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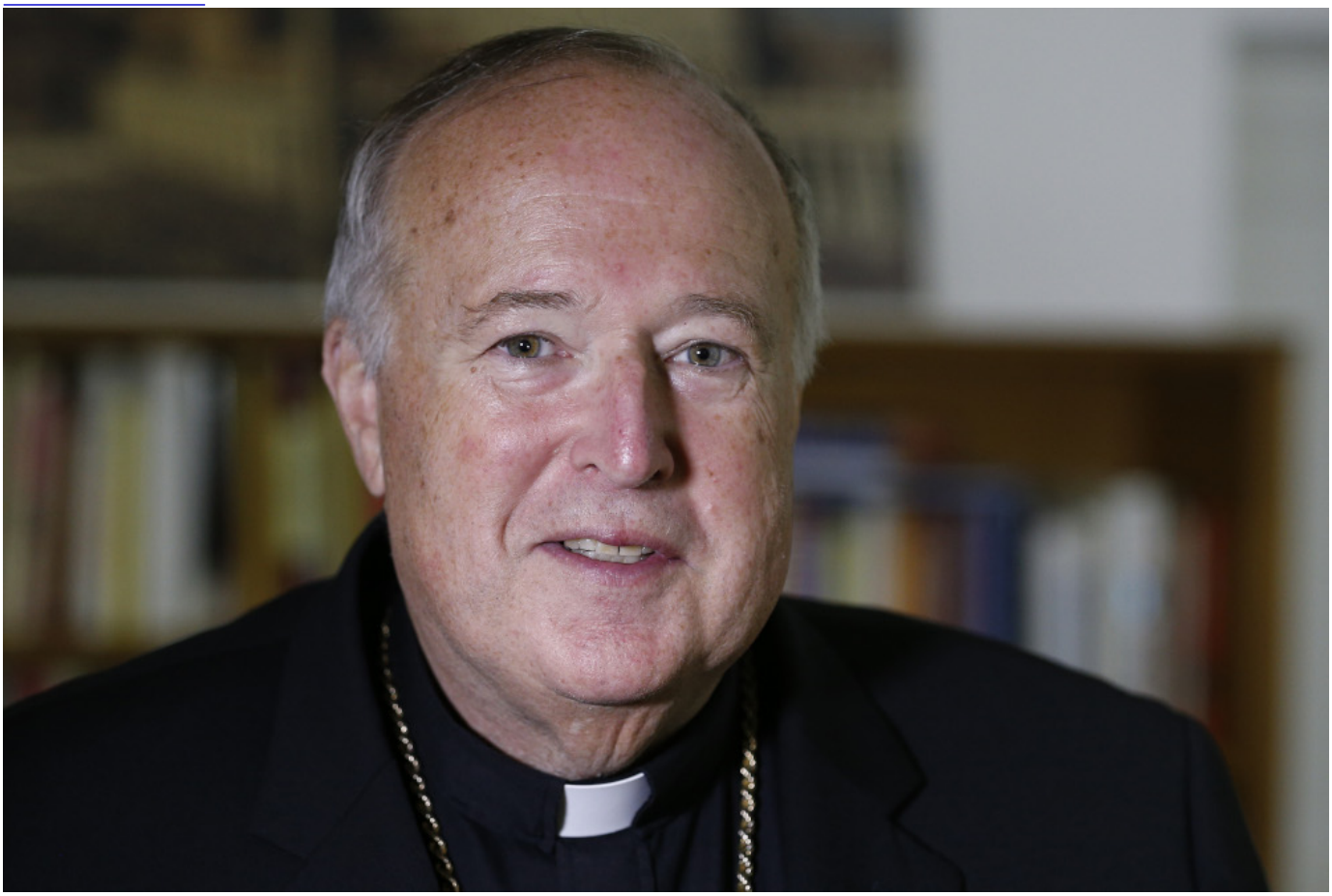

San Diego Bishop Robert McElroy is pictured after an interview with Catholic News Service in Rome Oct. 27. (CNS/Paul Haring)

by Robert McElroy

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Editor's note: The following is a reprint, with permission, of the 2019 MacTaggart Lecture given by San Diego Bishop Robert McElroy on Nov. 6 at St. Mary's University in San Antonio.

