



# *Journeying Together:*

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF  
**BEACONS *of* LIGHT**

BY FATHER EARL FERNANDES



ARCHDIOCESE OF  
CINCINNATI

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Through the Beacons of Light process, our parishes will come together as Families of Parishes to better enable our local Church to more effectively accomplish our sacred mission to proclaim the Good News of salvation and make disciples. Additionally, the upcoming Synod of Bishops on a synodal Church offers us in the Archdiocese of Cincinnati an opportunity to reflect upon the ways in which we are truly “journeying together” towards being people and parishes who radiate Christ.

With that as backdrop, I am very pleased to share this theological reflection, *Journeying Together: Theological Foundations of Families of Parishes*, by Father Earl Fernandes. This document provides important underpinnings for the creation of Families of Parishes and a theological framework for each Family’s pastoral planning process over the coming years. *Journeying Together* unites as one the theological framework of the synod’s themes of “communion, participation and mission” and the important work that our Families of Parishes will do on the path to becoming Beacons of Light.

I am grateful to Father Fernandes for this significant contribution, as well as to our priests, deacons and lay parish leaders who will use this theological reflection to bring to fruition the Beacons of Light process. Please join me in continuing to ask for the intercession of our Blessed Mother, to whose care we have entrusted our archdiocese, as we strive to respond to her Son’s great commission.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

**Most Reverend Dennis M. Schnurr**  
Archbishop of Cincinnati



## INTRODUCTION

Beacons of Light is a multi-year process of pastoral planning for the Archdiocese of Cincinnati which seeks to help our parishes carry out the mission of evangelization. It will have a major impact on the people of the archdiocese and on parishes, which will be grouped together into “Families of Parishes.” In this essay, I will attempt to offer a theological foundation for this process, beginning with a description of the Church as the Family of God.

The Second Vatican Council rightly calls the family the domestic church, stating: “From the wedlock of Christians there comes the family, in which new citizens of human society are born, who by the grace of the Holy Spirit received in baptism are made children of God, thus perpetuating the people of God through the centuries” (*Lumen Gentium*, 11).

Individual “domestic churches,” drawn together by the Holy Spirit, form parishes, which the *Code of Canon Law* (c. 515) describes as “a certain community of the

Christian faithful stably constituted in a particular church, whose pastoral care is entrusted to a pastor... under the authority of the diocesan bishop,” who erects, suppresses or alters parishes.

Every diocese is divided into distinct parts to foster pastoral care through common action (cf. *CIC*, 374). At times several neighboring parishes can be joined together within a diocese, such as when a deanery is formed. A particular church is erected by the Pope himself, which reminds Catholics in each diocese that they are united to the universal Church and remain in communion with Catholics around the world, united with the Pope.

Our archdiocese is a portion of the People of God which is entrusted to a bishop, who acts as a shepherd, with the cooperation of his priests and the People of God. The bishop gathers the People of God in the Holy Spirit through the Gospel and the Holy Eucharist (cf. *Christus Dominus*, 11; *CIC*, 369).

## THE CHURCH AS THE FAMILY OF GOD

Although we can try to define the structures of the Church, we also recall that the Church herself is a mystery. In *Lumen Gentium*, the Second Vatican Council describes the Church, using scriptural imagery (cf. *LG*, 6), as the “sheepfold, the sole and necessary gateway to which is Christ;” a “cultivated field, the tillage of God;” and, “the Jerusalem, which is above” and “our mother.” Other scriptural images utilized by the document include the Church as the Body of Christ, with its Head and members (cf. 1 Cor 12:12) who have differing gifts, given by the Spirit for the building up of the Church (cf. 1 Cor 12:1-11).

The Church is also like a vineyard, planted by the heavenly cultivator (cf. Mt 21:33-43; Is 5:1). At the Last Supper, Jesus speaks of Himself as the Vine and His disciples as the branches. Apart from Him we can do nothing (cf. Jn 15:1-5). At times, for growth and flourishing, some pruning and trimming is necessary; certainly, this will be true with Beacons of Light.

One scriptural image used by the Council that is very helpful for us in understanding parish groupings and the Beacons of Light process is the Church as the Family of God, “the house of God in which His family dwells; the household of God in the Spirit” (cf. Eph 2:19, 22). The image of the Church as a family is ancient, and the idea of a family as a “domestic church” has re-emerged in recent times. Parishes are communities of families which gather under a pastor, a father of the family, in communion with the bishop, to worship God and to build the Kingdom.

The family is a place of belonging, a privileged place to experience love and growth, an original sign, given by God the Father. It is both a building block of society and a critical means by which we are introduced into a decisive relationship with God. The family exists to help

generate life and to deepen companionship between individuals as they journey toward their common destiny. Family stability is critical for the future. This is not only true of our individual families, but also of our parish families. Every family, including a parish family, has a mission to build up the Church and to increase the Kingdom of God in the world; to be a community of love in which people experience a sense of belonging; and, to be a beacon of light and hope to others.

