

The Synod: A Reflection to Prepare

by L.J. Milone, Director of Faith Formation
Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle

In this brief reflection, I want to open up the meaning of the synod, how we might prepare for it, and call on all of us to participate in it. This is a very important event for the whole church as well as to our own community at the Cathedral of St. Matthew. The synod is more than a meeting, more than trying to solve an issue. It is a spiritual event intended to reinvigorate our church and empower us to live the Gospel in our daily lives.

The Synod and our Common Mission

There is a fair amount of confusion about the synod. What is the Pope talking about with the word “synod”? This ecclesiastical term means “journeying together.” The synod is a way for all of us to journey together along the way of Jesus. It is also a way to discern how we might be more faithful to Jesus for we do stumble, fail, and sin. The synod, according to the *Handbook for the Synod*, “is intended to inspire people to dream about the Church we are called to be, to make people’s hopes flourish, to stimulate trust, to bind up wounds, to weave new and deeper relationships, to learn from one another, to build bridges, to enlighten minds, warm hearts, and restore strength to our hands for our common mission (PD, 32).”

The Holy Spirit as Primary Actor

Thus, the synod is not another series of business meetings. While church leadership aims to make better pastoral decisions depending on what the people say, the intention of the synod is to encounter one another in God and then listen to what the Holy Spirit wants us to do. The *Handbook for the Synod* affirms, “Synod means walking together under the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the primary actor of the synod.” The Spirit is the major player in the synod. We need to remember that. For the Spirit is the ever-present love of God always already *here and now*.

Pope Francis, faithful to Scripture and Catholic Tradition, understands the world as graced. Following Jesus, the Holy Father sees our lives as always already one with God. We are already one with God; realizing this truth is what life is about. Jesus Christ is the good news of inherent oneness with God, which is his message of the kingdom: God for us, with us, within us, one with us. Scripture affirms, “In God we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). And, St. Paul writes of “one God and Father of us all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph.4:6).

Discerning the Spirit's Call to the Church

The Spirit means God already present and active in our lives. Hence, the essential question put to us in this experience of church called “synod” is: what is the Spirit saying to us? Jesus assures us that “the Spirit of truth...will guide you to all truth” (John 16:13). We need to listen to the Spirit. Listening, in general, is the key to this synod. Called together in synod, the people of God – all of us, laity and clergy – listen to the Spirit of God. We listen to our own experience of God. We listen to our sisters and brothers share their experience of the divine.

Listening with Humility and Faith

Pope Francis points out that this deep listening as “more than simply hearing. It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn. The faithful people, the college of bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the ‘Spirit of truth’ (Jn 14:17), in order to know what he ‘says to the Churches’” (Rev 2:7).

Now, to listen like this we need humility and faith; we will need to put aside our predetermined ideologies. Pope Francis issues a clear warning: “Ideologies are a dangerous weapon; we always have the tendency to latch on to an ideology in order to interpret a people. Ideologies are reductive and lead us to exaggeration in our claim to comprehend intellectually, but without accepting, comprehending without admiring, comprehending without assimilating. So reality is understood in categories, and the more common ones are the categories of ‘-isms’.”

Participate in a Listening Session

How, then, might we participate in the synod? The cathedral will hold several **listening sessions through February** to listen to the Spirit speaking through you, the people of God. *Showing up and taking part in the listening sessions is the best way to participate in the synod.*

Prepare with Prayer and Scripture Reflection

Prior to these listening sessions, we can prepare by prayer and reflection. What do we hear the Spirit saying to us? This is the decisive question. Pope Francis calls us to pay special attention to the Word of God; so, read, prayerfully, one of the Gospels to help you prepare. This liturgical year the church reflects on readings from the Gospel of Luke. So, take the Holy Father’s call as a call to read Luke.

We can prepare by reflecting on these questions: How are we, as a cathedral parish, walking together? How is the Spirit calling on the church, here in our cathedral parish as well as the whole universal church, to be transformed? What is your experience of God? How are you, currently, experiencing God in this church, particularly in the Cathedral of St. Matthew?

Through the synod’s listening sessions, we will be strengthening our relationships with each other as a local church, our *communion*. This will happen through our *participation* in the synod by preparing through prayer and by joining in the listening sessions. This work of listening and conversation is intended to help us in our shared *mission* to share the love of God in Jesus Christ with our community. So, Pope Francis subtitles the synod, “Communion, Participation, Mission.” Join your sisters and brothers throughout the world and come to the listening sessions. The church cannot be faithful to Jesus without you.