

A DIOCESAN SYNOD*

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A Synod is a celebration of the diocesan Church. It is a "coming together" of the local Church as "sacrament" and mystery. It is a time to discern the Spirit, to recognize charisms, and to order them for the upbuilding of the Church. It is also a time to sing hymns, to break bread with joy and recognize the Lord.

In its "coming together", a Synod is a sign of openness to the Spirit, of vulnerability to mystery; it is an act of faith in God's abiding grace, revealing itself here and now through the flesh and blood of the diocesan Church; it is a happening, a "saving event". It cannot really be programmed with charts and schemes. No organizational instrument can predict its outcome; for the Spirit breathes where and when he wills.

Vatican II teaches that the Church is "a kind of sacrament". In a Synod this "sacrament", this sign of the Church comes together. Each member of the Synod is a unique cell in this living "sacrament". The sacrament of baptism needs a minister, a subject, sponsors, water, and a Christian community into which the newly baptized will be admitted. In the same way, if the diocesan Church is going to be a true "sacrament", it needs a bishop, priests, lectors, teachers, sisters, brothers, parish councillor, and other lay ministries. It needs these living components to fill up and complete the "sacrament" of the diocesan Church.

When such a local Church comes together, a "new creation" becomes visible, for through baptism all have become God's creation. The Church comes into being as God's gift because his Word comes to the believers *in power*. They respond to

* The Priest, May 1972.

that Word by a faith which leads to death in baptism and life in the Spirit. Then they form a communion in the Word and in the bread. This communion, then, comes together as the "sacrament" of the diocesan Church.

Now this "new creation" is not yet a perfect creation. When the diocesan Church comes together, a sinful Church comes together. Vatican II teaches that the Church is constantly in need of repentance and renewal. We need to repent because we have sinned. We have not lifted a finger when our black brother stood bound before us, begging that we set him free. We have not served the world, but rather, we have asked the world to serve us. We have multiplied laws and have thus robbed our brother of the "freedom whereby God has made him free!". We have not always "recognized in the poor and in the suffering the likeness of our poor and suffering Founder". Although we are called to be a sign on this earth of "the kingdom of justice, love and peace", we have been silent while brother killed his brother in war. Yes, we are a sinful Church! It is not without reason that we begin our Eucharistic celebrations saying: "I confess to almighty God . . ."

It is, of course, a grace that our Church is a sinful Church; otherwise, you and I could not belong to it. Then there would be no Church. Besides, a sinful Church should become a humble Church, constantly praying for the redemption and forgiveness of the Lord.

If we feel that the Church today is in sad shape, that there is too much sinfulness in the Church, then the Church has a greater claim than ever on our presence and our love. For Christ came to save sinners. So, if we accept the Christ of the Gospel, then we must, like Christ, love the Church, as sinful. Only love can redeem. The sinful Church needs our love to become a true community of redemption and salvation in our time.

Now if a Synod is going to be fruitful, the diocesan Church must be faithful to God's call. It must become the Church God wants it to be in this present world. This is the most urgent *priority* — to be the Church of God. This means that the Church again and again must look into the Scriptures to find out what kind of Church it ought to be. The Church can do this by placing itself under the judgement of the biblical images of the Church.

One of the most helpful images is the one given by St. Paul: the Church is the body of Christ. "Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?" (I Cor. 6:12-13). He means that we have passed from the body of death to the body of Christ. Bishop Robinson concludes that "it is almost impossible to exaggerate . . . Paul's doctrine of the Church as now the resurrection body of Christ". St. Paul's idea can be best understood by paraphrasing his words in this way: "You are the body of Christ and severally membranes thereof" (I Cor. 12:27).

So in the body of Christ there is an osmosis of life and a mutual sensitivity among the members. One member in Christ confers life and holiness on the other. Thus, the members of the body are a living unity before they are distinct. They are one in essence, but distinct and diverse in their functions.

This body is not static. It is constantly growing. It is built up and cemented together by love. Cup, loaf, blood, body, table—these are the symbols of the living interdependence of the diverse members in the one community that is the body of Christ.