In the Family of God, we continually meet and encounter the Event or Person who “gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction” (cf. Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, 1). In the family, we behold the Mystery of Christ present as a face. One learns to confront one’s difficulties and to face the realities of life, enlightened by His Presence; there we encounter Christ in the other. In our individual and parish families our companionship coalesces or comes together in a space, in daily living and working together, on a common journey with a common goal: our destiny with God.

The Church can be understood as the Family of God, but it is a family with diverse members that does not lose its identity, and which has its very roots in Truth itself. Jesus addresses God as Father and refers frequently to the disciples as His friends. The early Church addressed its members as *adelphoi* or brothers. The community of believers is not principally an administrative grouping, the way a company is organized, structured and occasionally re-organized; rather, the distinctive characteristics of the Church as the Family of God are prayer and Eucharistic worship. Believers, called by name, have been drawn together and constituted as a family by the Holy Spirit. No family is perfect and there are always family members with different temperaments, but there is one fundamental bond: faith.

The Church, constituted by God, is commissioned to evangelize. Every family, every parish must have a missionary outlook. We must radiate Christ to the world, and yet, we are experiencing profound change. Our world is becoming more polarized and fragmented, and this is making the task of evangelizing more challenging. Pope Francis frequently says that “we live not so much in an epoch of change as in a change of epoch.” Acknowledging this and the changed reality of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati, which includes demographic shifts and fewer priests, is essential for carrying out the mission of the Church in a *changed* environment.

Beacons of Light is principally about the mission of evangelization. At the beginning of his pontificate, Pope Francis described his dream for the Church, writing: “I dream of a ‘missionary option,’ that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation” (*EG*, 27).

## FAMILIES OF PARISHES AS EVANGELIZING COMMUNITIES

With urgency, we need to move from maintenance to mission. This transformation must necessarily come to the Archdiocese of Cincinnati. Beacons of Light is a means for channeling our resources – human, material and spiritual – in a way that best serves the mission of evangelization. This demands that we think not only of parishes as families, but of multiple parishes or groupings as extended families, or Families of Parishes, so our local church and parishes may be transformed into an evangelizing community.

What are some characteristics of an evangelizing community? It is in this “missionary spirit” that the Church goes forth (cf. *EG*, 20-24). Paragraph 24 of *Evangelii Gaudium* begins with these words: “The Church which ‘goes forth’ is a community of missionary disciples who take the first step, who are involved and supportive, who bear fruit and rejoice” (*EG*, 24).

**First, we are a Church that goes forth.** We are missionaries. Going forth demands courageously leaving our comfort zone. In an interview in 2013, Pope Francis said:

“Instead of just being a church that welcomes and receives by keeping the doors open, let us

try also to be a church that finds new roads, that is able to step outside itself and go to those who do not attend Mass, to those who have quit or are indifferent. The ones who quit sometimes do it for reasons that, if properly understood and assessed, can lead to a return. But that takes audacity and courage.” (Interview with Antonio Spadaro, Sept. 21, 2013)

**Second, the community of missionary disciples shows initiative.** Pope Francis invites us to be “imitators of God” by having foresight. God seizes the initiative with us and calls us to do the same. The Spanish term *primerear* captures this idea of being proactive rather than reactive. In the Archdiocese of Cincinnati, we cannot afford to wait for people to come to us; rather, we must seize the initiative, especially with lapsed Catholics and the unchurched. This will require an entrepreneurial spirit. The Holy Father writes:

“An evangelizing community knows that the Lord has taken the initiative; He has loved us first (cf. 1 Jn 4:19), and therefore, we can move forward, boldly take the initiative, go out to others, seek those who have fallen away, stand at the crossroads and welcome the outcast.” (*EG*, 24)

**Third, the evangelizing community is engaged with its members.** The whole People of God has been made priest, prophet and king through baptism. Many of the lay faithful have talents and expertise to offer the Church and the world. The bishops and priests have the task of animating their vocations. Pope Francis sometimes uses the word *balconear*, which means to stand by the window or balcony to see what is happening, but without personal engagement. A person sees and criticizes everything without ever personally getting involved in the mission. Clergy and laity alike are guilty of doing this. The Pope proposes Jesus as the opposite of this sort of person:

“Jesus washed the feet of his disciples. The Lord gets involved and He involves His own, as He kneels to wash their feet. He tells His disciples, ‘You will be blessed if you do this.’ An evangelizing community gets involved by word and deed in people’s daily lives; it bridges distances. It is willing to abase itself if necessary, and it embraces human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others.” (EG, 24)

An evangelizing community has committed leaders in its priests, who can also identify the gifts and talents of deacons, religious and the lay faithful to engage others rather than merely to complain about what has gone wrong.

**Fourth, a community of missionary disciples accompanies others.** Speaking in Assisi, Pope Francis said:

“I repeat it often: walking with our people, sometimes in front, sometimes in the middle, and sometimes behind: in front in order to guide the community, in the middle in order to encourage and support; and at the back in order to keep it united and so that no one lags too far behind, to keep them united.” (Francis, “Meeting with Clergy, Consecrated People, and Members of Diocesan Pastoral Councils,” Cathedral of San Ruffino, