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United States flag back-lit by shining cross.

The flag of the United States of America with sunlight appearing to lend a cross to the center of the blue section filled with stars. (OSVNews/Beverly Lussier, Pixabay)

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Pope Francis' goal of synodality for the Catholic Church — with people from different backgrounds, circumstances and experiences coming together to listen to and learn from each other about how to reflect Christ's Gospel in today's world — unfolded in a Feb. 28 podcast and dialogue featuring Washington Cardinal Wilton Gregory, joined by four Catholic young adults.

"Whenever I've experienced the church in true dialogue and open conversation, that's synodality. Whenever the church gathers and everyone feels respected and can open their hearts, that's synodality," said Gregory, who participated in the Synod of Bishops in Rome this past fall.

The cardinal noted the synod included representatives from the Catholic Church around the world, men and women, young and old, clergy, religious and laypeople.

"We got to know each other and speak to each other about things important to us as Catholics," he said, adding that dialogue allowed synod participants to exchange ideas and sometimes disagree with each other.

An especially moving part of that gathering for him was an ecumenical prayer service before the synod, where representatives of different Christian faiths and young people from different cultures prayed together.

The podcast and discussion on the topic, "A Listening Church in a Divided Nation," took place at the 2024 Catholic Partnership Summit at the Crystal Gateway Marriott in Arlington, Virginia, and opened with Gregory participating in a live recording of the "Jesuitical" podcast from America Media, co-hosted by Zac Davis and Ashley McKinless.

The dialogue was a Salt and Light gathering for Catholics under 40 years old to help them explore links between faith, Catholic social thought and their lives and work. It was sponsored by the Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life at Georgetown University, with the Leadership Roundtable and the "Jesuitical" podcast as co-sponsors.

The participants included Fatima Vasquez-Molina, campus minister and service coordinator at her alma mater, Elizabeth Seton High School in Bladensburg, Maryland, and Anna Gordon, a fellow Seton graduate, who is the Georgetown initiative's program director and leads its Salt and Light gatherings for young adults.

Noting how the nation's capital is now "an epicenter of division," Washington's archbishop said, "We have to learn how to focus on the issue, not the person." He added that in a time when personal attacks seem to be more prevalent than the sharing of different political opinions, "social media has given differences an energy and a power I don't think they've ever had before."

Gregory said that spirit of division, amplified by social media, also has "infected our church." Noting how in past ages Catholic saints sometimes disagreed, he said, "Aquinas and Bonaventure didn't (always) see eye-to-eye, and they still may be arguing in the heavenly kingdom, I don't know."

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Now the differences among people have "degenerated into personal attacks," the cardinal said, stressing the need "to talk to each other about the things that are important to us, as a people and as a church." Washington's archbishop said a key reason he agreed to participate in that dialogue was "I have a great deal of hope that our young people will be able to guide us," and he pointed to how young people played a key role in the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 1960s.

"Every generation inherits the problems and possibilities of a given age," he said.

He noted how young adults are active volunteers in Catholic Charities' outreach to the poor and immigrants in the Archdiocese of Washington, and now a challenge is to invite more young adults to attend Mass. "Catholicism needs both lungs. Our social justice and our faith doctrine have to be wedded to each other," he said.

Vasquez-Molina shared insights from working at her Catholic high school.

"The way to a listening church is through immersion and encounter, that's the best way," she said, noting the importance of connecting with her students through their cultures and interests and engaging in conversations with her Catholic and non-Catholic students about questions they have, in order to bring Jesus to them.

She noted her disappointment when she attended a pre-synod listening session for Hispanic Catholics, and afterward wondered, "Why wasn't there another young voice like me?"

Asked for her hopes for the church and the country, Vasquez-Molina said, "My hope is for more seats to be created at the table, that's my biggest hope and prayer."

Georgetown's Gordon said she appreciated how the dialogue with Cardinal Gregory and the Catholic young adults was like a "mini-synod" as they talked about the importance of having a listening church.

"Each of us has felt misunderstood at some point," she said, noting how some young adults wonder if they can still call themselves Catholic if they struggle with a certain issue or some Church teaching.

Gordon noted how at the initiative's Salt and Light gatherings, a diverse group of Catholic young adults share their perspectives on challenging issues. She said Catholic social teaching offers the pathway for a listening Church that engages

people and encourages their participation.

"Catholic social teaching has been doing synodal work all along. Now we have the language to connect those dots even more," she said.

As the conversation on fostering a listening church and society concluded, Gregory said, "One of the things that would foster better listening skills is, don't enter the conversation with the conclusion. If you start a conversation with a conclusion, you're not going to be open to hearing what the other people might say."

During the "Jesuitical" podcast, Gregory was asked about his own faith journey.

At age 11, he started attending St. Carthage School in Chicago as a sixth grader, and he was so inspired by the example of the parish priests, Msgr. John Hayes and Father Gerry Weber, and by the Adrian Dominican sisters at the school, that soon he felt called to be a priest himself, but they explained to him that first, he had to become Catholic. He was baptized and received his first Communion at the Easter Vigil in 1959.

Gregory also reflected on the clergy abuse crisis in the Catholic Church. In 2001, then-Bishop Gregory of Belleville, Illinois, was elected president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, and he led the nation's bishops as they adopted the "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People."

"The thing I kept in the back of my mind was Gerry Weber and John Hayes, such wonderful men in my life, they should not die in that shadow. I was committed to do the right thing," Gregory said. He added that in addressing that crisis, "in some respects, it made me love the church more. As a husband, for example, you never love your wife more than when she needs you."

He noted how he made 13 trips to Rome when he was the USCCB president as it addressed the abuse crisis, and he faced denial from Vatican officials who said it was an American or English-speaking problem. "I kept pushing forward," he said, adding that he felt then that, "If I die, I can die saying I told them the truth."

Some church officials warned then-Bishop Gregory that his efforts to address the abuse crisis could mean the end of his career, and he said his attitude was, "Be that as it may, I don't want this to be the end of my church."