

Together, as the holy People of God

Included here are two recent texts that are particularly in tune with our focus in this issue of Ekklesia. The first is taken from a 2016 papal letter written to Cardinal Marc Ouellet, President of the Pontifical commission for Latin America. The second is an excerpt of the opening remarks by Cardinal Gualtiero Bassetti, president of the Italian Bishops' Conference, to the Permanent Council of Italian Bishops on April 1st, 2019.

Letter of his Holiness Pope Francis to Cardinal Marc Ouellet, President of the Pontifical commission for Latin America¹ (March 19, 2016):

[...] To evoke the faithful Holy People of God is to evoke the horizon to which we are called to look and reflect. It is the faithful Holy People of God to whom as pastors we are continually called to look, protect, accompany, support and serve. A father cannot conceive of himself without his children. He may be an excellent worker, a professional, a husband or friend, but what makes him a father figure are his children. The same goes for us, we are pastors. A shepherd cannot conceive of himself without his flock, whom he is called to serve. The pastor is pastor of a people, and he serves this people from within. Many times, he goes ahead to lead the way, at other times he retraces his steps lest anyone be left behind, and, not infrequently, he stands in the middle to know the pulse of the people.

Looking to the faithful Holy People of God, and feeling ourselves an integral part of the same, places us in life and thus in the themes that we treat, in a different way. This helps us not to fall into reflections that, in themselves, may be very good but which end up homologizing the life of our people or theorizing to the point that considerations end by prohibiting action. Looking continually at the People of God saves us from certain declarationist nominalisms (slogans) that are fine phrases but that are unable to sustain the life our communities. For example, I now recall the famous phrase: “the hour of the laity has come”, but it seems the clock has stopped.

Looking at the People of God is remembering that we all enter the Church as lay people. The first sacrament, which seals our identity forever, and of which we should always be proud, is Baptism. Through Baptism and by the anointing of the Holy Spirit, (the faithful) “are consecrated as a spiritual house and a holy priesthood” (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 10). Our first and fundamental consecration is rooted in our Baptism. No one has been baptized a priest or a bishop. They baptized us as lay people and it is the indelible sign that no one can ever erase. It does us good to remember that the Church is not an elite of priests, of consecrated men, of bishops, but that everyone forms the faithful Holy People of God. To forget this carries many risks and distortions in our own experience, be they personal or communitary, of the ministry that the Church has entrusted to us. We are, as firmly emphasized by the Second Vatican Council, the People of God, whose identity is “the

¹ Vatican web site: http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2016/documents/papa-francesco_20160319_pont-comm-america-latina.html

dignity and freedom of the sons of God, in whose hearts the Holy Spirit dwells as in His temple” (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 9). The faithful Holy People of God is anointed with the grace of the Holy Spirit, and thus, as we reflect, think, evaluate, discern, we must be very attentive to this anointing.

At the same time, I must add another element that I consider the fruit of a mistaken way of living out the ecclesiology proposed by Vatican II. We cannot reflect on the theme of the laity while ignoring one of the greatest distortions that Latin America must confront – and to which I ask you to devote special attention – clericalism. This approach not only nullifies the character of Christians, but also tends to diminish and undervalue the baptismal grace that the Holy Spirit has placed in the heart of our people. Clericalism leads to homologization of the laity; treating the laity as “representative” limits the diverse initiatives and efforts and, dare I say, the necessary boldness to enable the Good News of the Gospel to be brought to all areas of the social and above all political sphere. Clericalism, far from giving impetus to various contributions and proposals, gradually extinguishes the prophetic flame to which the entire Church is called to bear witness in the heart of her peoples. Clericalism forgets that the visibility and sacramentality of the Church belong to all the People of God (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, nn. 9-14), not only to the few chosen and enlightened.

Pope Francis

From opening remarks to the Permanent Council of Italian Bishops², Rome, Italy (April 1, 2019):

Dear fellow brothers, and may I say, close friends:

[. . .] Synodality is not an external dress. It has a mysterious meaning, one contained in that little preposition, ‘Syn’, ‘together’. It is the fruit of, and condition, for the Holy Spirit’s coming, of the one who loves unity and harmony. Synodality is the outward form that the mystery of *communion* takes in the life of the Church: Christians are synodal, that is, “fellow-travelers, God-bearers, temple-bearers, Christ-bearers, and Spirit-bearers”, in the words of Saint Ignatius of Antioch. Synodality is, therefore, a style that comes from that life of grace which conforms us to the Lord Jesus. Synodality comes from the bottom. It starts with listening, since we all have something to learn from the other with the desire to be in harmony and to mutually accept one another. It is seen in our speech and behavior, in our relations, in our choices, in our everyday life.

Synodality is generative. It approaches reality with a willingness to learn and become involved. It is a gaze on the human person: from the places (of this meeting) in Verona – affective life, work and celebration, human weakness, tradition and citizenship – to the streets of Florence: Go outwards, proclaim, live, educate and transfigure. . . Synodality also requires effort. It requires evangelical spirituality and ecclesial belonging, continuous training, readiness to accompany another, and creativity. Pope Francis continues to tirelessly call us to take this important step. It is necessary for us to truly be God’s people, and to remain a moral and social point of reference for our country.”

Cardinal Gualtiero Bassetti

² L’Agenzia SIR (Religious Information Service), Rome, Italy. <https://agensir.it/quotidiano/2019/4/1/synodality-card-bassetti-we-need-it-to-truly-be-gods-people-and-to-remain-a-moral-and-social-point-of-reference-for-our-country/>