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Cardinal-designate Christophe Pierre, apostolic nuncio to the United States, gives the annual

Cardinal-designate Christophe Pierre, apostolic nuncio to the United States, gives the annual Cardinal Darden Lecture at The Catholic University of America in Washington April 26, 2023. (OSV News photo/Patrick Ryan, The Catholic University of America)

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Days after his appointment as one of 21 new cardinals of the Catholic Church by Pope Francis, OSV News spoke with Cardinal-designate Christophe Pierre, the Vatican's ambassador to the U.S., who shared his thoughts on his new role, the Synod on Synodality, and why both the synod and the National Eucharistic Revival are "just the beginning" of a fresh encounter with Jesus Christ.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

***OSV News*: What was your reaction when you learned Pope Francis had appointed you as cardinal?**

Pierre: This is the kind of news you don't expect, so I was a bit astounded. I was asleep on a Sunday morning and I received a phone call at about 6:30 a.m. It was a journalist I know from Rome, and he told me, "Have you heard that the pope has appointed you?"

I was not expecting that. But I immediately understood, because I had already had the experience, when I was in other countries like Mexico, of phoning a newly made cardinal. So I knew that it was not fake news.

I'm quite happy [about the appointment], to be honest. But on the other hand, I measure the responsibility. It is a great sense of trust, and I see the repercussions.

Spiritually, I think you feel a great responsibility, because this is about the church. It's not about me. All my life, that has been my mission: I have been sent to help the pope to exercise his mission. It's a beautiful mission -- a challenging one, but a beautiful one.

Speaking of mission, right now we as a church are focused on synodality. Looking back at the North American phase of the synod, do you think the process has taken root here?

First and foremost, I think the synod is synodality. The synod is really something which is from the deep intuitions of the Holy Father. Pope Francis is really the pope for today. ... He has the gifts of the Holy Spirit to guide the church.

And he has analyzed very well the situation of the world today. It's a world which is globalized, but also a world which is separated. The separation works at every level: in the families, in the communities. Consider the political life of this country: Instead of trying to build the country together, we separate ourselves. We fight constantly. There is a polarization which is very unhealthy. This kind of polarization is not just here; it's all over the world. It's a sign of the times.

The pope has a kind of vision of what the time needs. Six years ago, I was invited to The Catholic University of America to give a paper to the faculty of canon law. And I chose to speak about synodality and the vision of Pope Francis. When I prepared this talk, I analyzed all the documents of the pope, and already from the beginning, everything [about Synodality] was there. So, it's not just a funny idea that the pope has now. It corresponds to a need.

The point is precisely that, as the pope says, in this particular world which is divided and polarized, we need to work together. We should not reproduce the evil of society; the temptation is to be a worldly church.

On the contrary, we should be a sign of unity, but not in an artificial way. ... There is an anxiety, even among the bishops, among the church, to resolve the problem immediately. But we should not remain at the level of appearances. ... Unity should be at the roots of the society. And this unity will come only if we as a church are a synodal church and we work together.

[The synod] is not to change the doctrine of the church. A lot of people are afraid about synodality; they say, "The pope will change everything." No, that's not true. The pope wants us to work together at all levels: in the family, in the parish, in the diocese, as a national church, as a universal church. And for that, we need to make an effort to listen to one another, and also to listen to the Holy Spirit.

I am a bit amazed to see people saying, "We don't want synodality, because this goes nowhere." It goes somewhere. But it requires effort. If you are a parish priest, you have to involve all your parishioners. Fathers and mothers have to involve the family and work together.

And the togetherness needs to be organized, so as to enter into the structure of the church. This is what synodality is all about. The synod ... is a moment to examine if and how the church at the local level is actually working together and trying to offer to a divided world something new.

In that sense, do you think that the synod is the living out of the Second Vatican Council, and its vision of the church in the world?

Certainly; I fully agree with you. I think the Second Vatican Council was a huge event of the Spirit. And it's amazing to see how Pope Francis is really filled with the spirit of the Second Vatican Council. He wants to help the church with the reception of the council, which is very important. This is part of the life of the church: We have to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

My episcopal motto is "Si Scires Donum Dei" ["If you knew the gift of God," which Christ says to the Samaritan woman in John 4:10]. This is the marvelous dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan lady. "If you knew the gift of God" -- we don't take time to become aware about what God is offering us.

The church is a gift of God. Look at the Book of Revelation. The church comes from heaven (Rev 21:2). The church is God's presence in human reality. And we are God's presence in the human reality. The church is a sacrament of God's presence.

The church produces the sacraments, all of which are a gift from God in order to live our human lives and to transform our humanity. Yet that transformation will not happen if it is not an answer, personally and of the community, to the gift that God gives us.

For example, the day a man and a woman receive the sacrament of marriage, they become for the rest of their lives God's presence in their human reality. The consequences are huge. But if they want to resolve their problems -- and they will have a lot of problems, because everybody has problems, even the family -- by themselves, they will fail. And at times, this is what we try to do.

Of course we have divisions in the church. But at times, we think that we can fix it up by ourselves, and we fail.

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How have your prayer life and your walk with God changed in recent years?

I'm more and more convinced that I have had in my life, through the church, a personal encounter with Christ. And this encounter with Christ has become more and more precise.

But not Christ as an idea, not as an ideology; rather, the person of Christ, who has always been, and who has met me through the church. I think that has been the constant.

And I think that goes also to the roots of my vocation as a priest, which is to be part of the church in order to help people to have a personal encounter with Christ through the church. That's the reason why I became a priest.

Even this calling now [as cardinal], which is a bit extraordinary, which I didn't expect ... it's just to help the church to be the place where people may have a personal encounter with Christ.

If the church today is not the place where, especially the young people, have the possibility to have a personal experience [of Christ] -- [that shows] at times we forget that we are the church.

Both the synod and the National Eucharistic Revival should be a new beginning, starting again with Christ; a personal encounter with Jesus that will have deep consequences in daily life.