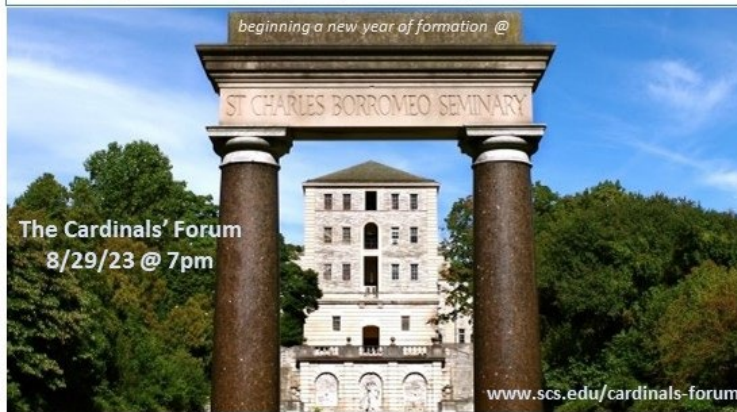


SYNODALITY ...

a style, a mentality, a spirituality, a pastoral model



presentation by

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Pope Francis recently told American seminarians in Rome that Synodality is “the challenge and task (they) are called to.”¹ So are we.

Our task this evening is to address Synodality from the vantage point of our respective academic chairs. So, I will take up the challenge in terms of communications – by focusing on how three images communicate three lessons that may help us appreciate what will be taking place in October.

Let’s begin with the official image – **the Synod logo** – and its related spin-offs in the Synod’s media toolkit. You’ve probably seen it, or you can look it up now on your phones ... but do, please, keep listening! Here’s a summary explanation of it:

Underneath a Eucharist-like sun stands an unusual tree (think: Cross), with branches like wings (think: Holy Spirit). Below are fifteen multi-colored silhouettes envisioned as “walking together” (which is the etymology of the word ‘synod’). These figures, grouped purposely in no hierarchical order, “sum up our entire humanity in its diversity of life situations of generations and origins.” They – which is really to say “we” – are on the move as Church, in “communion, participation, and mission.”²



Now, a former colleague of mine describes this artwork as looking “like the cartoonish ecclesiastical art of the 1970’s” which displays “the thought world of rotary phones, eight track tape players, cannabis-fueled free love, and Hans Kung.”³

Maybe so. But, snarky-ness aside, and even if you prefer other kinds of illustrations, the fact is that a worldwide Church with more than a billion adherents inhabiting multiple cultures and histories is bound to be colorfully diverse – even more so than a mere fifteen representations can portray.

And it’s true, as the image depicts, that we in the clerical and/or religious state, stand baptismally “among” our fellow Catholics, not above or in front of or somewhere else. That’s actually a good lesson in humility for all of us, a sacramental truth that never goes out of style.

The second image to consider is a more classic one – **the barque of Peter**.⁴ That painting from the Middle Ages serves as a metaphor for the Church as the People of God. Professor Ulrich Lehner describes it how:

“In such a group the Church is imagined as a boat. St. Peter may be at the rudder, but the sails make the ship totally dependent on the wind, the Holy Spirit. The rowers might be strong and effective, but they waste their energy if they are not working together as a team under the guidance of the ship’s more experienced sailors. The ship’s navigator might be skillful, but he is guided by the stars,



by an outside force. All people on this ship want to arrive at the same shores; they all have the same desire. Crammed onto the ship’s decks, they might not enjoy their voyage, but realize that theirs is a *penitential* journey.”⁵

Now, as we know, any ship sets out with a destination in mind. Where the Synod is going may be an open question (or not, according to some critics). But where the Church is going requires that we be on board, that we learn to talk with and listen to each other, so that we can navigate together according to God’s way and reach our

final destination without capsizing. The lesson to remember is that the Church is, by definition, a communal reality into which we are necessarily incorporated. It may be a challenge, but we cannot willingly (or pertinaciously) let anyone fall overboard.

And the final image for your reflection is actually a verbal one. It's not (yet) a word in the dictionary, but a portmanteau coming from the writings of St. Francis de Sales. (Yes, you knew I'd work him in here somehow!) In his masterful *Treatise on the Love of God*, this Doctor of the Church states that "the supreme unity of the divine act" that is God's creation "is opposed to confusion and disorder but not to distinction and variety." He then explains that :



"(God) employs these last (distinction and variety) to bring forth beauty by reducing all difference and diversity to proportion, proportion to order, and order to the unity of the world, which comprises all created things, both visible and invisible. All these together are called the universe, perhaps because all their diversity is reduced to unity, as if one were to say – (here's comes the word-image) – **'unidiverse,'** that is, unique *and* diverse, unique along with diversity, diversity along with unity."⁶

The topics, the delegates, the background presuppositions, the questions for discussion, even the very notion of synodality – all of this seems to have brought diversity to the forefront. But in the love of God that has brought our world into existence, that has created human beings in the divine image and likeness, that has redeemed all of us through God's Incarnate Son, and that has infused the ecclesial Body of Christ with the Holy Spirit – in that divine providence, it is not our differences that define us, but our unity as believers and disciples. The saintly lesson is that in "unidiversity" lies spiritual beauty.

So, when it comes to how images communicate, beauty matters. As the Synod approaches, our challenge and task is to see it and seek it, work together as we row toward it, and learn to appreciate and embrace it, so that we can communicate God's beauty in our own lives and in our vocations in a synodal Church.

¹ Hannah Brockhaus, “Pope Francis: Synodal Journey ‘a challenge and task’ for American Seminarians,” *Catholic News Agency* ([January 14, 2023](#)).

² “The official logo of the synodal path.” <https://www.synod.va/en/news/the-official-logo-of-the-synodal-path.html>

³ Larry Chapp, “Orwellian Synodality,” <https://gaudiumetspes22.com/blog/orwellian-synodality>

⁴ “Navicella,” a mosaic of 1305-1313 by Giotto of Bondone, 1628 copy in oil in the Vatican. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Giotto_di_Bondone_-_Navicella_-_WGA09363.jpg

⁵ Ulrich L. Lehner, “Toward a Listening and Empathetic Church? A Synodal Hermeneutic for Theology in Three Historical Vignettes,” *Church Life Journal* ([August 18, 2023](#)).

⁶ St. Francis de Sales, *Treatise on the Love of God*, II:2, trans. John K. Ryan (Tan Books and Publishers, 1975), vol. I, p. 106 (emphasis added).