



## Archbishop Shelton's Pastoral Reflections

February 2025

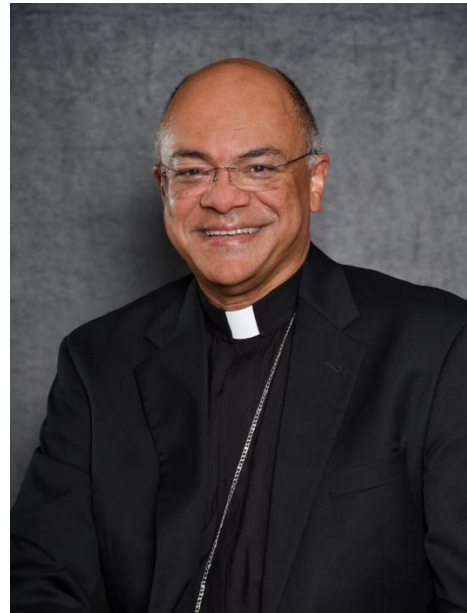
### **We are the People of God, the Sacrament of Unity**

*Since the Church is in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race, it desires now to unfold more fully to the faithful of the Church and to the whole world its own inner nature and universal mission. (Lumen Gentium, #1)*

My dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

The Second Vatican Council taught that the Church is the People of God, the sacrament of unity among all nations and peoples. We are not “rugged individuals” or a nameless, faceless crowd. We are the family of God, the sisters and brothers of Jesus, and our unity in Christ frees us from the isolation of individualism, and from the tyranny of an anonymous state.

The divisions that we experience in society and in the Church are the consequence of sin. The Evil One works hard to separate us from one another—by race, nationality, economic conditions, social status, and political ideologies. Jesus, on the other hand, calls us to join our minds and hearts together and to recognize that we are all One in Him.



During the past several years, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the pastoral leadership of Pope Francis, we have been prayerfully reflecting on “synodality.” This term is often misunderstood today, but it is an ancient concept dating back to the earliest days of Christian history. As we read in the Acts of the Apostles, the Holy Spirit, who empowered Jesus’ fearful disciples, gathered the leaders of the young Church together in prayer, attentive listening, and dialogue to discern God’s will and to make important decisions about who they were, what they believed, and what God was calling them to be and do as missionary disciples of the risen Lord.

Synodality is the act of engaging in authentic dialogue within and beyond the Church, fostering a united, inclusive, and missionary community. The idea that we are one family, rich in our diversity, is what inspires us to respect each other even when we disagree, to celebrate our cultural and linguistic differences, to work together to care for our common home (the earth), and to build a world community that is dedicated to the common good.

When we acknowledge that we are united as the People of God, and not simply separate groups (or tribes) who must compete with one another for the necessities of life, we create the conditions necessary for peace and solidarity among all peoples. In union there is strength and harmony. In division we find only weakness and social discord. No wonder that Jesus prayed for unity for his disciples and all who would listen to them (cf. Jn 17:20–23):

*I pray not only for them, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, so that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me. And I have given them the glory you gave me, so that they may be one, as we are one.*

We are One in the Holy Spirit, just as Jesus and the Father are One. We are God's People, the sacrament of unity among all nations and peoples.

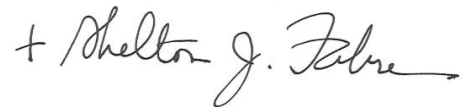
As this Jubilee Year of Hope progresses, let's pray that we will resist the temptation to scatter and be divided in our loyalties. Let's ask instead that the Spirit of God who dwells in us will bring us together as members of God's family who care for one another and for our common home.

As noted in the Final Document: Communion, Mission, and Participation of the Synod on Synodality (see selection below):

*The Church's vocation and prophetic service (LG 12) consist in witnessing to God's plan to unite all humanity to Himself in freedom and communion. The Church is "the Kingdom of Christ already present in mystery" (LG 3) and "the seed and the beginning of the Kingdom on earth" (LG 5). It, therefore, walks together with all humanity, strongly committed to justice and peace, human dignity and the common good (#20).*

We are already united in Christ, but the divisions among us that have been made possible by sin require that we cooperate with God's grace and work together to achieve "justice and peace, human dignity and the common good" for all. May the Blessed Virgin Mary and all the saints walk with us in this Pilgrimage of Hope so that we all will be One in Christ.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, starting with a cross symbol and followed by the name "Shelton J. Fabre". The signature is written in black ink on a white background.