Rekindle the fire

During the month of October, I had the great privilege of participating in the synod on the Amazon in Rome. It was a gathering overflowing with the spirit of God that constituted a dramatic, prayerful effort to address a central question: How can the church in the Amazon ever more effectively proclaim the salvation of Jesus Christ in its fullness, so that all men and women of the region, especially indigenous peoples, might find in the church a true sacrament of God's love and the pursuit of justice for the poor and for the Earth?

In order to begin to answer this question, the church in the region had engaged during the previous two years in a massive process of discernment reaching into the depths of the Catholic communities in the villages and the forests, in the cities and among the landless communities of itinerants. Through conversations with catechists and liturgical leaders, with village congregations and with the urban parish communities, with bishops and priests and local parish leaders, most of whom are women, the Catholic community sought to identify the dreams and the hopes, the sufferings and the questions, the frustrations and the spiritual joy which the people of God find in the church and need from the church.

This process of consultation and discernment gave particular priority to hearing the voices of those who are usually excluded from meaningful participation, particularly the indigenous peoples of the region who have historically been the victims of discrimination within society and in the life of the church.

It revealed a tapestry of deep and beautiful faith, devotion to family, a closeness to the Earth as the great blessing of God's creation, and a dedication to a vision of the good life which is centered not upon material acquisition, but rather living in good relationship with God, our brothers and sisters and the whole of the created order.

The consultation also pointed to the suffering of the people of the region, especially within the indigenous communities. It revealed a need for a comprehensive initiative in pastoral formation to assist and form the catechists and parish coordinators who sacrifice heroically to serve Christ in village parishes where a priest only visits once a year. The process of discernment pointed to the immense gift of grace that the institution of an Amazonian rite for the liturgies would constitute for the indigenous peoples of the region, allowing the native peoples of the Amazon to pray in their own language and incorporate symbols of their own cultures. The consultation which preceded the synod articulated the need for both maintaining celibacy as a central tenet of priestly life, and on an emergency basis ordaining married priests who could celebrate the Eucharist in communities starved for Christ's real presence in the sacrament. One bishop noted that if the ratio of priests per square mile in his diocese were applied to the nation of Italy, Italy would only have 64 priests. Finally, the consultation suggested the need for women to be ordained as deacons in order to enhance their ability to preach the word, celebrate baptisms, and lead parish communities on a permanent basis.

In addition to these pastoral priorities, the consultative process highlighted the church's role in standing with victimized communities within the Amazon, when their tribal lands are taken, when their rivers are poisoned by the chemicals used in foreign mining operations, when economic interests are literally burning the Amazon rain forest in the purposeful pursuit of more grazing land to raise cattle, when tribal leaders are criminalized for defending the rights of their people. The synod also sounded an alarm for the world about the ecological destruction taking place in the Amazon rain forest and its implications for climate change and the future of the world.

Listening in the synod assembly to the voices of the church of the Amazon — village leaders and catechists, women religious and lay missionaries, bishops and priests — was a poignant, hope-producing, complicated, painful, joyful experience. But it was the experience of a church that is alive and unafraid to ask fundamental questions of reform and renewal, of creative new pathways for moving forward in the present moment, of believing that the Holy Spirit is leading God's people constantly, lovingly, vigorously.

I have been asked in this lecture so suggest how the church in the United States might move forward from this most painful moment in its history. My suggestion would be to embrace the type of synodal pathway that the church in the Amazon has been undergoing — one filled with deep and broad consultation, the willingness to accept arduous choices, the search for renewal and reform at every level, and unswerving faith in the constancy of God's presence in the community.

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The synodal pathway

Synodality is an ancient concept in the life of the church which has been given new emphasis and vitality through the teachings of Pope Francis.

Fundamental to these teachings is the principle that the whole people of God must take part in the process of discernment that guides the church in its sacred mission to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Rooting the entire process of synodality in the baptismal call of all believers, Francis holds that "all of the baptized, whatever their position in the church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization, and it would be insufficient to envisage a plan of evangelization that would be carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients." Quite bluntly, the Holy Father states, "the flock has an instinctive ability to discern the new ways that the Lord is revealing to the church."

Thus, an authentic process of synodality must never be an elite process, for it represents the action of the whole people of God.

