



Why Listening Matters for Better Understanding in a Divided Church

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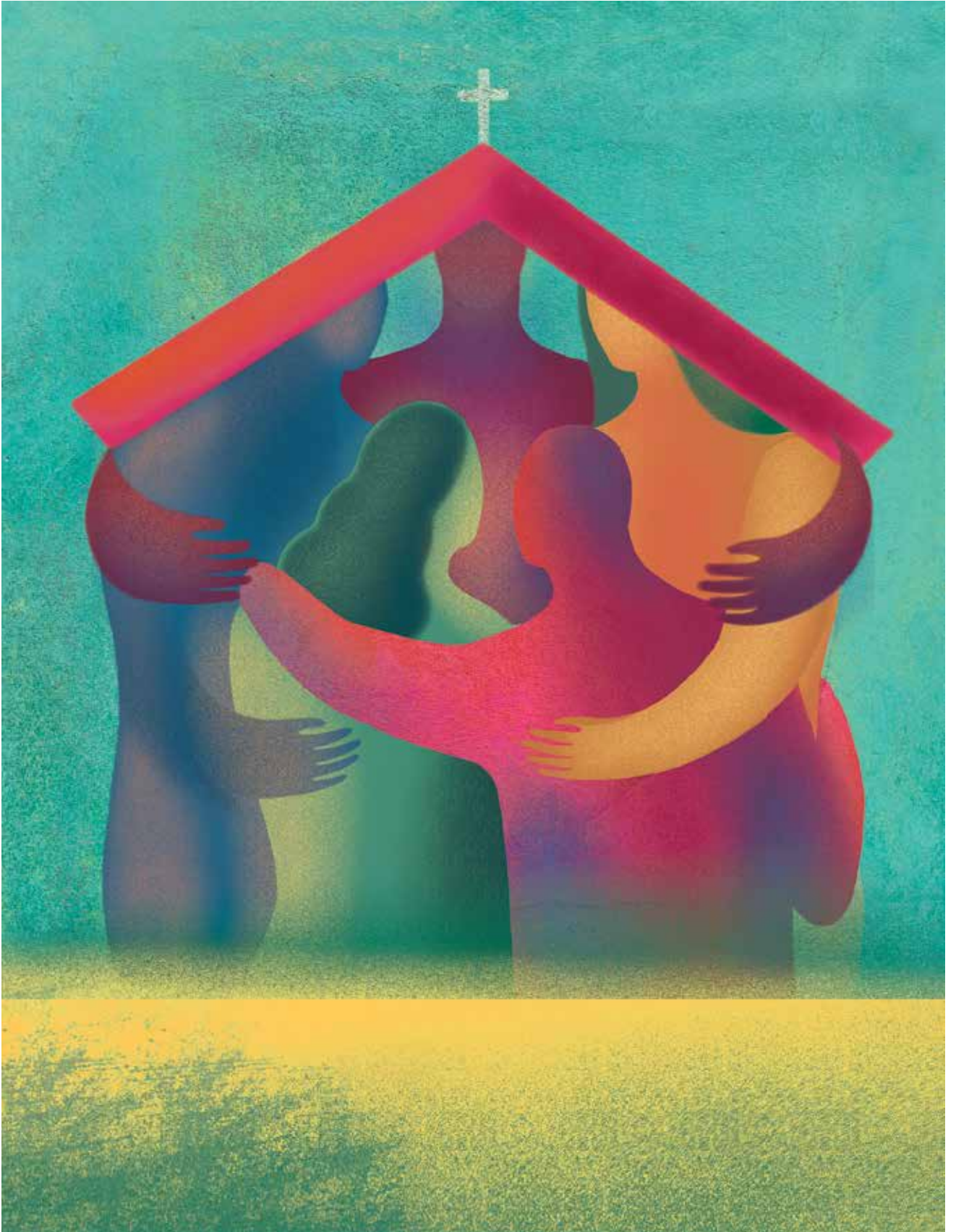
The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' fall release of the culmination of synodal listening sessions held in dioceses across the country, titled *National Synthesis of the People of God in the United States of America for the Diocesan Phase of the 2021-2023 Synod*, reveals a common set of themes that are on the hearts and minds of American Catholics.¹ People everywhere — including myself as experienced during our sessions held in the Diocese of Lexington — were surprised by the vast agreement discovered when they actually listened and heard from each other. They learned not only about their common love for the Church, but also a similar desire to see it flourish and to be an effective sacrament of God's presence in the world.

