

Cardinal Joseph Tobin, archbishop of Newark, New Jersey, presented "Pope Francis: Journey of Synodality" at Sacred Heart University In Fairfield, Connecticut, April 18. His talk was part of the Bergoglio Lecture Series. (NCR Photo/John Grosso)



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"Let me tell you my favorite guillotine joke," Cardinal Joseph Tobin said to the packed room at Sacred Heart University April 19, earning some muffled laughs. Tobin, archbishop of Newark, New Jersey, was at the Connecticut school to deliver its third Bergoglio lecture of the semester.

"It was during the Terror and on this day, they were executing foreigners. The first man up was an Italian and he was placed in the guillotine, and the executioner pulled the rope and the blade came crashing down, but stopped two inches from the man's neck. The crowd shouted 'It's a miracle,' and he was set free," the cardinal related. "The second man was a German and the same thing happened: The blade stopped a couple of inches from his neck, it was proclaimed a miracle and he was set free. The third man was an American and as he mounted the scaffold, he looked up, and said to the executioner, 'You know, if you tighten that bolt up there, it might work.' "

The joke demonstrated certain qualities of the American mind, in this case our need to fix things, that may need to be overcome if synodality is to succeed. Listening and patience, so as to ensure the Holy Spirit is taking the lead, were at the top of Tobin's list, too. He noted that the parables of the Kingdom of God always imply patience, and that people who live in agrarian societies and those who have endured great suffering are masters of patience from whom the rest of us would do well to learn.

I have been warning for over a year about this precise need to analyze bracingly our American habits of mind and how they might help or hinder the synodal process.

The main points of Tobin's lecture were about grounding the synodal process in a rediscovery of "two past connections to the activity of the Holy Spirit." The first was the "double miracle at Pentecost." The first miracle is well known: "People hear the Good News in their own language, that is, in what makes them, 'them,' " Tobin said.

The second is "subtler" and is often overlooked and unremarked: "Somehow, the hearing and subsequent belief in the Good News does not homogenize the disciples into a sort of featureless ecclesial 'porridge,' " Tobin explained. "Rather than eliminating cultural differences, the Spirit leads the disciples to a unity that is more

profound and respectful than a minimalist notion of 'inclusion.' "

Tobin said that the ongoing diversity of the early Christian community is evident from the fact that "the first conflicts were ethnic, cultural and theological." But the unity forged at Pentecost is greater still. Those at the first Pentecost, "will discover a principle of unity that, while not denying culture, gathers them together and makes reconciliation possible … the Holy Spirit," Tobin said.

> 'Rather than eliminating cultural differences, the Spirit leads the disciples to a unity that is more profound and respectful than a minimalist notion of "'inclusion." '
> —Cardinal Joseph Tobin

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"Diversity alone is only part of the Pentecost event," he said. "The Word of God had already demonstrated that diversity alone was the tragic result of a construction project driven by human hubris in a place called Babel. A comprehensive reading of Acts shows an astonishing unity that the apostolic preaching creates, a unity that the community struggles mightily to preserve."

I hope Tobin will expound at greater length on what characterizes this "more profound and respectful" unity in our time and what he means by "a minimalist notion of 'inclusion.' " He is on to something very important. As far as I can tell, Catholic theologians have done very little serious work discerning the ways our Catholic intellectual tradition and the current interest in diversity, equity and inclusion do, and do not, cohere.

The second, necessary point of connection with the activity of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church today, according to Tobin, is with "the crucial teaching of Vatican II regarding the church as the 'People of God.' " He noted that the placement of the chapters in Lumen Gentium was "normative" and quoted from the International Theological Commission's document on synodality:

> …the sequence—the Mystery of the Church (chapter 1), the People of God (chapter 2), the Hierarchical Constitution of the Church (chapter 3)—stresses that the ecclesiastical hierarchy is at the service of the People of God in order that the Church may carry out her mission in conformity with God’s plan of salvation, in the logic of the priority of the whole over its parts and of the end over the means.

Synodality, then, "embodies a maturation and deepening in the reception of this understanding of the church as People of God walking together according to which 'the Pastors and the other faithful are bound to one another by mutual necessity.' " according to Tobin. The whole membership of the church is bound to each other in equal dignity in Christ by baptism, and all must surrender to the Holy Spirit as they enter the synodal process.

But pastors surrender to the Spirit as pastors, and the lay faithful surrender as lay faithful. The distinct vocations of the church are united, not homogenized. Synodality, you might say, is not a leveler; it is leaven for the whole.

Tobin pointed to the oath a bishop makes before he is consecrated a bishop. The bishop vows to "discern and coordinate the gifts of the Holy Spirit not to own them or even to generate them." This discernment is at the heart of synodality and it is built on attentive and affective listening to one another so that we all may hear the Holy Spirit.

"If we want a synodal church, we need to ask ourselves if we believe that the Spirit manifests freely through all persons and their life stories, even in points of view that are completely different and diverse from our own position," Tobin explained.

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The synodal process clearly will rise and fall on whether or not we learn to listen to one another and whether the church makes accompaniment the hallmark of its pastoral theology. "It flies in the face of what our society is saying at this time, which is that question of polarization, of keeping people at a distance if they are not in agreement with us, not like us in certain social, cultural ways," Tobin said. "Accompanying is different; it says you go to each person and treat them in their individuality, you walk with them in grace, you embrace them."

Tobin also mentioned the need to move beyond the ad intra quarrels that dominated so many initial reports from the synodal process. He cited, approvingly, an essay at America magazine by Fr. Lou Cameli of the Archdiocese of Chicago who mentioned the focus on ad intra issues as one of the challenges to synodality, along with the perfunctory role of prayer in the process, and the tendency for people to say things *to* the church rather than speaking *from* the church. Tobin pointed to the success of the *Encuentro* process as pointing a way to overcome these hurdles.

He finished by quoting from the Holy Father's talk last week to the General Assembly of the Union of Major Superiors of Italy:

> Sometimes I get a little scared when we talk about synodal spirit and immediately think, "Now they have to change this, this, this...," and we come back closed in new ways. No, walking in the synodal spirit is listening, praying and walking. Then, the Lord will tell us the things we need to do. I have seen in some proposals, "Now we have to make this decision, this, this...." No, this is not synodal walk. This is a "parliament." Let’s not forget that the synodal walk is done by the Holy Spirit: He is the head of the synodal path, He is the protagonist. And women, in this dynamic, go forward with the pastors, even when many times you do not feel valued and sometimes understood, you are available to listen, to meet, to dialogue, to make plans together. Open yourselves, [always] with the grace of the Holy Spirit.

What Tobin is doing, what the pope is doing, is precisely the "formation in synodality" that was called for in the recent North American Final Document for the Continental Stage of the 2021-2024 Synod about which I wrote April 17. We need ecclesial leaders to address these topics publicly to get the entire church thinking through the difficulties, appraising the challenges, discerning the opportunities, all of it rooted, as Tobin's talk was, in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ and trust in the Holy Spirit.