Just as importantly, synodality is inherently a process of listening. "A synodal church is a church which listens, which realizes that listening is more than simply hearing. It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn. The faithful people, the college of bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to one another, and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the 'Spirit of truth' in order to know what he 'says to the churches.' " Pope Francis is emphatic that this process of listening must occur at every level in the church.

It is my reluctant conclusion that the church in the United States is now adrift on many levels, and that a fundamental moment of renewal is needed. A synodal

pathway would an opportunity to set that type of renewal in motion.

If the church in the United States were to embark on such a synodal renewal, it would need to make hard choices. The Catholic community could not hold back from difficult and piercing questions or searing dialogues. It would have to include a process of consultation that reaches into the heart and the soul of the Catholic community at all levels, asking men and women how they have found salvation in Jesus Christ, what graces the church has brought into their lives, how the church has hurt them.

Catholic young adults pray over Bishop Anthony Taylor of Little Rock, Arkansas, at the Fifth National Encuentro in Grapevine, Texas, Sept. 21, 2018. (CNS/Texas Catholic Herald/James Ramos)

Such a synodal pathway is not foreign to the church in the United States, nor is it beyond our capacities. Last year, the church in the United States, completed a significant dialogical process in its fifth *Encuentro*. Seeking to renew in a fundamental way the church's outreach to and immersion in the Hispanic

community that is rapidly becoming the majority in the Catholic community of the United States, the *Encuentro* process sought dialogue, reflection and action on the level of the parish, the diocese, the region and the nation as a whole. A particularly telling element in this dialogue was the ability to bring into the conversation thousands of Hispanic young adults who are the future of our church.

While a general synodal process in the United States would have to be broader than the *Encuentro* process and engage more deeply and widely in general questions of governance, inclusion, clericalism, and lay ministries, the success of the *Encuentro* is a sign that a synodal process of discernment can be undertaken in the church in the United States with enormously substantial results.

The church of the Amazon sought to create through synodality a church with four characteristics that arise from the identity of the church and the current pastoral moment. It sought to build a missionary church looking outward to the world with the fire of evangelical zeal. It embraced a participatory church inviting believers to active engagement in the church and in the world. The church in the Amazon endeavored to build a welcoming church. And finally, the Catholic community in the Amazon desired to become a church of harmony that fosters the values of peace, mercy and communion.

These four hallmarks could constitute for the church in the United States a charter for renewal through which to reanimate our evangelizing and believing church. For each of them addresses a specific element of atrophy in the American Catholic community which weighs us down in the present moment, and each has the capacity to reorient us in our mission of proclaiming Christ crucified and Christ risen.

A missionary church

Two major elements of the culture of the church in the United States are particularly burdensome today, and cause us to turn inward, rather than outward toward the evangelization of the world.

The first is the bunker mentality that suffuses the life of the church, especially for those of us who are bishops or Catholic lay, priestly, and religious leaders in the United States. We are frequently paralyzed by the constancy and substance of attacks launched upon the community of faith which we love so deeply and to which we have given our lives. In great part, this bunker mentality has arisen because of the pervasive failure of the church and its leaders to recognize the enormity of the crime of clergy sexual abuse, particularly against minors. But this bunker mentality within the church is also the result of secularizing trends in society that have led to drift and alienation from the church, especially among the young, as well as the disaffection of mainstream Catholics from elements of Catholic teaching on sexuality and the moral life. There is a palpable sense of siege among the leadership of the church in the United States. It saps our ability to engage constructively with the world, to find the energy and the hope-filled zeal to undertake new initiatives and our ability to clearly discern where the call of Christ is truly leading us.

The second element of the culture in the church in the United States which is crippling is the "culture of maintenance" that pervades our decision making. We are the inheritors of vast institutions, structures, buildings and financial commitments that were established in a prior age. We are also the inheritors of patterns of decision making that place enormous value on how decisions were made in the past as a guide as to how they should be made today. These two realities create in the church a powerful force of inertia that often makes maintaining the status quo a higher imperative than constantly renewing the priorities of the church in the light of the Gospel as applied to today's ecclesial and societal situation.

