Spirituality
Pencil Preaching



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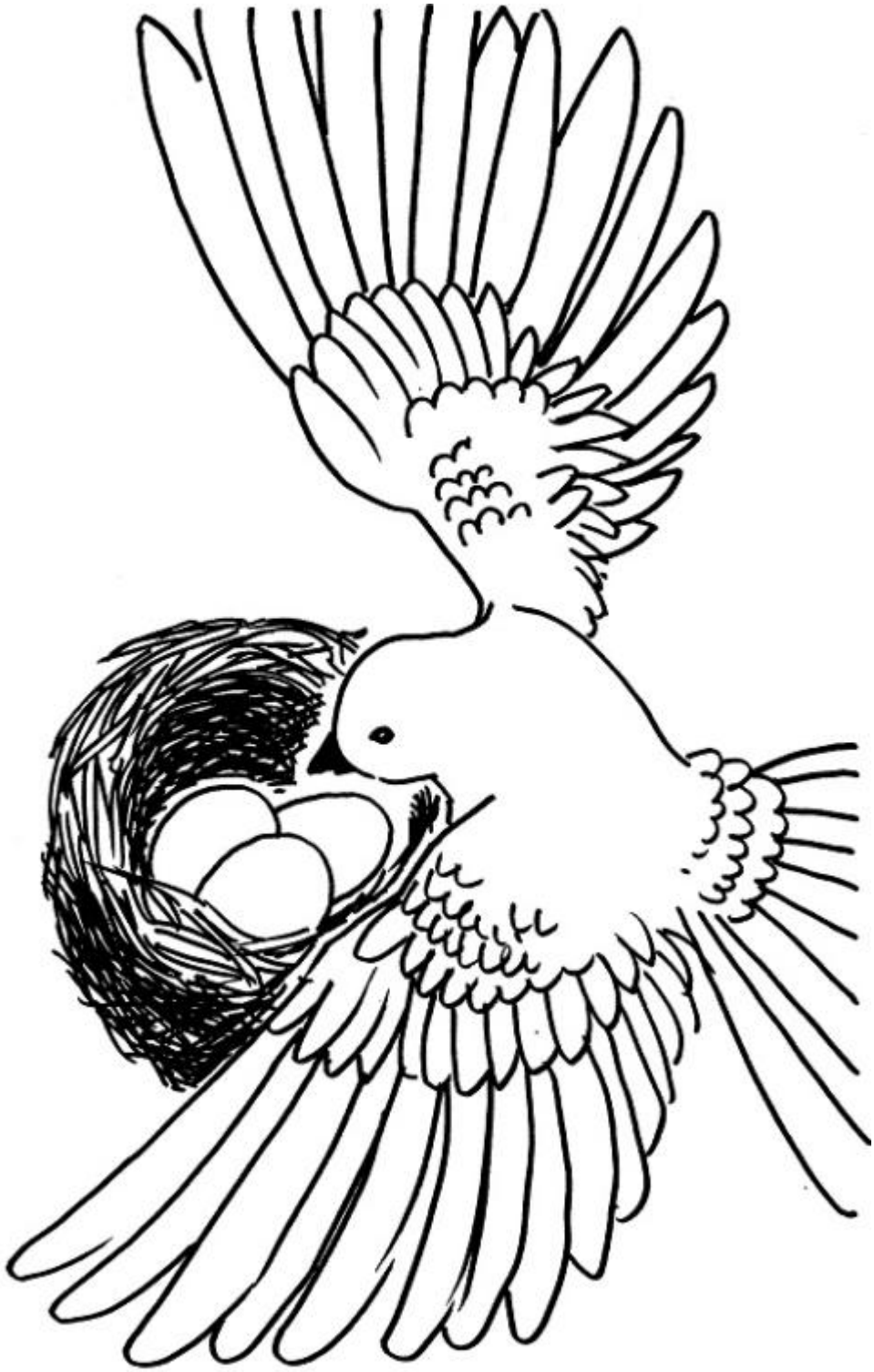

"It is the decision of the Holy Spirit and of us ..." (Acts 15:29).

Acts 15:22-31; *Jn 15:12-17*

What is most astonishing in the letter sent to the missionary churches of gentile converts was the claim from the leadership in Jerusalem that they were acting in

concert with the Holy Spirit. From a timorous, cowering group of outliers after Jesus departed this earth at his Ascension, the early church was now acting with confidence that Jesus had sent his Spirit to guide them.

Since that first Council of Jerusalem, down through the history of the church, the belief that the Spirit would always keep us from error in matters of essential direction and mission has been one of the marks of the church. Without it, and without councils to hammer out difficult questions and resolve controversies, the church would long ago have dissolved into strife and division, which has been the fate of every other human organization.

Church historians confirm the importance of each council to make doctrinal and pastoral decisions and course corrections. Trent addressed the crisis of the Reformation. Vatican II brought 2,500 bishops and scores of experts to Rome over four years to renew the church in the modern world. Significantly, the same spirit of collegiality that marked the process by the world's bishops flowed from Vatican II to regional conferences and diocesan councils, right down to parishes, where pastors were to consult the community on important decisions. Full, conscious, active participation by all the baptized was the keynote of Vatican II.

The miracle of the church is that we are still together, and despite our differences, still called to the one Table of the Eucharist to celebrate our unity in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

This inspiring story would be only a history lesson if the church were not at a critical threshold again. Pope Francis is boldly calling the universal church to take the next step to complete the vision of Pope John XXIII at Vatican II by becoming a “synodal” church. The word means simply “walking together,” but Francis has proposed a daring step forward for all the baptized members of the church to walk, listen and encounter one another on the real issues facing the church in its mission to evangelize the contemporary world.

Preparation for the first meeting of the synod in October 2023 has already opened critical concerns about shared authority, lay empowerment, the role of women, moral questions on family life, the role of women, clericalism, the pedophile crisis, money, diversity and the environment. An unprecedented conversation involving the whole church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit is likely to open doors that cannot be closed again about radical changes needed to evangelize a changing

world.

Signs of how critical this process will be are the caution and foot-dragging many bishops have shown to Francis’ initiatives. Are we not reliving the tensions of the 1st century’s Jerusalem Council as the church decides its future and even its relevance in the 21st century?