

TWENTY-NINTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

October 17, 2021

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Last Sunday, Pope Francis officially opened a new synod in Rome, which is a meeting of bishops and members of the Church to discuss certain aspects of life in the Church. These synods take place in Rome approximately every three years, and the topic of this particular synod is the process of consultation in the Church and the direction of the Church at this moment in history. Pope Francis has asked that every diocese in the world participate in this synod on a local level; so, today, Bishop da Cunha is celebrating a Mass at the Cathedral in Fall River to begin the diocesan phase of the synod, and he has recommended that every parish in the diocese celebrate a votive Mass to the Holy Spirit this weekend, to be spiritually united as a diocese.

It's a tradition in the Church to invoke the blessing and guidance of the Holy Spirit at the beginning of certain events, such as a new school year, or a synod. We call on the Holy Spirit, because Scripture tells us that He is the One who reminds us of everything Christ taught us (cf. Jn 14:26) and “*guides us to all truth*” (Jn 16:13). Both Pope Francis and Bishop da Cunha have been careful to explain that the purpose of a synod is not to listen to the will of the *people*, but rather to listen to the will of the *Holy Spirit* and how He is guiding the Church. A synod is not a congress or a parliament where decisions are made by majority vote, and it is not an assembly to change the doctrine or teachings of the Church. It is rather a meeting to discuss how the Church can be ever more faithful to the teachings of Christ which never change in any age.

So, the Pope is asking everyone in the Church to listen more carefully to the Holy Spirit, so that we can discern His direction and guidance. This requires serious prayer and reflection on the teachings of Christ, because the Holy Spirit always directs our attention back to the truths that Christ revealed to the world. After this process of reflection and consultation, each diocese will present suggestions to the synod in Rome, regarding what the Church should focus on at this time in history. The ultimate purpose and goal of this process is greater conversion and sanctification of all of us in the Church and deeper reform and renewal of the Church, so that she will be more faithful to her mission of bringing Christ to the world.

There may be many different topics that surface for discussion as a result of the Synod, but we can hope that it will direct greater attention and priority to the more pressing issues of our time, especially the drastic decline in the practice of

the Catholic faith. In his recent pastoral letter, Bishop de Cunha gives the very sobering statistics on the decline of the Church here in our diocese. Since 1990, the number of Catholics in the Diocese of Fall River has decreased by 100,000, participation in faith formation has decreased by 67%, and reception of the Sacraments of Initiation has declined by 65%. Mass attendance, which was already very low before the pandemic, has now decreased even more, by about 35%. Perhaps the number one thing most priests hear from their remaining parishioners is that their children and grandchildren no longer practice the faith. We know the Church can never change the teachings it has received from Christ, so we can hope that the Synod will discuss how parents can convince their children that the teachings of Christ are the truth about how to live. There is little that we priests can do, if parents and families do not convince their relatives and friends to come hear our homilies or read our columns, because most of us spend almost all of our time meeting with those who ask to see us. This is a real pastoral dilemma for us.

This synodal process in the Church comes soon after the experience of the pandemic, which kept many people from the sacraments for too long a time, and also after the very painful and traumatic experience of the clergy abuse crisis, which continues to be a major issue in the Church. So, we can hope that the Synod will also focus attention on the issues related to each of these experiences. For example, it has been reported that during the pandemic, many Catholics died in hospitals without receiving the sacrament of Anointing. This can never happen again, especially if hospitals are allowing Catholic priests to enter to anoint. The abuse crisis, we all know, revealed a shocking lack of holiness, and even pure evil, in some of the Church's priests, so we can hope the Synod will discuss and address the ongoing purification of the priesthood and measures that can promote sanctity and accountability among priests.

As the Church listens more carefully to the direction of the Holy Spirit, it may also happen that she will focus her attention on those teachings of Christ which may have been selectively avoided over the past years. It can happen for all of us that we focus selectively on the teachings of Christ that are easier for us to follow. But it could be that the fruit of this synodal process in the Church will be a greater attention and focus on the more challenging teachings of Christ which call us to greater holiness. We can pray that, as a result of this Synod, the Church that we love so much will be more intensely faithful to Christ, with greater integrity and less contradiction, and will be better able to bring Christ and His teachings to others, so that they can discover the more abundant and beautiful life Christ offers, as well as the gift of eternal life to come.