

First Meeting of Synod Delegates
November 15th, 2014, Mary Immaculate College

Speaking Notes of Bishop Brendan Leahy

This is a great moment. Just a few weeks after convoking the Diocesan Synod, the first in the Diocese in around 70 years, here we are already, several hundred of us, Synod delegates ready to set out on the journey! My first word is “thanks” – thanks for the interest, the time, the commitment, above all, for the choice you’ve made to be part of this journey. Maybe there was a little cajoling involved in persuading you but you still made the choice and we are all grateful for your presence here. Each one of you here is a gift for each other.

As you may know, though I am from Dublin, my parents were from Kerry and we would often travel from Dublin to West Kerry – a more than six hour journey in those days. The preparation for the journey was always both exciting and hard work! Cases, bags, pots and pans had to be packed into the car. And it couldn’t be a question of just throwing everything in. My father would have to carefully arrange things so that everything did actually fit in. We’d be in and out of our house, up and down stairs, carrying those bags and going back to fetch those items we’d forgotten. The preparation would take time! There was a little drudgery attached. But it was all part of the excitement! And it was worth it to get us to Kerry!

Thankfully, there are no bags and cases to be dragged around here today. But in a sense, this day marks the beginning of our preparation for the collective journey called a Synod. I’m sure there will be many moments of joy as well as challenges ahead of us! But it’s wonderful to see over 300 present here from all corners of the Diocese, representing parishes and other groups, lining ourselves up, as it were, for action, looking forward to our Diocesan Synod in April 2016.

What we are about – a Diocesan Synod – is new to us all. We are going to have to learn by doing. If it depended all on ourselves, then we would rightly be worried! Can any of us really say that we feel fully competent for what lies ahead of us? If there is anyone here wondering if they are really up to it, I would say – relax, you’re in good company! We all feel a little like that! What matters is to remember that we must work as if it depended on us but knowing that it really depends on God. The Holy Spirit will come to our aid. Indeed, I like to think it will be the Holy Spirit who will be the pilot, the guide, for our journey.

A few weeks ago, I had the privilege of going with a Limerick Diocesan pilgrimage group to Rome. Our pilgrimage was in honour of Saint John Paul II. It was a wonderful in so many ways. It was a chance to recall, as Bishop Donal Murray did for us during a Mass at the altar of the saint, some of the things Pope John Paul said to us in 1979 when he visited Limerick. For instance, in Greenpark Racecourse, the Polish Pope said, “lay people today are called to a strong Christian commitment, to permeate society with the leaven of the Gospel, for Ireland is at a point of decision in her history”.

The highpoint, however of our pilgrimage was the encounter with Pope Francis. St. Peter’s Square was full with 70.000 pilgrims but the Irish group was fortunate enough to be seated right in front of Pope Francis. The Pope singled out our group for mention in his greetings to the English-speaking pilgrims. I was particularly pleased to be able to greet him personally afterwards and present to him both the history book of the Diocese of Limerick and my pastoral letter convoking the Synod. He looked at both with great interest and asked us to

pray for him. It wasn't something planned but I was really happy that I was able to present him with the pastoral letter and so tell him about the Synod. It was an important symbolic moment, reminding me, and all of us here today, that we are a portion of the universal Church of Christ and that we are in communion with the successor of Peter.

In his catechesis that day, Francis spoke about the Church as the Body of Christ. He reminded us of the great gift of Baptism that makes us members of the Church. As he put it, "baptism constitutes a true rebirth, which regenerates us in Christ, renders us a part of Him, and unites us intimately among ourselves, as limbs of the same body, of which He is the Head" (cf. Rm 12:5; 1 Cor 12:12-13).