FINDING COMMON GROUND OPENLY AND HONESTLY

The impetus for this effort began in the fall of 2021, when Pope Francis invited the global Catholic Church to employ prayerful and careful listening as an intentional first step of a two-year process called "Synod on Synodality." This synod, a gathering, is focused on how the Church should move forward in unity. At the first Synod of Bishops to launch the process, Francis presided over the assembly at the Vatican, where he instructed the bishops to speak boldly and to listen charitably. This is a difficult challenge for many, if not all of us. To really promote the unity of the Church — a lack that was poignantly mentioned in the U.S. synthesis, especially when some bishops seem to flaunt their defiance of the pope — it is important that we address issues openly and honestly and not suppress our differences. In the setting of the Church, it is a fundamental requirement that this should be done in charity, even in the age of social media. Pope Francis told some of us during our time with him at the last *ad limina* visit

in Rome for U.S. bishops in November 2019 that it was acceptable for those gathered to criticize him because he learns a lot from such criticism; yet, he instructed that the place to do it was at the gathering, where it could be talked through, not in the press.

Pope Francis also teaches us that our differences, even our conflicts, are not to be feared. People argue and "fight" — hopefully nonviolently — about what is important to them. Most often, a healthy disagreement is much more productive than a polite withdrawal or indifference to an issue. The pope suggests that unresolved conflicts are the opening for the Holy Spirit to point to a new way. When we have reached the limits of our arguments and reasoning, we can seek the guidance of the Spirit to do what is humanly impossible. But this requires seeing the other not so much as an opponent — and especially not as an enemy — but as a fellow traveler on this path of faith who sees and understands things differently than ourselves.





We cannot really be one church if we are not able to have disagreements in a civil and constructive manner. Furthermore, we certainly cannot be one church if decisions that affect everyone are put to a majority vote and we ignore the misgivings of the minority. We also cannot be one church if we sweep our differences and difficulties under the rug — as we did with reports of sexual abuse, and as we continue to do with systemic racism and our exclusive policies so painfully felt by women, LGBTQ persons, people of color and others. Careful listening, prayer, reflection on the Word of God, consultation of the sources of our Catholic tradition and silence all contribute to

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an atmosphere where dialogue can help us discover common ground, and the Spirit can lead us “toward” unifying solutions, but not magically creating them.

In my parish and diocesan experience, I see what happens when people sit down and break bread with people whose life and experiences differ from their own. I see crusaders against gay rights break down in tears when they witness the sacrificial love of same-sex partners as one companion deals with a life-threatening illness. I also see anti-immigrant spokespersons become speechless when they hear of the gruesome experiences that migrants tell them with the help of an interpreter. When people are reduced to labels, causes and statistics, they are easy to characterize and even dismiss; but when they are seen as a sister and brother, one who struggles with many of the same issues that they themselves do, it is much harder to do so.

RESPECTING AND HONORING OUR DIFFERENCES

Of course, we should not underestimate the effort and good will that is required to bring together people who have diametrically opposed view-

points and those who have not always been welcome to the table. Although some views are now more acceptable in public discourse, they are still incompatible with the Gospel of Jesus. The insensitivity and lack of civility promoted in the media has become common in too many settings. But it is also not helpful when we say things like “that is too political” or argue that politics are unrelated to our faith. First, we have to distinguish between “partisan” and “political,” a distinction too often omitted in public discourse. We can and must avoid partisanship, but to avoid all political issues would render our faith irrelevant in the world and would surrender a valuable voice in the discourse. Remember that “politics” doesn’t have to be a dirty word. Pope Francis calls it not only a noble vocation, but insists that it should also occasionally serve as an exercise of charity. But this requires that politics be in the service of the common good for all, not just for our own party or for people like ourselves.

The unity we desire in the Church should not be confused with uniformity. Diversity is a blessing and is part of what makes us genuinely Catholic. How we create a true community — that is, come together as one with all of the gifts of that diversity — is the challenge that lies before us. From what I have read and heard from the Synod, this is what we all want.²

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NOTES

1. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *National Synthesis of the People of God in the United States of America for the Diocesan Phase of the 2021-2023 Synod* (Washington, DC: 2022).
2. The remarks in this article were originally made by Bishop John Stowe at the Leadership Roundtable at the Catholic Partnership Summit in Washington, DC, on September 22, 2022.

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