Opinion
NCR Voices



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The Gospel reading this Sunday ought to be familiar to most churchgoers. Every First Sunday of Lent, we hear proclaimed a version of Jesus' time in the desert following his baptism in the Jordan by John. This year, we will hear Matthew's account, which opens with the line: "At that time Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil" (Matthew 4:1).

Like Luke's version, Matthew describes Jesus being "led by the Spirit" into the desert, steered as if by a welcoming guide or companion. When I hear this story from either Matthew or Luke, I sometimes find myself picturing some kind of personified Holy Spirit holding out her hand to Jesus, clasping his and gently leading him into this hostile place where for 40 days and nights he will pray, reflect, discern and face temptations.

While Matthew and Luke use the word "led" to describe what the Spirit is doing, Mark's account departs from this almost passive interpretation of the Holy Spirit's action. We read in this narration: "At once the Spirit drove him out into the desert" (Mark 1:12).

The operative word here is "drove," which evokes for me a sense of nudging, pushing and insistence. You don't have to *drive* someone to do something if they are willing and able. In those cases, you would simply be able to *lead* them there.

At first glance, this may seem like a minor or even insignificant difference, a mere editorial choice or word preference. However, like most things in Scripture, there is often a deeper meaning beneath the surface, what Bible scholars often refer to as the *sensus plenior* or "fuller sense."

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Both versions of Jesus's journey into the desert contain nearly identical details apart from the verb used to describe the Spirit's action. We know that Jesus is going to be challenged, tempted, made to feel uncomfortable, pray and discern in a manner hitherto likely not experienced before.

This episode in his life is so significant that all three of these Gospels place this desert journey as the turning point from his life of relative obscurity to his history-changing public ministry, which will pave the way for his execution and resurrection.

As we begin another season of Lent this week and continue to reflect on the Holy Spirit in this series of columns, I believe there is an important lesson here for us to consider.

The two things that remain constant among the different versions of this story are the desert as destination and the Holy Spirit as the one in charge. In each case, the desert is the goal, and it is clearly the Holy Spirit who has determined that location.

In each case, the desert is an unfamiliar and, at times, an inhospitable place where Jesus will have to grapple with difficult circumstances, not just in terms of the physical conditions but also the mental, emotional and spiritual ones, too.

In each case, things will be different for Jesus coming out of the desert experience. He will not be the same person coming out as he was going in; he started off as a private person, he will emerge with a new mission for public ministry. He will be changed by the process that was led or driven by the Holy Spirit.

While most of us are not being led or driven into a literal desert this Lent, I do see something of a parallel for the whole church as we continue to engage in the global process of synodality. The Holy Spirit is clearly at work, inspiring not just Pope Francis in calling for a synod of bishops on synodality, but also in all people of faith who are participating in the synodal sessions and engaging in the process of listening, learning and prayer.

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For many people who are able and willing, it is as if the Spirit were gently leading them into this synodal place. As new and unfamiliar as it may seem at times, these people see hope and possibility, even if the process can be messy and the ultimate

outcome remains uncertain. They recognize this synodal experience is the work of the Holy Spirit who accompanies and empowers the body of Christ throughout the journey.

Like Jesus emerging from the wilderness, those who are led by the Spirit into synodality know that things will be different and they will be changed, but they trust in God who continually sends the Spirit to "renew the face of the earth" (Psalm 104).

But there are also those who are feeling *driven* into what they might describe as the desert of synodality. Some in the church are scared, defensive and critical of the synodal process. Such folks are convinced that the process of listening to experiences of the people of God would somehow threaten the tradition and stability of Catholicism (at least as they conceive of it).

Like those led by the Spirit, those driven by the Spirit will have to confront their own demons in the wilderness and face multiple temptations. Key among these, in my view, is the temptation to deny that the Holy Spirit is the primary force at work in the synodal process.

The naysayers want nothing to do with where the Holy Spirit is steering them and the rest of the church. They want stasis and predictability and control that are antithetical to how God actually works and has always worked in relationship to the world.

We can see this most clearly in the fear and sensationalism surrounding resistance to the ongoing work of the German "synodal way." While distinct from the Synod of Bishops on synodality, the German "synodal way" nevertheless centers the experiences of ordinary Christians, including those at the margins of the church and society, by focusing on how God is working in their lives and inviting people of faith to speak, listen and learn from one another.

Reflections on the Holy Spirit

Read other columns in this series by Fr. Daniel Horan:

- Catholics need to focus more attention on the Holy Spirit
- How can we get to know the Holy Spirit — and what pronoun should we use?
- Beyond birds and flames: Let's think of the Holy Spirit as jazz music

Its origins are traced back to the reports of clergy sexual abuse in Germany and a sincere desire for Christian reform on a personal and collective level. It is a constructive, if necessarily imperfect, response to interpret the "signs of the times" in the "light of the Gospel" (*Gaudium et Spes*).

However, for some people, including some bishops, this is unacceptable. This skepticism about listening to the Spirit in the lives of ordinary Christians has metastasized into resistance to the Synod of Bishops on synodality. The desert is just too uncomfortable, the change that comes with this experience is just too frightening and perhaps just too demanding for some. Therefore, the Holy Spirit must drive such people into the wilderness because they are not willing to be led.

For Jesus, the desert was a liminal place, an in-between time and space that was an important turning point that occasioned his work of doing God's will.

For the church today, the experience of synodality may well be analogous to that key episode in Jesus's life. Whether we willingly extend our hands out to be led by the Spirit into this process of listening, discerning and praying, or we find ourselves kicking and screaming in resistance, the Holy Spirit is steering the ship.

The question isn't whether or not we are all going to be changed by the synodal process, which is what many people hope for and some others fear. The question is whether we trust in the divine action of the Holy Spirit among the body of Christ. Do we actually believe in the *sensus fidelium*, the "sense of the faithful" that is a gift shared by all the baptized? Or do we mistakenly think that only ordained clergy or vowed religious or Christians of a certain ideological stripe have access to the inspiration of the Spirit?

I pray that this Lent may be a time when we can hold out our hands and allow the Spirit to lead us also into an unknown place where we will listen, learn, reflect and pray together. Because, like Jesus after those 40 days and nights, the time will come on the other side of the journey when we, too, will emerge changed and expected to announce the reign of God in word and deed.

This story appears in the **Synod on Synodality** feature series. View the full series.