Through this membership in the body of Christ, the Christian participates in the death and resurrection of Church. The character of the diocesan Church must, therefore, be understood by reference to the victory of Christ. In Christ, the Church, already in this life, overcomes sin and death. Thus the Church, by being the "resurrection body of Christ", proclaims to the world the victory that "where sin abounds, grace does more abound".

If the diocesan Church is going to be faithful to this Pauline image of the body of Christ, it must witness, first of all, to unity in diversity. Secondly, it must witness to Christ's victory over sin and death and thus be a sign and ground of hope for all men.

A second Pauline image for the Church is "the building". Other words used to express the idea are "upbuilding", "edification", and "spiritual house". St. Paul uses the Greek word "oikodome", which refers more to the building process than to the building itself. He wants to convey the picture of stonemasons and carpenters working together, joining stones and timbers to build a strong house. In modern terms, the image could mean that one man lays the foundation, another lays the

bricks, another puts in the electrical wiring, another, the plumbing, etc.

St. Paul's phrase, "upbuilding" or "edification", refers also to the Christian community itself, which is "God's house". It includes the love of "agape" and the love-banquet itself which is celebrated in the house. Thus St. Paul highlights that unselfish love which is the main factor in the process of "building up" the spiritual house. He stresses the relationship of the individual members to each other. For him, "edification" or "upbuilding" is not simply a moralistic or pietistic concept, but primarily charismatic and spiritual.

St. Paul wants to indicate further that each builder has a reasonable role in building up the Church. But each builder must relate his work to the total project of building up the Church. It is only in this relationship that the individual builder will discover whether his work is really useful for "the upbuilding of the Church". St. Paul also implies that the process of building up the Church is never finished, that the process of relating the different works of the builders to the total building will go on until the coming of the Lord. Quite plainly, this image calls for unity among the builders.

Now it is easy to see that the diocesan Church today needs the services of many "builders", like teachers, administrators, helpers, council members, critics, writers and leaders. It needs many ministers who reconcile divisions; ministers who visit the sick, and the lonely; ministers who "weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice".

It is plain, too, from this image that no one is really free "to do his own thing" in isolation from the rest of the builders. The usefulness of each one's ministry depends on how it relates to the total process of building up the Church. Thus, St. Paul could ask the speakers in tongues in Corinth to yield the floor to the prophets. It was not that there was anything wrong with speaking in tongues. In fact, it was a manifestation of the Spirit. However, speaking in tongues created a twofold problem: first, there was the question of "usefulness"; secondly, there was the question of order in the Church. Regarding usefulness, St. Paul felt that at that particular time, the Church of Corinth had a greater need for prophets. Besides, the speakers in tongues created disorder in the Church. For this reason, St. Paul advised that if there were no interpreter, the

speakers in tongues should be silent in the Church. For "he who speaks in an unknown tongue *edifies* (*oikomei*) himself, but he who prophesies *edifies* (*oikomei*) the Church" (1 Cor. 14:4).

Now if the diocesan Church is going to be faithful to this Pauline image of the Church, it must decide which ministries must be suspended because they are no longer useful, and which new ministries should be instituted because there are new needs. At the same time, it must determine which ministries, both new and old, have the more urgent priority for the upbuilding of the Church; otherwise, some builders may be building at the wrong time or in the wrong place. Furthermore, it needs to ask whether it has over-emphasized the ministry of priesthood to the detriment of other ministries. It would be difficult to build a house with just bricklayers.

The history of the Church reveals the constant need to bring all the builders together, either in Synod or in Council. The *Code of Canon Law* recommends that a diocesan Synod be held every ten years. The Council of Constance (1414-1418) decreed "that from henceforth an Ecumenical Council should be held every ten years". One can speculate whether the Protestant Reformation would have happened if this decree had been observed.

A third New Testament image of the Church is called "the brotherhood of faith". This phrase includes other images, such as "fellowship of saints", "the followers", "disciples" and "the fellowship". Although the word "brotherhood" was not used very often, the idea itself, pervades the entire New Testament.