> There is a palpable sense of siege among the leadership of the church in the United States.
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That is why a process of synodal discernment that seeks to advance truly missionary discipleship holds the potential to free the church in the United States from the powerful grip that the bunker mentality and the culture of maintenance have upon us. Missionary discipleship by its very nature faces outward and refuses to become

entrapped by long-standing patterns of ecclesial action and decision making. It demands a willingness to leave behind treasured practices that have served the church well in past ages, but now imprison the Gospel. It proclaims that believers and church leaders must find joy in their understanding of and commitment to the spread of the salvation that we find in Jesus Christ. The ethic of missionary discipleship refuses to adopt a bunker mentality not because it is blind to the failures of the church or the antagonism that so many have toward Catholicism in today's world, but because it proclaims that precisely in times of hardship and sin in the life of the church, God stands steadfast in our midst.

Missionary discipleship also categorically rejects that strain of defeatism in the life of the church which proclaims that the Catholic community today must decline in numbers in order to maintain fidelity to the gospel. This vision of a smaller and purer church is diametrically opposed to the missionary impulse which has been at the center of the Christian life since the first apostles. The embrace of the church is wide, not because she ignores the failures that are rampant in the human heart, but because the mercy of God stands as the central attribute of God in relation to men and women.

A critical point must be made here about the bunker mentality and clergy sexual abuse. Moving out from a bunker mentality can in no way mean moving away from or beyond the searing issue of clergy abuse. The church's obligation to protect the vulnerable, minister to and compensate victim/survivors and acknowledge our sinfulness individually and collectively must grow, not diminish, in the coming years. Precisely in moving out of a bunker mentality in the life of the church we will be freer to carry out our responsibilities regarding clergy sexual abuse with greater clarity, zeal and compassion, because our relationship and love for all those who have been abused will not be seen through the distorting lens of distance and protectiveness that are all too often the byproducts of viewing out from a bunker.

In addition, the reality of clergy sexual abuse and the church's failure to confront this evil in our midst through blindness, denial, obfuscation and minimization must help to shape our perceptions of what it means to be a missionary church. For our history and current failures to protect minors and adult victims of abuse act as a critical check on the all too alluring impulse within the life of the church to embrace

a sense of triumphalism in missionary outreach within the life of the church or in the world. The image of the church as a field hospital that Pope Francis has given to us must convey the reality that even in being a source of grace and healing, the church itself remains broken and sinful battered and in need of reform.

San Diego Bishop Robert McElroy leads an Aug. 13, meeting with all of the more than 2,500 San Diego diocesan employees in response to Pope Francis' call to confront sexual abuse of minors and other vulnerable people. (CNS/David Maung)

A co-responsible and participatory church

The issue of clericalism stands as a rupture within the life of the church in the United States today. It is a poison that protects abusers of children from detection and justice. It is a cultural pattern in parish life that permits the mistreatment of lay men and women and excuses words and actions that have no place within a Christian community. It distorts effective patterns of decision making in ecclesial communities at all levels. It warps the souls of priests and bishops, and alienates them from

Christ.

The only effective corrective to clericalism is a theological vision and ecclesial reality that powerfully frame the ordained priesthood within a participatory and co-responsible church where lay women and men are empowered, respected, well-formed and cherished. For this reason, any process of synodal discernment in the church in the United States must confront forcefully the avenues through which lay ministry and empowerment are enhanced in the concrete life of the church, and how they are frustrated.

The final document of the synod on the young captures this vision: "A characteristic feature of this style of church is the valuing of the charisms that the Spirit gives to each of her members, through a dynamic of co-responsibility. In order to initiate it, conversion of the heart becomes necessary, as well as a readiness for mutual listening, which builds an effective common mind. Motivated by this Spirit, we can proceed towards a participative and co-responsible church, capably of valuing the wealth of the variety of which it is composed."

The vision of a participative and co-responsible church contains and calls for a deep theology of the ordained priesthood and episcopacy that is truly rooted in the vocation to be prophet, shepherd and priest. But it always places those roles in relationship to the call and the grace of God to leadership and the need to be truly servant to the community. The call of God to a priest or bishop is not a possession, a source of a collection of rights, or a bestowal of status. It is a call to service, prayer and compassion.

