

## STUDY GROUP REFLECTION | MARCH 2025

### BACKGROUND

*Today's American Catholic* ("TAC") is a journal of inquiry, reflection, and opinion on matters of ecclesial, civic, and spiritual life. It is a lay-run publication that seeks to promote religious dialogue and deepen the faith of its readers. TAC has been publishing since 1993 and is currently based in the state of Connecticut (US), within the Archdiocese of Hartford.

In March 2025, TAC convened a "Lenten Synodal Practice" for friends of the journal to meet and study the Synod's Final Document together. Our "Conversations in the Spirit" have yielded reflections on the Synodal Church, which we share here as a public submission in response to Cardinal Mario Grech's invitation. While our reflections could pertain to several of the 10 Study Groups, we feel that **Group #9** ("Theological criteria and synodal methodologies") is the most natural recipient.

### THEME #1: GENDER EQUALITY

Our group has experienced a feeling of urgency around the issue of gender equality. So long as this injustice exists within the Church, and women are not allowed to live out the fullness of their ministerial callings, the possibility of shared synodal discernment remains unfulfilled.

We acknowledge the links between current inequalities within the Church and historic patterns in Scripture, even as we work to overcome them. We also note that gender inequality is a contradiction between Church *teaching* of radical equality in Christ (Gal 3:28) and *practice* that does not afford equal opportunities for all. This contradiction is a major stumbling block for younger Catholics' engagement with the faith community.

The Final Document provides some pathways forward, particularly in its reference to "mother and sister earth" (54) and the implicit link between gender equality and ecology. Paragraph 60 states explicitly that "There is no reason or impediment that should prevent women from carrying out leadership roles in the Church: *what comes from the Holy Spirit cannot be stopped.*" However, statements such as "The difference between the sexes constitutes the basis of human relationships" (52) read to us as a bit reductionist, and we feel that a broader, more creative theology of relationship would better serve the Synodal Church. Our group also identified an urgent need for a renewed teaching regarding Christian anthropology, with a particular focus on a renewal of a theology of human sexuality.

### THEME #2: TRANSPARENCY AND CLERICALISM

Shared discernment of doctrinal, pastoral, and ethical issues depends on a Church that is transparent, open, and accountable, where true *parrhesia* and "Conversation in the Spirit" can spontaneously occur. Good faith and good will are essential components of transparency; in this we echo the Final Document's observation that transparency is an "attitude" rooted in Scripture (96).

In a clerical as opposed to a transparent Church, laypeople may feel accountable to leaders, but there may not be structures in place to ensure that leaders are accountable to laypeople. Bishops may choose to pursue synodal initiatives halfheartedly or ignore them altogether. *Ad limina* visits where bishops are asked what specifically they have done to implement synodality within their dioceses and a bishop-selection process that involves the laity in prayerfully discerning and selecting leaders of gratitude, love, and service are two practical methodologies for shared synodal discernment.

We also express support for suggested reviews and revisions of canon law (60, 92) to assure that transparency advances, clericalism declines, and women's opportunities are advanced in the Church. In these instances, emphasis on accountability and evaluation are also strongly supported.

### **THEME #3: FORMATION AND IMAGINATION**

Shared discernment requires that laity have a knowledge of the history, tradition, and teachings of their Church, as well as a certain spiritual maturity. At the same time, we must be alert to new symbols and metaphors that can help us renew our faith and deepen our sacramental imagination. Love should be the cornerstone of doctrine, and we must always strive to give it its due primacy.

We must not be afraid to reimagine the sites and methods of formation in a more synodal key. Retreat and pastoral centers, Small Christian Communities, and houses of hospitality offer spiritual seekers nourishment outside of traditional parish structures. Seminaries might be restructured as quasi-monastic "schools of the Lord's service" (cf. the prologue of the *Rule* of St. Benedict), "schools of listening," or co-educational "institutes for vocation and ministry," where laypeople and religious come together to work, study, pray, and help one another discern their particular vocations.

### **CONCLUSION**

In his book *Prayer*, theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar writes: "The Church is not God, it cannot share the adoration due to the Son. But the Son must not be isolated from his brethren; the way opening on to heaven—and he is the way—cuts through the whole of [hu]mankind, and that rent, that breach, is the Church. Thanks to the reality of the Church I can enter by contemplation and imitation into the reality of Christ. It is, for me, the place where God is manifested to [hu]mankind in Christ."

It is in this spirit of "contemplation and imitation" that we respectfully submit these reflections to the General Secretariat, with gratitude for the opportunity to participate in the project of building a more co-responsible Church.