

October 10th, 2024 / Philadelphia, PA

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ...

I write to you on the threshold of a significant moment of my vocational life. Tomorrow, I embark with more than 30 colleagues from 14 Catholic institutions around the US to accompany just over 100 undergraduate and graduate students for a week-long pilgrimage to Rome. We go to deliver a message to the Roman Catholic Church's XVI Ordinary General Assembly of Bishops for the Synod on Communion, Participation, and Mission: there are people of good will, particularly young people, ready to roll up our sleeves in growing a Roman Catholic Church characterized by encounter, listening, and deliberate processes of collective discernment.

And so, with my heart oriented toward Rome, I begin this letter to you, my fellow disciples ministering to young people in institutions of higher education, in the spirit of the 16th chapter of St. Paul's letter to the Christian community in Rome. A woman he named as benefactor to him and many - Phoebe of Cenchrea – delivered a similarly heartening message to Rome. As St. Paul did through St. Phoebe, the only person he names as a diaconal partner, I want to open my letter by commending to you a few people I have come to know through my efforts to serve the synodal process unfolding these past three years. In Paul's words, these disciples have "worked hand in hand" with each other, across institutional and vocational boundaries that otherwise separate us in Catholic higher education. Like those Paul names in his salutation to the community in Rome, they too have been midwives of the tradition for their time and place – in this case, in catalyzing a *synodal* Church on Catholic college and universities campuses in the US, and indeed the dioceses in which they are embedded.

So many hellos to all of these remarkable folks whose ministry demonstrates the potential for synodality to revolutionize the way we minister to young, and how Catholic campuses might be the catalyst for this generational project of becoming a synodal Church!

- I want to send greetings to *Kevin*, an ordained vice president of mission in his well-heeled university community, who uses the gravitas of his position and the financial resources at his disposal to grow relationships *among us all* here in Philadelphia! He knows that the health of one depends on the health of all.
- A shout out our *Archbishop in Philadelphia*, who has modeled what it means to exercise authority by embracing a learning, rather than simply a teaching posture, with your young adults. And likewise, to the several Cardinals and Archbishops who have agreed to an intimate dinner with pilgrims in Rome this week. May this drawing close be the first step in believing what you hear!

- Big props for *Michelle and Eli, Diane and Paz, Mary and Marcelle, Brian and Frank, Casey and Lisa* - collaborators from higher-ed adjacent Catholic organizations living the social mission of the Church. Prepping students to be synodal protagonists – listeners, dialogue partners, contributors to discernment about things that matter most to them - reminds us that Catholic education is not about teaching students stuff but accompanying them in becoming agents of change for the common good.
- I want to give my regards to *Becky*, our participatory artist, who helps us understand that tradition is something practice and create together, often most effectively, with construction paper, paint, markers and friends. I've attached some of her more recent work – we're bringing to Rome – below!
- A big hello to *Jaisy*, an ecclesialogist who is risking relationship beyond her own Malabar Catholic community, and beyond the theologian-bishop divide. She is show us all how to grow relational authority and accountability. And *Michael*, whose relationships in universities across Latin and South America has reminded us of the global nature of our Church!
- Finally, let me tag all of *the students in @SCHEAPPilly* who said yes to Pope Francis' invitation to begin the journey of becoming a synodal Church by sharing your joys and laments of journeying with the Church, whether as an insider or outsider. Your "Yes!" to this whole thing made Pope Francis say "Yes!" to our nomination of Julia Oseka from SJU – the youngest female voting delegate in the history of Roman Catholicism! You teach us that showing up doesn't just count, it builds collective power.

With the exciting, and yet daunting possibility of becoming a synodal Church before us, and as we move to the most precarious phase of any Catholic synod or council – its reception - I wonder, my sisters and brothers, what it might mean for take up the invitation that the newly minted Cardinal Timothy Radcliffe, OP, spiritual advisor to the General Assembly, set before nearly 400 voting delegates of the General Assembly of Bishops a little more than a week ago. As they began a second month-long gathering to discern structural changes to the Roman Catholic Church - one of the oldest, clericalist, colonialist, crustiest, and for many, cringiest of human institutions on our planet – he offered this wisdom:

Christians must be seekers with those who seek and questioners with those who question.

If we are to follow Radcliffe's advice, which he pulls from theologian Tomas Halik, then we need to stick close to our young people, for they are today's seekers and questioners. Surely we know that just because they are disaffiliating from the Church – or perhaps were never fully affiliated with it to begin with – does not mean they are not

seeking goodness, truth, beauty and justice. Nor does it mean that they don't have questions about transcendence, or biblical interpretation, or flourishing (or live with the burden of our problematic answers such questions). And simply because they dutifully remain connected to the Church – showing up for Sunday liturgy, doing weekly service projects - does not mean that they aren't seeking a deeper belonging or wrestling with the burdens of problematic answers to their own questions.

We would do well to seek and question with our young adults – not for instrumental reasons like enrollments in our classes or ministry programs but for the very integrity of theological tradition to which we are so committed and for the Church which we long to see thrive.

In these past three years I have actively listened to hundreds of young adults, and synthesized nearly a dozen reports that capture the fruits of their conversations in the Spirit. They tell us that they are "the now" of the Church and not simply its future; that they want at seat at tables where people are talking about them, that they are ready for faith communities to let them lead rather than expecting their willingness to be led; that they won't be fooled shallow performances and have no tolerance for judgments that wound. In all of this, they demand of us a shift in the way we perceive them - not as people to minister *to* but to minister *with* or even support in their own ministry. I wonder what that might require of us in our classrooms, in our campus ministry centers, in our divisions of Mission and Ministry? I wonder how such a shift might also revitalize our theology and everything about our tradition it nourishes – from liturgy and ethics to ecclesiology and pneumatology.

How might seeking and questioning with them advance theological understandings of authority to evolve to include consensus building practices that prioritize perspectives like theirs from the peripheries and as such renew trust and confidence in decision-makers? Or deepen calls for reciprocity emerging from the Synod, particularly among men and women, to include relationships of mutuality across generations? What do they have to teach us about the need for acknowledging harm and committing to repair as essential for building trust and rebuilding institutional integrity? Might they help us recognize, through the seeking and questioning arising from their own lived experience, doctrine as an ongoing process of discovery through discernment and not merely static truth claims passed down the generations? With their refusal to be pacified by moral platitudes or political posturing, might they help us understand what protagonism looks like in the mist of the divisive issues of our times?

To be sure, there are leaders among us who worry that pandering to all this seeking and questioning contributes to the "anthropological confusion" of the age. Likewise, there

are those that recommend we keep our eyes on Christ, whether in celebrations of the Eucharist and the devotional practice of Adoration, or as my colleague Natalia Imperator-Lee has put it, "Father knows best" deference.

But was not Jesus a seeker? Did he not seek after something bigger than the religious container provided him by the tradition of his parents and grandparents, devout though they were? Was not Jesus a questioner? Did he not question the religious authority of his day as to juridical rigidity of his own tradition? Did he not question culturally constructed boundaries with his transgressive choice to fully reveal himself to women (the woman at the well, Mary of Magdala); to make outsiders the catalysts of his miracles or the protagonists of his parables? More to the point, did he not teach the scholars in his Temple as a young person?

Sisters and brothers, I look forward to seeking and questioning with you about all of these things – and so much more - in two short weeks. In the meantime, I ask you to pray for all of those gathered in Rome!
Peace!

Maureen O'Connell



Becky McIntyre, September 2024