In his letters St. Paul frequently addressed his fellow believers as "brothers". In his brotherhood of faith there is no room for estrangement, which, if it happens, must be followed by reconciliation. There is no room for jostling for superiority or power, or for lording it over one another as the pagans. But all are one, "enduring all things, hoping all things", washing each others feet according to the example of the Lord.

A fourth image of the Church is "the common slavery". The slave image occurs in the fifty New Testament passages. St. Paul suggests that those who preach Jesus Christ as Lord must regard themselves "as slaves for Jesus' sake" (11 Cor. 4:5). It is Christ's love, his slave-service toward his followers

which turns these same followers into slaves for one another. The New Testament word, "diakonia", in its Greek meaning, described the rugged and menial service of the slave. This slavery was a gift freely and humbly offered to the brothers in the Lord. This image profoundly modified the exercise of human authority so that all apostles would admit that they were "unworthy servants".

A fifth image of the Church is now the familiar "People of God". This image indicates the graciousness of God in creating, calling, sustaining, judging and saving his people. It indicates that God constitutes his people by his own possession.

However, God calls his people, not to privilege, but to responsibility. As the God of history, he calls his people to serve his purpose in the world, to reveal the mystery of his will. Always waiting on God, this people becomes a servant, pilgrim people.

For this reason the Church can never absolutize any specific programs or ministries. For the Church, like a true servant, waits daily for the Master's Word. Sometimes God will lead the Church into the desert to do penance; at other times he will lead it into the Promised Land to enjoy its fruits. But the Church will never be "snugly ensconced in Zion". It will always be responding to the mystery of God's call. And God is very much like a lover, who calls his beloved, the Church, always in movement. Its tasks and ministries are new every day because, through the Gospel, God's Word comes as a new call every day.

Consequently, no ministry, including that of priests, can be finally defined or circumscribed either in its external form or in its tasks; otherwise, it will be closed to the new and larger demands of the Gospel in view of the changing needs of the Church and the world. An overly defined ministry can become immune to the Gospel; it can become a routine job which is outside of, rather than within, the Christian community. For priests, it can easily become a clericalism which is quite insensitive both to the prophetic call of the Word and to the blood and sweat of the human condition.

Now the crucial point about all these images is this: they all describe constitutive, not accidental, elements of the Church. Thus, they have priority over all subsequent historical forms. If the Church is going to be faithful to the call to be Church,

then it must possess these elements. If a diocesan Church is going to be a true sign, "raised among the nations", it must be faithful to the meaning of those images which emerged in the Church after the first Easter. It must appear like the Church in Acts 2:42: "These remained faithful to the teaching of the apostles, to the brotherhood, to the breaking of the bread, and to the prayers."

In this verse in Acts, being faithful "to the brotherhood" comes right after being faithful "to the teaching of the apostles". When all is said and done, the most predominant characteristic of the Church in the New Testament is the brotherhood of faith. So whatever a diocesan Church says or does, it must always remain a brotherhood of faith.

To be more specific, the diocesan Church is a brotherhood before it is a hierarchical or juridical organization. It is a brotherhood before it is divided into bishop, priests, sisters, brothers or laymen. It is a brotherhood before it is divided geographically into parishes, schools and institutions. To put it yet another way, the brotherhood of faith to the diocesan Church has priority over, and effectively transcends, all subsequent geographical, sociological, and functional distinctions. Even though here on earth the Church badly needs organizational forms through which its people can work and relate themselves are secondary to the brotherhood of faith.

Thus, it is unthinkable that in diocesan brotherhood one parish would define itself over against another, or over against the diocese. It is unthinkable that a parish would invoke this world's symbol of money, prestige, race, or city, to lord it over another parish. It is unthinkable that any religious community would define itself over against, rather than within, the diocesan brotherhood. It was because of the priority of the brotherhood that St. Paul came down so hard on the factions of Corinth: "What could be more unspiritual than your slogans, 'I am for Paul' and 'I am for Apollos'?" (1 Cor. 3:4). Paul reminds the Corinthians: "You belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God".