Most Reverend Shelton J. Fabre  
Archbishop of Louisville



## ***A selection from the Final Document For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission***

### **Part I - The Heart of Synodality: Called by the Holy Spirit to Conversion**

#### **The Church as the People of God, Sacrament of Unity**

15. The identity of the People of God flows from Baptism in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. This identity is lived out as a call to holiness and a sending out in mission, inviting all peoples to accept the gift of salvation (cf. Mt 28:18-19). The missionary synodal Church springs from Baptism, in which Christ clothes us with Himself (cf. Gal 3:27) and enables us to be reborn of the Spirit (cf. Jn 3:5-6) as children of God. The whole of Christian existence has its source and horizon in the mystery of the Trinity, which brings forth in us the dynamism of faith, hope and love.

16. “It has pleased God, however, to sanctify and save men and women not individually and without regard for what binds them together, but to set them up as a people who would acknowledge Him in truth and serve Him in holiness” (LG 9). The Eucharist, the source of communion and unity, continually nourishes the People of God on their journey towards the Kingdom: “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.” (1 Cor 10: 17). The Church, nourished by the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of the Lord, is constituted as His Body (cf. LG 7): “you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.” (1 Cor 12: 27). Enlivened by

grace, the Church is a temple of the Holy Spirit (cf. LG 17); the Spirit animates and builds it, making us all living stones of a spiritual edifice (cf. 1 Pet 2: 5; LG 6).

17. Gathered from every tribe, language, people and nation and living in different contexts and cultures, the synodal process gave us “the spiritual taste” (EG 268) of what it means to be the People of God. The People of God is never the simple sum of the Baptized but the communitarian and historical subject of synodality and mission still on pilgrimage through time and already in communion with the Church in heaven. Within the plurality of contexts where the local Churches are rooted, the People of God proclaim and bear witness to the Good News of salvation. Being in the world and for the world, they walk together with all the peoples of the earth, in dialogue with their religions and their cultures, recognizing in them the seeds of the Word, journeying towards the Kingdom. Incorporated into the People of God by faith and Baptism, we are sustained and accompanied by the Virgin Mary, “a sign of sure hope and comfort” (LG 68), by the Apostles, by those who bore witness to their faith to the point of giving their lives, and by the saints of every time and place.

18. In the holy People of God, which is the Church, the communion of the faithful (*communio Fidelium*) is at the same time the communion of the Churches (*communio Ecclesiarum*), which is manifested in the communion of Bishops (*communio Episcoporum*) by reason of the very ancient principle that “the Church is in the Bishop and the Bishop is in the Church” (St. Cyprian, Epistle 66, 8). The Lord placed the Apostle Peter (cf. Mt 16: 18) and his successors at the service of this manifold communion. By virtue of the Petrine ministry, the Bishop of Rome is “the perpetual and visible principle and foundation” (LG 23) of the Church's unity.

19. “God’s heart has a special place for the poor” (EG 197), the marginalized and the excluded. Therefore, they are at the heart of the Church. The whole Christian community is called to recognize in those made poor the face and flesh of Christ, who, though He was rich, became poor for us so that we might become rich through His poverty (cf. 2 Cor 8: 9). The preferential option for the poor is implicit in Christological faith. The direct knowledge of the suffering Christ (cf. EG 198) possessed by those who are poor makes them heralds of salvation received as a gift and witnesses to the joy of the Gospel. The Church is called to be poor with those who are poor, who often constitute the majority of the faithful, to listen to them, learning together how to recognize the charisms they receive from the Spirit. The Church also needs to learn to recognize them as agents of evangelization.

20. “Christ is the Light of nations” (LG 1), and this light shines on the face of the Church, even when marked by the fragility of the human condition obscured by sin. The Church

receives from Christ the gift and responsibility of being the effective leaven in bonds, relationships and the kinship of the human family (cf. AG 2-4), witnessing to the meaning and goal of its journey in the world (GS 3 and 42). The Church assumes this responsibility today at a time dominated by a crisis of participation, that is, of people feeling that they are not participants or actors with a common destiny, as well as by an individualistic understanding of happiness and salvation. The Church's vocation and prophetic service (LG 12) consist in witnessing to God's plan to unite all humanity to Himself in freedom and communion. The Church is "the Kingdom of Christ already present in mystery" (LG 3) and "the seed and the beginning of the Kingdom on earth" (LG 5). It, therefore, walks together with all humanity, strongly committed to justice and peace, human dignity and the common good. All this, while it "aspires after the completion of the kingdom" (LG 5) when God will be "all in all" (1 Cor 15: 28).

