effective ways; answering a prevailing sense of skepticism about all institutions; and helping to heal from incidents of the sexual abuse of minors in the Church and to strengthen our comprehensive safe environment programs.

After much prayer and deliberation, the Synod delegates discerned five global areas of challenge that required immediate and effective attention:

1. Liturgy and Worship: Every Catholic is called to full, conscious and active participation in the worship life of the Church (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* #14, 41, 48).
2. Family Life: There is a need to strengthen and support families, and to empower and assist parents as the primary teachers of the Catholic Faith.
3. Evangelization: We must create concrete plans for evangelization through our parishes, schools, ecclesial movements and communities.
4. Leadership: There is a need to continually call, form and support clergy, religious and laity in active leadership roles in the life of the Church.
5. Catechesis and Education: We must renew the ministry of faith formation throughout our Diocese, leading each person to a deepening relationship with the Lord Jesus in and through His Church.

A complete list of the initiatives that the Synod approved to address these global challenges appears in the Synod Report.

II. Three Spiritual Principles Underlying the Synod and its Implementation

The Synod has given testimony to the fact that the Lord is powerfully at work among us, inviting us to write a new chapter in the life of our Diocese. I have never had greater hope for our Church than I do now. With your help, and following the promptings and power of the Holy Spirit, I am confident that we will inherit the new life that the Lord wishes to grant us if we are willing to follow His lead.

As I reflect upon the mandates approved by the Synod, it has become apparent to me that there are three spiritual principles that guided our work. Recognizing and remaining faithful to these principles is of the greatest importance because they articulate a vision that gives direction, confident assurance and hope to the wonderful opportunity of grace that the Lord has provided us.

First Principle: The Centrality of Christ

The first principle became apparent mid-way through the Synod, during a spiritual exercise designed to shift the work of the delegates from the identification of the challenges we face to work on discerning appropriate pastoral initiatives to address those challenges. The task was a simple one: to identify a single passage of Scripture that summarized the spirit, mandate and work of the Synod itself. The consensus of the delegates identified the Lord's

teaching on the Vine and the Branches found in the fifteenth chapter of Saint John's Gospel. It is this passage that powerfully illustrates the first spiritual principle:

"I am the vine, you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit. Apart from me you can do nothing." (Jn. 15:5)

While a great amount of scriptural exegesis has been written about this passage by scholars through the ages, in my own prayer and reflection, the meaning of this passage begins with one fact. The branches of any vine have no life apart from the vine. No branch can survive without the life, energy and nourishment that come from the vine. All the branches combined are meaningless without the vine.

In our life with Christ, the same is true for you and me. Since Christ is our Divine Vine, each of us and all that we will accomplish in our Synod journey must be rooted in the Lordship of Jesus Christ, Savior and Redeemer of all creation. The Synod powerfully reminded us that our discipleship draws its power from our personal encounter with the Lord Jesus in and through the Church. Such an encounter gives us the strength to bear witness to the Lord in our daily lives. It helps us to grow in our unity and mission as the Church. Finally, as we fall more deeply in love with the Lord, we discover the God-given power to accompany those who are searching for meaning in their lives, one person at a time. Thus, the need to discern what the Lord wills for us did not end with the signing of the Synod's decrees. Rather, it is our perpetual obligation to humbly follow the Lord Jesus, in whom we have life and hope.

In terms of implementing the Synod, the choices we make must never be motivated by our own desires, pleasures, preferences or opinions. Our work as a Church is never simply building a consensus of what we may want or think is best. We form the Mystical Body of Christ in the world, each of us as unique, individual branches nurtured by the Divine Vine who is Christ. So if we seek the spiritual and pastoral renewal of our Church, we must keep our eyes fixed on Christ. The centrality of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit invite each of us to embrace a spirit of humility, docility and obedience to the promptings of the Holy Spirit and the proper exercise of ecclesial leadership. Christ will lead us to renewal by accompanying our efforts, pruning away all that is sinful or no longer effective in the mission of the Church, nourishing our work with His grace and standing with us when we suffer the most.

There is a corollary that arises from this parable that is noteworthy. For even a perfunctory glance at any vine quickly reveals that no branch is identical with any other. Rather, the splendor of the vine is precisely in its varied look. Each branch grows in its own unique beauty, yet all the branches are intimately tied to the one Vine and through it, to one another.

In spiritual terms, the Synod reminded us of the great unity in diversity that we enjoy as a diocesan Church. This diversity was powerfully manifested not simply among the delegates but in the joyful faces of the 8,000 worshippers who gathered at the Synod Mass. The Synod has called us to see strength in our diversity -- a diversity of gender, age, state of life, culture, race, economic background and education. Rather than simply acknowledge this diversity in words alone, the Synod impels us to explore the depth and meaning of this diversity and allow it to mold our ecclesial life in union with one another and with Christ, the Divine Vine of which we are all branches.

