

## Mission and Ministry in the Church in the United States Ways Forward in the New Century

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The word “synod” comes from the Greek words *sun* (“together”) and *hodos* (“road, path”). “Synod” can therefore be understood as paths converging or walking together down a road. The purpose of this opening presentation is to provide a picture of the terrain upon which we are walking—the wider context of the United States—in light of the proposals and strategies which will be discussed during the Synod.

### **The United States Today: Risk and Opportunity**

There are three important things to keep in mind when thinking about our context today. First of all, the United States is a powerful country in a dangerous world. It has stunning wealth, overwhelming military power, and a cultural and economic reach made possible because of globalization. At the same time, terrorism and some of the effects of globalization has greatly increased the physical and emotional insecurity of America, and Americans are still trying to figure out how to live with these realities.

Second, we are caught up in a third wave of immigration which is changing the face of America as other waves did in the past. This time, it is coming from Latin America and from across the Pacific. A higher proportion is Catholic. And California—not New York—is, along with Miami, the gateway. The quality of the migration is different because immigrants (unless they are refugees) do not entirely break their ties with their homelands. This affects our understanding of citizenship today, and makes a continuing multiculturalism more likely than was the case in the past.

Third, America is the most religious of all the industrialized countries in the world. In a time when, worldwide, religion is on the upsurge, it puts America in a different place than Europe or Australia.

### **The Window on Evangelization**

The first proposal for the Synod is regarding the “New Evangelization,” which involves not only proclaiming Christian faith, but addressing those already baptized but engaged in little or no practice of their Faith. There is a fear that the Church is losing young people; that fear must be tempered by the fact that, at least since 1920, young people typically drift away from faith, only to return when their children reach school age. Because people are marrying later and having children later. A positive opportunity must also be sought in the fact that the youngest generation coming of age (those born since 1980) seem to be more religiously inclined than the immediate two previous generations. For the Church to be a welcoming place, it must be a reconciling Church.

## **Accountability and Communication**

The clerical sexual abuse scandal has underscored the importance of accountability. It has also shown Catholic laity to be more resilient and secure in their faith than many had thought. In a world deluged by information, effective accountability and communication will be important. Some studies have speculated that where Church leadership is more progressive and engages laypeople more directly, there are higher levels of participation in Church life.

## **Education and Leadership**

Roman Catholics under 55 have the highest level of education of any Christian group in the country. Education in faith has to be on the same level as other aspects of education. The most recent statistics show that there are 3414 candidates for the priesthood studying theology, but 35448 in lay ministry formation programs. Twenty-five percent of diocesan priesthood candidates in theology were born outside the United States. Three elements to keep in mind: the priests of the past typically came from a family of four or more children; only immigrant Catholic families are that large these days. Importing foreign clergy has been very controversial and generally not thought through for its implications. And the shortage of clergy is not just a problem in the Catholic Church; other Christian churches are experiencing this as well. It seems to have to do with clergy now having lower status in American society. Extending the definition of who may become a priest may not alter the picture significantly.

## **Sacraments, Justice, Communion and Mission**

Certainly a Catholic Church without access to the sacraments would be a serious diminution of a tradition. The social teaching of the Church is one of its jewels. Past commitment to that social teaching may account some for the loyalty to the Church we find today. At the same time, many Catholics are selective in their appropriation of those teachings. Key to keeping new immigrants Catholic is a commitment to their social needs. Finally, as part of a world-wide Church, Catholics bring a special gift not only to Christianity in the United States, but to the nation itself, which often tends to think in self-centered and isolationist ways.

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