A synodal process that seeks to promote a church of co-responsibility and participation will strengthen the priesthood in the United States even as it strengthens the call to broader lay ministry and involvement in the church and in the world. For the overwhelming majority of priests and bishops in our nation ardently strive to incorporate into their lives the primacy of Christ, the call to be servant, the acceptance of sacrifice for the church and the inherent compassion for sinners, which means all of us. A participatory and co-responsible church is not a replacement for, a threat to, or a diminishment of the essential role that priests and bishops play in the life of our communities. It is instead a call to complementarity in the deepest sense, understanding that the rich gifts of the Spirit are meant to be used widely and wisely with the ecclesial community, and that to continue structural and cultural patterns which inhibit this expansiveness is to reject outright the grace

of God.

If the church in the United States were to undertake a robust and piercing synodal process regarding our efforts to become a participative and co-responsible church, two major issues would have to be dealt with creatively, substantively and prayerfully.

The first of these issues is the role of women in the church. It is time that the Catholic community had a substantive discussion on how the church in the United States can maximize the co-responsibility and participation of women The process of discernment which led to the Amazon synod created a profound consensus about the essential role of women's existing and potential ministries, both in the church and in the world. It led to a conviction among the Amazonian bishops who gathered in Rome that women should be included at every level in every ministry which is not precluded by Catholic doctrine.

The second question within the Catholic community that must be a focus of any synodal process touching upon the themes of participation and co-responsibility is the role of young adults in the church and in the world. The recent universal synod in Rome has provided new pathways for us to embrace at every level in the church in the United States. If we do not take up this challenge inspirationally and systematically in the life of the American church, we will see the drift away from Catholicism cascade into the type of exodus that has emptied the churches of Europe and produced a generation of non-believers. We are currently completing a diocesan synod in San Diego focusing on young adults, and the overwhelming trajectory of our consultation and renewal has focused on the simple truth that we must find a way to recognize and witness to the reality that young adults are not dependents in the church community, but eager to be co-responsible in the comprehensive life of the Catholic community. We must invite them in.

A woman holds a sign in support of women deacons as Pope Francis leads his general audience in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican Nov. 6. (CNS/Paul Haring)

Read this next: On Catholic women deacons, San Diego's McElroy is 'in favor of it'

A welcoming church

The ministry of Jesus Christ is preeminently one of invitation, loving embrace and healing. When the Lord approaches men and women, particularly in distress, his pattern of encounter is constant and clear. First, he embraces them with the overpowering love of God and assures them of the presence of God's grace in their lives. Then he heals them of the affliction that is consuming them. And only then does call them to reform their lives.

The pastoral action of the church must follow this very same pattern. Often it does not. Instead of showing the patient dialogue of Jesus with the Samaritan woman at

the well, instead of showing the joy which Christ did in his encounter with Zacchaeus, instead of rejecting the judgmentalism of the crowd like Jesus in defending the woman accused of adultery, the church so frequently is indifferent to those who are seeking, inhospitable to those who want to find a place in God's church, judgmental to those who carry failure in their lives as all of us do.

If we are to build a more welcoming church in the United States, the searing issue of judgmentalism must be faced. There is no sin that Jesus condemns in the gospels more often than that of judgmentalism. Probably, this results from Jesus' recognition that this is a sin that virtually all of us fall into easily and frequently. It is a mystery of the human soul why men so often find satisfaction in pointing to the sins, rather than the goodness in others. It is a mystery of the human soul why we feel better about ourselves because someone else has failed.

But this mystery of the human soul has imprinted itself deeply within the life of our church.

The church of Jesus Christ must be a church that proclaims the Catholic moral life in all of its fullness, and calls believers to high standards of faith and conduct. But the church must proclaim that life in the recognition that it is the mercy of God which saves us, not our own merits. Unless we reflect this fundamental principle of our faith in the lived reality of our ecclesial life, we risk legitimate rejection by the very young adults whom we are seeking to invite into the church. It is not that young adults live better lives, or do not fail in being judgmental themselves. But millennials and those who are coming after them have a particularly low threshold for the hypocrisy that lies in professing to follow the Lord Jesus while rejecting his continual condemnation of judgmentalism in our individual and ecclesial lives.

> Millennials and those who are coming after them have a particularly low threshold for the hypocrisy that lies in professing to follow the Lord Jesus while rejecting his continual condemnation of judgmentalism in our individual and ecclesial lives.