Second Principle: A Spirit of Co-Responsibility

The second spiritual principle that manifested itself within the work of the Synod began with the deep, passionate desire on the part of everyone involved in the process to seize this moment of grace to help renew our ecclesial life. This passion was not satisfied simply with diagnosing the challenges before us or proposing pastoral initiatives for others to implement. Rather, the desire was to join together in the work of renewal, recognizing our different states of life while working united in a common mission. This desire revealed the fundamental need to live the principle of co-responsibility in every aspect of our ecclesial life.

A true spirit of co-responsibility recognizes that every baptized person must assume responsibility for a portion of the work of the Church in ways appropriate to one's individual state of life. Co-responsibility fosters a true spirit of collaboration, allowing every person to share his or her different gifts, talents and expertise for the good of the whole community. Such an attitude respects leadership on every level while seeking to foster cooperation rather than competition.

On a spiritual level, a true spirit of co-responsibility prevents anyone from reducing discipleship simply to a personal possession or a "spectator sport." Rather, the mission of the Church and the work of the Synod must serve as a spiritual catalyst, because we cannot achieve what the Lord has asked us to do without deepening our unity in faith, hope and love. Thus, a spirit of co-responsibility will help us not simply to admit the challenges before us but to become part of the solution.

In practical terms, this spirit of co-responsibility will help animate our new pastoral planning process beginning in every parish in our Diocese, assist in the strategic planning process already underway in our schools, help renew our efforts to evangelize by adopting creative practices that can be learned from our larger society, provide badly needed

administrative assistance to our pastoral leaders and help transform the way our Diocesan Curia can provide more effective service.

Third Principle: Support of Leadership In the Church

The third principle that animated the Synod was the desire to support the current leaders of our local Church while also calling forth new leaders to assist in the pastoral, temporal and spiritual mission we share.

The support that the Synod delegates desired to offer the clergy of the Diocese, especially our pastors, was the mandate to foster “healthy and holy living” among our priests. The delegates keenly recognized the large number of duties and responsibilities that many pastors bear, often quietly and at great personal sacrifice. Among those duties are growing administrative responsibilities in a time of financial constraint. Despite these challenges, our priests and deacons serve generously and faithfully each day and I am deeply grateful for the integrity of their witness, collaborative spirit and dedication to the mission of the Church.

In order to realize this mandate to assist the clergy, I began a consultation process among the priests of the Diocese last fall to identify administrative, pastoral and spiritual initiatives that will help them to live more healthy and holy lives, in greater fraternity and mutual support. A separate set of initiatives to help realize this mandate will be decided in an extraordinary assembly of the presbyterate to be held on April 21, 2016.

In recognition of the need to invite, train, form and support pastoral and ministerial leaders, the Synod mandated a number of initiatives. Central to this work will be the creation of a Diocesan Leadership Institute whose mandate is threefold: (1) to provide training, formation and ongoing support to all pastoral, liturgical and catechetical leaders throughout the Diocese; (2) to help all adult Catholics discern their personal gifts and talents that can be used in service of the mission of the Church through their parish and school communities and (3) to provide the opportunity for all adult Catholics to grow in their spiritual life and knowledge of their Catholic faith.

Another initiative that will help foster new leadership and engage the young Church in the work of Christian service is the Catholic Service Corps. The Catholic Service Corps will provide opportunities for all the faithful, but especially young people, to deepen and broaden their Catholic faith by inviting them to embrace a life of Christian service and the call to be a missionary disciple. By giving expression to their faith through the work of their hands, many of these young people will be prepared to become leaders of our Church for the next generation.

Conclusion

Before concluding this reflection, I wish to express my profound gratitude to all those who served as delegates to the Synod. Their dedication to the process, generous commitment of time and great zeal for our Church is a blessing that has enriched both my own life of faith and our diocesan Church.

At the start of the Synod, I commended our work to the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of God. She has always served as an anchor for the Church during its times of greatest challenge. She remains so for you and me today.

As venerable Archbishop Fulton Sheen once observed, just as the moon does not generate its own light but reflects the light of something far greater, so too has Mary, from the moment of Christ's conception in her womb, always reflected the power, glory and light of Christ, her Son. Nothing of Mary's life was really about her -- it was all about her Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. As we continue to walk the Synod together, may the same thing be said of you and me.

With every best wish and blessing this Easter for you, your families and every member of our diocesan Church, I am

Sincerely yours in Christ,



Most Reverend Frank J. Caggiano
Bishop of Bridgeport