He also referred to chapter 37 of the Book of Ezekiel that he recommended we read. In that chapter the prophet describes a vision that is unusual but the prophet wants us to be encouraged by it. At the time of the prophet Ezekiel, the people of Israel were going through a devastating time. They had been exiled away from the Holy Land to Babylon and were losing hope. In the account of the vision, God shows the prophet a valley full of bones, separated from each other and dry. It is a desolate scene. In the vision God asks the prophet to invoke the Spirit upon them. At that point, the bones move, they begin to come together. First nerves and then flesh grew on them and in this way they form a complete body, full of life (cf. Ez 37:1-14). The Pope commented, "See, this is the Church! This is the Church, she is a masterpiece, the masterpiece of the Spirit who instills in each one the new life of the Risen Christ and places us, beside one another, each at the service and support of the other, thereby making of all of us one single body, edified in communion and in love."

At this point I'd like to read the text itself of the prophet Ezekiel chapter 27. It's what Pope Francis asked us to do:

The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all round them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, 'Mortal, can these bones live?' I answered, 'O Lord God, you know.' Then he said to me, 'Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord.' So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, 'Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.' I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. Then he said to me, 'Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely." Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you,

and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord.’

Yes, the Spirit breathes life into us. I’ve always liked a sentence the late Orthodox Patriarch Athenagoras used to quote:

Without the Spirit, God is far away, Christ remains in the past, the Gospel is a dead letter, the Church is a simple organisation, authority a domination, mission a propaganda, worship mere evocation, and Christian action a slave morality. But in the Spirit... the Risen Christ is present, the Gospel is the power of life, the Church signifies Trinitarian communion, authority is a liberating service, mission is a Pentecost, the liturgy is memorial and anticipation, human activity is deified”.¹

We need the wisdom of the Holy Spirit to guide us. How can we have this wisdom? I would like to suggest four keys for opening the doors of our hearts and minds to the Spirit.

Firstly, we must ask for the gift. That might seem obvious but we can so easily take it for granted. I invite you to invoke the Spirit often along this journey: “Come, Holy Spirit, help me how to listen to this person or group”; “Come, Holy Spirit, give me wisdom in what I have to say”; “Come, Holy Spirit, help me understand what is the right thing to do”.

Secondly, to have wisdom, it is important to love. And to love with the art of loving that we find in the Gospel. In other words, take the initiative, be the first to love, don’t wait to be loved. St. Paul tells us that while we were still sinners God loved us and now we too are to go out of ourselves to love others. And to do so with the universal love that Jesus had – to love everyone – those from my parish but also from other parishes; those from my group but also from other groups. Why not take as a goal today to really get to know people here that you haven’t ever met before.

Thirdly, the Holy Spirit will be particularly active among us if we have Jesus among us. In the account of the disciples on the road to Emmaus we read that their hearts were “burning” within them as Jesus walked among them along the road. The Risen Jesus is always with us. He promised to be with us until the end of time. But how we sense his presence and let him be active among us with his liberating Spirit depends on how much we love one another. He promised us, “where two or three are gathered in my name – and that is, in love for one another – I am there among them” (Mt 18:20). The First Christians really took mutual love, love for one another, to heart. In the First Letter of St. Peter we read: “above all, maintain constant love for one another” (1 Peter 4:7). And that means listening and learning from one another, giving and sharing our views, helping and receiving help from one another. And this includes listening and learning from the wisdom in the teaching of the Church throughout the centuries.

Finally, there is an important way to have the Spirit alive in our hearts and in our mind – it is love of the Crucified Christ when we encounter difficulties, misunderstandings or discouragement. Those moments inevitably come in life, including during a Synod. When they do, it is important to go deep into our hearts and call him, the Crucified Christ, by name: “this

¹ Olivier Clément, *Dialogues avec le Patriarche Athénagoras* (Paris: Fayard, 1969), p. 496, quoting Metropolitan Ignatios of Latakia, the Greek Metropolitan Ignatios of Latakia, speaking at the WCC, Uppsala, 1968.

difficulty is you”; “I want to love you in this disappointment or setback”; “I offer you this misunderstanding”. Let’s remember that as he was dying on the Cross, Jesus breathed forth his Spirit. United to him in any big or small challenge we might face, we too can breathe forth the Spirit around us.

With these few words, I wish you a good Synod day. A Synod is an event of the Church. I believe there is a grace attached to it. It is a work of God. Let’s do the work of God together and let’s do it well.