Yet, St. Paul did not impose any kind of rigid, militaristic uniformity on the Church. Never in the history of the Church has there been such respect and reverence for the freedom, the diversity, the flexibility of Christians as in the Church of Corinth. Unity was not superimposed by external authority. It

grew from faith in one Lord, one Gospel, one baptism and one bread.

It may be helpful to note that the diocesan brotherhood has priority over the brotherhood of parishes and other ecclesial forms. The diocesan Church is Church in its own right. Parishes are only lesser cells in one body that is the diocesan Church.

In the U.S., Catholics have often assumed that the parish was more important than the diocese. This has happened, first, because being in a Protestant culture, Catholics have absorbed a Congregationalist attitude of autonomous congregations. Secondly, in the rural parishes there was a natural isolation from the urban center of the diocese. Thirdly, ethnical groups of Germans, Irish, etc., clung to their traditions and were unwilling to lose their identities in the diocesan melting pot. Fourthly, dioceses in the U.S. have been, and still are, too large to form a Christian brotherhood which visibly transcends the smaller, more meaningful, brotherhoods in the parish. Fifthly, dioceses as such have not gathered enough in Eucharist or in Synod to give visibility and meaning to the concept of the diocesan Church.

But all these historical conditions may not override the ecclesial truth the parish is derivative of, and dependent on, the diocesan Church. For only the diocesan Church, in the bishop, has the living sign of apostolic succession. It has the official Gospel which forms the Church and the *cathedra* which presides over it. Finally, it is the sacramental center for the discernment and "sending out" of priestly ministries. Thus the priest in the parish comes out of, and is sent by, the diocesan presbytery to which he continues to belong.

With the formation of priests' senates, this diocesan presbytery deserves more attention. In Acts 13:1, we read: "Now in the Church of Antioch there were prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Symeon . . . and Saul. While they were worshipping the Lord and *fasting*, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them'. Then, after fasting and prayer, they laid their hands on them and sent them off".

Perhaps we can transfer this image of shared ministry to the diocesan presbytery. Let us imagine that the annual assignment of clergy in a given diocese includes ten pastors, two newly

ordained priests, and one deacon. Let us imagine, further, that on this occasion all the priests of the diocese gather with these men and their bishop at the Cathedral for three days of worship, prayer, and fasting. (Fasting, both in the New Testament and in the *Didache*, was a sign of solidarity.) On the third day all the priests and deacons join in the Eucharist and ordination ceremony. During this time, all the priests, together with their bishop, lay hands on the ten pastors, two priests and one deacon. Each priest, invoking God's blessing and in his own words offering prayers and support, participates in the "sending out" of the priests and deacon. Finally the bishop does the same. Later, when the priest has problems or needs spiritual or human support, he returns quite naturally to the Cathedral and the presbytery from which he was sent out.

This ecclesial picture, this living sacrament of the presbytery, would be considerably improved if it were "filled out" and completed by the addition of sisters and lay people imposing their hands and, in their own way, participating in this "sending out" of ministries. In every priestly ordination ceremony the bishop consults the people. They can say, "Yes" or "No". Since the people have a voice in the ordination of priests, it seems but fitting that they also participate in the "sending out". This would be a better sign of the unity and solidarity of the brotherhood of all believers in the diocesan Church.

A final aspect of the diocesan Church is its eschatological dimension. Briefly stated, this means that the diocesan Church exists to be a sign of the kingdom of God. Through the diocesan Church the kingdom of God already exists in this present world even though it is not yet complete. It is the mission of the Church to be a preview of the kingdom and at the same time to strain towards its completion. Meanwhile, it continues to pray, "thy kingdom come".

The oldest Eucharistic acclamation is the Aramaic "*Maranatha*", meaning, "Come, Lord". It is both a prayer and a confession of faith. It means that the Church is oriented first to the future, to its final goal, and then to the present, to make that future a reality even in the present.