*(Working Translation from the Original Italian, October 26, 2024)*



(CNS photo/Vatican Media)

## **A Message from Pope Francis: Words of Challenge and Hope**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

With the *Final Document*, we have gathered up the fruit of years – at least three – , during which we set out to listen to the People of God, in order to have a better understanding, by listening to the Holy Spirit, of how to be a “synodal Church” in these times. The biblical references at the beginning of each chapter set out the message by linking it to the actions and words of our Risen Lord, who calls us to be witnesses of his Gospel, with our lives more than with our words.

The Document on which we have voted is a gift three times over.

1. First of all, it is a gift for me, the Bishop of Rome. When I convoked the Church of God in Synod, I was aware that I needed you, the Bishops and the witnesses of the synodal path. Thank you!

I often remind myself, and to you, that the Bishop of Rome, too, needs to practise listening; in fact, he wants to do it, in order to respond to the Word, which tells him every day: “Strengthen your brothers and sisters.... Feed my lambs”.

You are well aware that my task is to protect and promote the harmony which – as Saint Basil teaches us – the Spirit continues to disseminate in God’s Church, in the relations between the Churches, despite all the efforts, tensions and divisions that mark its journey towards the full manifestation of the Kingdom of God, which the Prophet Isaiah asks us to imagine as a banquet God will prepare for all peoples. All of them and everyone, in the hope that none will be missing. Everyone, everyone, everyone! Nobody left outside: everyone. And here is the key word: harmony. The first strong manifestation of what the Spirit does, on the morning of Pentecost, is to bring harmony among all our differences and all our languages... Harmony. It is what Vatican II teaches by saying that the Church is “like a sacrament”: it is sign and instrument of God’s anticipation; He has already set the table, and He waits expectantly.

Through His Spirit, His Grace whispers words of love in everyone’s heart. It is up to us to amplify the sound of this whispering, never getting in its way; to open the doors, never building walls. How much damage the women and men of the Church do when they build walls, how much damage! Everyone is welcome, everyone, everyone! We must not behave like “dispensers of Grace”, who steal the treasure and tie the hands of our merciful God. Remember that we began this synodal Assembly by asking forgiveness, feeling shame and recognizing that we are all beneficiaries of mercy.

In this time of wars, we must be witnesses of peace, and also learn to shape in concrete ways the *conviviality of differences*.

For this reason, I do not intend to publish an “Apostolic Exhortation”: what we have approved is enough. The Document already contains very substantial indications which can guide the mission of the Churches, on different continents, and in particular contexts: hence I am making it available to everyone straight away; hence I have asked for it to be published. In this way, I want to acknowledge the value of the synodal journey which has been made, and which, by means of this Document, I entrust to the holy faithful People of God.

Time is needed in order to arrive at decisions and choices that involve the whole Church on some aspects of the life of the Church to which the Document draws attention, and on the themes entrusted to the ten “Study Groups”, which need to work freely in order to offer me proposals. I shall, therefore, continue to listen to the Bishops and the Churches entrusted to them.



This is not the classic way of putting decisions off for ever. It is what corresponds to the synodal style with which the Petrine ministry, too, is to be exercised: listen, convene, discern, decide and evaluate. Pauses, silence and prayer are necessary at every one of these steps. It is a style we are learning together, a little at a time. The Holy Spirit calls us and supports us in this way of learning, which we need to see as a process of conversion.

*A selection from the final greeting of Pope Francis to participants in the Second Session of the Synod on Synodality, October 26, 2024*

## **My Prayer for You**

Please join me in praying with these words of Pope Francis:

*At times, whether we are ordained, consecrated religious, or lay faithful, our hard work fails to achieve the desired results, the seeds we sow seem not to bear sufficient fruit, the ardor of our prayer cools, and we are not always immune to spiritual aridity. In our lives as missionary disciples of Christ, it can happen that hope slowly fades as a result of unmet expectations. We have to be patient with ourselves and await in hope God's own times and places, for he remains ever faithful to his promises. Amen.*