

A SYNOD OF THE PEOPLE, BY THE PEOPLE, FOR THE PEOPLE



Pope Francis repeatedly invites us to his New Evangelization though he never finitely defined the term. Yet, in this ***Year of the Laity***, a term adopted by our Brazilian bishops from November 2017- November 2018, to which we, at the American Catholic Council, fully agree. More than ever before we believe there is substantive urgency for the People of God to respond in faith now. We boldly accept Francis' invitations by developing the first-ever, national, ecumenical Peoples Synod to be held in Dallas, TX the weekend of October 12-14, 2018

The New Evangelization: Francis consistently invites the People to engage in this transitional time in the Church where he sees the organizational pyramid turned on its head. The New Evangelization is a paradigmatic model of creating and sustaining relationships. The process emphasizes *dialogue* as a means to *building deeper relationships*; it calls us to engage in *encountering others on life's journey* to recognize and respond to the needs of others around us. Scripture is all about relationships: the good, the bad, and the ugly.

Francis invites over and over again but the people do not act so we believe the signs of the times need solutions to issues demanding action. Christians are under siege globally; the media and others ridicule Christian beliefs and values; a destructive cycle of global change and chaos exists, violence epidemics abound, hostile gangs viciously torture and kill others for sport; angry rhetoric is everywhere, universal blame and finger-pointing actions manifest cultural breakdowns of societal values, politics has taken on offensive, insulting rhetoric with adolescent schoolyard bullying prevalent; even our bishops have publicly criticized the Pope

and his Vatican II. *Groupthink* has replaced respectful public discourse preferring well-scripted talking points with neither any conscience-driven research nor rational dialogue to defend their positions.

We are in the eye of the storm watching cultures crumble and a majority lament the situation but do virtually nothing to change it. To respond to the signs of the times, we must act by implementing the processes of the New Evangelization: dialogue, encounter and accompaniment. All of these actions are relationship based. Our times are complex; our goal for the Synod is to grow a diverse inter-religious community of practitioners who work in “field hospitals” locally to help heal our culture of the racial, gender, ethnic justice divide.

The Process: Listening circles engage individuals in new, creative ways to discuss applied faith life. Common to all Christian denominations is LOVE, which will serve as the sole criteria of a future created to live faith intentionally. Counteracting the current negativity of our culture, we must be willing to reconnect in new ways, in story ways, in uncluttered ways. Technology has disrupted our relational connectivity though it plays a vital and positive role in all our lives, like everything else it currently consumes our discretionary time disconnecting us further from one another. We plan to use a variety of methods to communicate nationally to those who engage in their locality.

There can be no doubt that we are in an in-between time where Richard Rohr states:
“...it’s no surprise that people by the millions are moving away from traditional religions entirely, often into secularism, often into experimental forms of spirituality that are not yet supported by religious traditions. But at this pivotal moment, something else is happening. Within each tradition unsettling but needed voices are arising---prophetic voices, we might call them, voices of change, hope, imagination, and new beginnings...They claim that the Spirit is calling us, not to dig in our heels, but rather to pack up our tents and get moving again.”

Our Synod will replicate the process used at the Vatican Synods on the Family in 2014-2015 where we actually listen *with intention* to one another. Within the Synod, we will behave differently because this form of listening is both an art and a science and is very successful in many different venues. We have a structure to engage all in open conversations on faith.

The Synod will expose attendees to “circle practices”, an ancient form of dialogue that brings people together in circles to share their stories and perspectives on faith. Circles are relationally powerful because people sit face-to-face, everyone speaks in turn and respect and confidentiality are honored. We will leave institutional dialogue to Francis and his Curia while

we will embrace the faith and make it come alive as a healing tool. We want to engage in living out Jesus' call in John 14:12-14:

"Amen, Amen, I say to you, whoever believes in me will do the works that I do, and will do greater ones than these, because I am going to the Father" And whatever you ask in my name, I will do, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask anything of me in my name, I will do it."

The listening circle method, an ancient method of dialogue, engages face-to-face communication reconnecting individual on a human level (rather than a technical level) while creating a "learning field", a respectful exchange of ideas that promoting creativity, communal decision-making and action based on accountability owned by the circle. When Pope Francis engaged bishops in listening, it was a messy process; some bishops called for Francis to intervene and tell them what to do. He opted for the synodal model creating empowered dialogue demonstrating that there was "leadership in every chair", a motto of the method we are using. The method engaged them in new ways of processing information; we believe this method has empowering potential for the People of God as well.

Stories about relationships form the focus of Scripture. Why? We are encouraged to be the face of God to others. Stories help us build deeper relationships getting us to understand why people think and act as they do. Stories take us outside ourselves allowing us to see and serve the marginalized and the hurting among us. We become interdependent in our service; Francis models this interdependency by being present to the people, engaging in dialogue about the peoples' needs as he acknowledges the societal breakdowns affecting all.

Francis and His Work: Francis was elected by his brother bishops to address a dysfunctional Curia and the products of their work. That is his work focus: the structure and systems that operationally make the institutional Church function. Because the Church has been a closed system, focused entirely on itself, the paradigm shift that Francis is working toward is immense-never been done before to the scale that Francis envisions. Yet, the People are impatient unaware that the immensity of the task is like turning an ocean liner 180 degrees. He is changing the culture to change the systems and structure. Notice the sequence.

The People of God and Their Work: The People of God can no longer abdicate their rights and responsibilities; there is a great deal of work being done on symptomatic issues, issues that are a direct result of poor governance. Institutional change, however, cannot directly occur from grassroots prodding or pleading. The grassroots are not recognized in a closed system and subsequently have no influence or power in such decisions. Institutional reform of the Church is a complex paradox that seems impenetrable until we look more closely.

We are tied up in virtual knots looking for ways to discover the weak link in the chains that bind us for dramatic change to occur. A colleague of ours, Clyde Christofferson, saw an analogy between the roles we have all filled and engaged in bear a strong resemblance to an old legend called the Gordian Knot. Simplistically, the story reveals a challenge to a complex problem, an intractable problem metaphorically described as a knot. The challenge offered to the people was to untangle the knot while individual after individual failed the mission as they looked for a loophole by pulling the rope in one direction or another. The creative solution was to cut the knot making untangling it simple. For us, cutting the knot of inaction is the only solution.

A Transformative Option: We are engaging in our own culture change with the People of God in the Synod developing an open system, focused on a broader audience to fulfill the John: 14—12-14 mandate. For too long the People of God await transformative “magic” from Francis alone, as if he were a magician. They scrupulously watch for Vatican actions to criticize or take Curial leadership to task. None of these actions have created meaningful change because closed systems are not interested in the world outside of themselves.

Francis’ stealth movement, ideologically and pragmatically, is moving the institution from one of laws to becoming an institution of love. Despite the resistance he experiences among a minority of vocal bishops must be energy draining but this enormous culture shift is already in play and cannot be reversed. Our Synod takes on the challenge of *being church* by intentionally exercising our rights and responsibilities to create deliberate faith-based opportunities to serve others and our planet to carry out this evolution---or *are we engaged in a revolution?* Perhaps it is a hybrid of both or in the eyes of the beholder based on our perception of the speed of this transformation. We are being called to birth the holy in each of us to *be more* than we were yesterday open to let the Spirit lead us *to do more* in faith than we did yesterday into a lived “New Evangelization”.

I warmly invite you to join us in Dallas October 12-14, 2018 for the first steps.

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