Now if the diocesan Church is going to be a preview of the kingdom, it needs to know something about that kingdom. It must look for the signs of the kingdom in the Scriptures. Some aspects of the kingdom can be seen in the "growth" para-

bles. The first is the parable of the seed growing secretly. "The kingdom of God is like this: as if a man should cast seed on the ground. . . and the seed germinates and grows he knows not how" (Mark 4: 26-29). Somewhat similar are the parables of the sower (Mark 4: 2-8) and the parable of the tares among the wheat (Matt. 13:: 24-30). These parables indicate that the kingdom will be in a period of growth, that it will require cooperation between God and man and, finally, that there will be a harvest time which will be the "coming of the Lord".

Another picture of the kingdom emerges in the conclusion of Matthew's eschatological discourse (Matt. 25:35): "Take your heritage, the kingdom prepared for you. . . I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you made me welcome; naked and you clothed me, in prison and you came to see me".

St. Paul describes another aspect of the kingdom: "Now we are seeing a dim reflection in a mirror; but then we shall be seeing face to face. . . There are three things that last: faith, hope and love; and the greatest of these is love" (I Cor. 13:12).

A more poetic glimpse of the kingdom is provided by Rev. 21: 3, 4: "You see this city? Here God lives among men; his name is God-with-them. He will wipe away all tears from their eyes; there will be no more death and no more mourning or sadness; now I am making the whole of creation new".

Yet another aspect of this kingdom can be seen in the teaching of Vatican II. In *The Church Today* we read: "For after we have obeyed the Lord and in his Spirit nurtured on earth the values of human dignity, brotherhood and freedom, and indeed all the good fruits of our nature and enterprise, we will find them again, but freed of stain, burnished, and transfigured. This will be so when Christ hands over to the Father a kingdom of truth and life, of holiness, and grace, of justice, love and peace" (No. 39).

Now it is evident that if the diocesan Church is going to be a believable sign of the kingdom, it will nurture in its own territory the values of human dignity, of freedom, of justice, and peace. It will be *the* example of brotherhood. It will be marked by dialogue, reconciliation and fraternal service. It will feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, visit those in prison, wipe away tears from the eyes of men, and preach the Gospel to the poor. It will do this, not for institutional self-

aggrandizement in the form of prestige or converts, but simply for the sake of the kingdom of God.

To be a sign of the kingdom, feeding the hungry and helping the poor cannot mean simply detached hand-outs in a kind of ecclesiastical philanthropy. It means that the poor man rides in our air-conditioned Oldsmobile and eat steak at our table. And, more importantly, it means that we ride on *his* beat-up bicycle and eat hamburger at *his* table.

The diocesan Church will also be a sign that in the kingdom there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, neither cleric nor layman, neither rich nor poor; for they are all baptized in the one spirit and belong to the one body. Needless to add, it will not tolerate any form of discrimination against women, blacks, chicanos, etc., for there is no second class citizenship in the kingdom of heaven. Only in this way will the diocesan Church be "a kind of foreshadowing of the new age". Only then will it begin to reveal to all men "that the kingdom is already present in mystery" (*The Church Today*, No. 39).

To be in the Church is to believe, not only in what the Church is, but in what it *ought to be*. (And only he who really believes in the future will bend his energies to make that future a reality.) In being a sign of the kingdom of God, the Church *ought to be* a sign of God's love for the world and at the same time a sign of his judgment of the world. If the Church cannot become that, then it has ceased to be Church and it needlessly encumbers the ground. If it does become that, then it is beginning to be the sign of the "new heaven and new earth".

BETTER FEW BUT GOOD

"Deus nunquam ita deserit Ecclesiam suam quin inveniantur idonei ministri sufficientes ad necessitatem plebis si digni promoverentur et indigni repellerentur. Et, si non possunt tot ministri inveniri quot modo sunt, melius esset habere paucos ministros bonos quam multos malos."

St. Thomas, Suppl. Q.36.a.4,ad 1.