Vatican

View from the Vatican



Then-Archbishop John Dearden of Detroit talks with troops stationed outside St. Rose of Lima Church on Detroit's east side as a group of Catholic sisters listens nearby during the 1967 unrest. Dearden launched a three-year synodal process that took place in Detroit, culminating in its 1969 diocesan synod. (CNS/Archdiocese of Detroit Archives)



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Countless pieces of analysis have used the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the election of Pope Francis to argue that he is a breath of fresh air as he urges the church to consider difficult topics, most notably through the ongoing synodal process.

And while that's true, the spirit of synodality can also trace its origins in the United States to much earlier.

In the years immediately following the Second Vatican Council, Detroit's Archbishop John Dearden launched a process that feels thoroughly in sync with the goals of Francis. I learned more about this important history during a recent visit to Detroit, at the invitation of retired Auxiliary Bishop Thomas Gumbleton, to speak to a group of reform-minded Catholics carrying on that historic work and eager to see how the current process plays out.

"The Church is not a building. It is not a set of rules. The Church is what we are — with our joys and sorrows, our strengths and weaknesses. The Church will always be in reform, but this does not excuse us from the awesome responsibility which is ours to fulfill."

While the words may have a familiar echo, they are not an advertisement for Pope Francis' ongoing synodal process, but instead a 1967 announcement for a three-year synodal process in Detroit, Michigan, culminating in its 1969 synod.

Over three years, some 80,000 Catholics in the Detroit Archdiocese were engaged through 7,200 "Speak Up" listening groups that met in 335 parishes over a period of six weeks for free-ranging conversation and debate modeled after the "openness … [and] freedom shown at Vatican II."

The end result was a restructured archdiocese, led by locally elected vicars where decision making took place through parish councils. At the beginning of the process, Dearden, who presided over the synod, said the purpose of the initiative was "to hear the free voice of our people on all topics — even those beyond my authority."

At the conclusion of it, Dearden, who was present at the Second Vatican Council and was elevated to the College of Cardinals in 1969 by Pope Paul VI, wrote that "the Synod breathes the spirit of the Vatican Council."

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"It was needed to give life, warmth, strength and intensity to the council directives," he said. "The Synod is a beginning, not an ending."

Dearden's words and the legacy of the 1969 synod were very much present in Detroit where I spoke on March 9, tasked by Gumbleton to provide an overview of where things stand in the global synod process for a group, called "Elephants in the Living Room," started 20 years ago by Fr. Gerry Bechard.

Bechard told me the name of the group is inspired by the naming of the animals from the book of Genesis and the need to "name the elephants in the room" when it comes to fostering a greater willingness to discuss issues in church life that have long been considered taboo by some church leaders.

Retired Auxiliary Bishop Thomas Gumbleton of Detroit joins local Palestinians and internationa

Retired Auxiliary Bishop Thomas Gumbleton of Detroit joins local Palestinians and international visitors for a Palm Sunday procession from Lazarus' tomb in Bethany to the Bethany Gate at the Israeli separation wall March 16, 2008, in the West Bank. He was a co-founder of Pax Christi USA in 1972. (CNS/Debbie Hill)

As someone who has long called for greater inclusion of women and LGBTQ individuals in the church, Gumbleton, who is 93 years old, knows firsthand the consequences of speaking freely, having been retired by Pope Benedict XVI in 2006, despite petitioning to remain in office. But in Detroit last week, he told me that 60 years after the council and nearly 50 years after Detroit's 1969 synod, the global synod is giving him new hope.

Trying to understand whether that hope is warranted was also the topic of another panel, one marking the pope's anniversary, that I moderated this week.

As part of our NCR coverage to mark the occasion, on March 14, we hosted an NCR Live conversation with Bishop John Stowe of Lexington, Kentucky, and Kate McElwee, executive director of the Women's Ordination Conference. Both offered glimpses at the very different types of discourse happening in the Catholic Church today under Francis.

During the event, Stowe said that he agreed with recent remarks from Cardinal Robert McElroy of San Diego and Cardinal Blase Cupich of Chicago that the church should reconsider the language of the Catholic Catechism that describes homosexuality as "objectively disordered."

"I would love to see that language changed, because it does more harm than good in the church today. It does more harm to individuals who already struggle with their

self-understanding and their relationship with the church," Stowe told me.

On the question of women in the church, Stowe said, "I hope to see the day when women are restored to the diaconate."

"I think it's time. I think it would be another great sign of inclusion for so many young people who can't understand a church that appears to be sexist or a church that appears to be so exclusive. And for families who have daughters that want to see them have every opportunity in the church, as well as their sons, I think that would be wonderful."

"I think it's undeniable that Francis' papacy has lifted a kind of culture of silencing that many of us have experienced," said McElwee, who is married to NCR's news editor, Joshua McElwee.

While she said that many "wounds" remain over the way Francis has at times spoken about women and his reiteration of Pope John Paul II's position against the ordination of women, she said at the grassroots level, people have grown "louder and more emboldened."

"That is because Francis has invited more people into the church," McElwee continued.

And in the same spirit of Dearden, Gumbleton and others involved in the synod process, both of yesterday and today, she added: "I think he's infused some hope that things might change."