

Monastic Scribe LIX: September 29, 2023

READY, SET, GO...

The World Synod of the Catholic Church will open this coming week in Rome. It will be a four week time of prayer and discussion with another follow-up month's program for a year from now. There has never been such a worldwide consultation of so many people as have taken part in these preparatory meetings all over the globe. Yet, the majority of our Catholic people probably know very little about what has occurred. And, worse still, there are those who fear and oppose any such gathering, suspecting changes that will destroy the old church of their faith.

I can remember, on January 25, 1959, where I was (in bed sick with the flu) when I heard that Pope John XXIII had called an ecumenical council. None of us who were alive could remember the last Council which had taken place in 1869-1871. And with the custom of the sufficiency of monarchical papacy after the French Revolution, there was not a lot of expectation for a Council or any real need for one.

Nevertheless, because of Pope John's knowledge and experience, plans moved ahead and the Council opened on October 11, 1962. Many of the bishops who attended the gathering, as well as many of the Catholic faithful throughout the world, thought this was a waste of time and expected some pre-written documents prepared for them to simply accept. What they were not prepared for was the movement of the Holy Spirit. Documents that had been simply repetitious of recent traditional teachings were rejected. The Bishops found that they had a voice and were part of a truly Catholic Church. Many went home changed in their understanding of what a universal church led by the Spirit was really all about. But the people of God never fully assimilated the teachings of the Council. They accepted the "changes" in the language of the Mass, the position of the altar, and similar novelties but had no real understanding of the deeper teachings of the Council on the Church, Liturgy, the Bible, the place of the Church in the modern world. Teachings limited by reactions to the Protestant Reformation and to the French Revolution had neglected the full meaning of the Catholic faith that goes back to Christ, the Apostles, and to 2000 years of history.

Experience and not just theoretical beliefs would become central to the Council. Historical and intellectual preparations had been made during the nineteenth

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century as many found that the current piety of the people did not represent the best of biblical, patristic, liturgical, ecclesiological, spiritual doctrines, as well as ecumenical and global awareness. There was defensiveness and a closed feeling of superiority as well as a very passive and simplistic understanding and lifestyle of many priests and laity alike. The Second Vatican Council called for an *aggiornamento* (adapt to the signs of the times) as well as a *ressourcement* (return to sources of teachings of Jesus, early church, patristic and medieval developments). There was the strong belief that the Holy Spirit continues to work in the church now as well as throughout its 2000 year history.

Perhaps it was too much too soon for the people of God to assimilate. There were resistances and mistakes made and tendency to go back to the pre-Conciliar church. The world changed during the sixty years after the Council. Pope Francis, learning from his Latin American experience, proposed to give life to the Synods that Pope Paul VI had reintroduced into the church after The Council. The Synod of Bishops has been meeting every three or four years since but often were simply tools of the Pope's current vision.

The Synod called for this and next year is not primarily a way to introduce changes into the church. It is to make the church healthier in accord with the teachings of the Council. An Ecumenical Council is the highest level of teaching in the Catholic Church. This Synod is simply a way to implement what the Council taught. This may lead to changes in questions of who is to be ordained, the openness to different groups, etc. but these changes will follow from the basic reform of the Church through the Synod.

There are three areas of focus at the Synod. The first is COMMUNION. Union with God and human unity in the life of the church is vital. The Church should promote this union. The church is not to be conservatives and liberals but radical followers of Jesus Christ. Membership is based on Baptism and all members are equal even if they have different functions in the church. The second focus is PARTICIPATION, not only in the liturgy but in the voice and activity of the church. The third focus is MISSION, the call to evangelize in the sense of sharing the joy of the gospel, of being prophets of hope for the world.

These three foci will bring up issues of sharing in the governance and authority in the church, of the place of cleric and lay, of men and women, of who may take part in all these modes. Pope Francis would say everyone is invited – “*todos, todos todos*” as they shouted in Portugal.

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I invite you to take active interest in the Synod. Get behind the headlines. Try to understand what is really being discussed. Don't be cynical or negative. Pray to the Holy Spirit to enlighten all involved. Join me at joycet@glastonburyabbey.org in celebrating this historic moment in the history of the Church. It is your church – think and act that way!

Fr. Timothy Joyce, OSB, STL

Please note that I do not speak on behalf of Glastonbury Abbey, the Archdiocese of Boston or the Catholic Church, though I hope my faith is in harmony with all these. Any error in judgment should be credited to me and not anyone else.