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A church of harmony and dialogue

A final characteristic of the vision for the church that emerged from the synod on the Amazon is that of harmony, the promotion of the values of peace, mercy and communion. In the United States, no less than in the Amazon, there is need for such a church.

It is always tempting to look back in the history of the Catholic community and envision an age where harmony was profoundly emblematic on levels of ecclesial life. There is no such age. There have always been conflicts of demographics, institutions, ideologies and factions in the life of the church in our nation.

But our age is a particularly turbulent time in the church on so many levels. The sexual abuse crisis has left a gulf between the bishops of the United States and so many laity and priests. Issues of sexual morality form another cleft within the life of the church and between the church and American society. The very nature of religious liberty has become controversial, and the teachings of the church on religious freedom have been distorted by both sides. Bishops often seen to reflect different positions and different priorities on contentious public policy questions.

The great danger is that our ecclesial life is becoming like our political life — polarized, distorted and tribal. That is why a deep and broad process of synodal dialogue within the Catholic community in the United States could empower an alternative pathway forward. A decade ago, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops undertook a study on how the church could build a bridge between Catholic coalitions and believers who prioritized the protection of the unborn and those who prioritized the protection of the poor and the marginalized. The study actually found that an affective pathway based on the virtue of compassion could establish such a bridge embracing more than eighty percent of Catholic faithful in a new type of coalition.

We must find such affective bridges within the life of the church to heal the divisions that hobble our ability to be the unified sacrament of God's presence in the world that the church is called to be. We must put aside the weapons of distortion, faux scandal, guilt by association, and tribal identification, and take up the conversation

that seeks to find unity, peace and communion in substantive and enduring ways.

In doing so, we would not only prevent the further intrusion of the most negative elements of our nation's current political life into the life of the church, but we could contribute to the healing of our nation's institutional, moral and political crisis by speaking to a politics which seeks harmony and the common good.

Pope Francis carries his pastoral staff as he arrives in procession to celebrate the concluding Mass of the Synod of Bishops for the Amazon at the Vatican Oct. 27. (CNS/Stefano Spaziani)

When Pope Francis spoke to Congress in 2015, he pointed to the words of Thomas Merton: "Free by nature in the image of God, I was nevertheless the prisoner of my own violence and my own selfishness, an image of the world into which I was born." It was Merton's graced spiritual journey to escape that prison by bringing a sacred sense of dialogue and encounter with him, which ultimately was the only instrument

that could change the world.

We live in a political culture in which substantive dialogue across ideological and partisan divides is dying. Yet dialogue, encounter and unity are more important to our nation at this moment than any single policy issue we face today, because such a stance of encounter is itself the foundation for any genuine pursuit of the common good. It is for this reason that Catholics must undertake with renewed conviction our vocation as a genuine peace-builders in our nation, creating opportunities and momentum for the creation of a new and broad public consensus to guide the republic.

In "*Gaudete et Exsultate*," Pope Francis acknowledges that genuine peacemaking is enormously difficult. "It is hard work; it calls for great openness of mind and heart, since it is not about creating a 'consensus on paper or a transient peace for a contented minority.' … Nor can it attempt to ignore or disregard conflict; instead, it must 'face conflict head on, resolve it and make it a link in the chain of a new process.' We need to be artisans of peace, for building peace is a craft that demands serenity, creativity, sensitivity and skill."

Being faithful

In his homily at the Mass opening the synod on the Amazon, Pope Francis emphasized that in the Second Letter to Timothy, "St. Paul reminds us that our gift has to be rekindled. The verb he uses in the original text is fascinating: to rekindle, literally which means stoking a fire. The gift we have received is a fire, a burning love for God and for our brothers and sisters. A fire does not burn by itself; it has to be fed or else it dies; it turns into ashes. If everything continues as it was, if we spend our days content that 'this is the way things have always been done,' then the gift vanishes, smothered by the ashes of fear and concern for defending the status quo."

At this moment of turmoil and stasis for our church, it is alluring to believe that the easiest and safest pathway is to stand firm. But for the church, turmoil and stasis are the calls to renewal and reform. Let us look outward rather than inward.

Let us move in synodality.

Let us rekindle the fire.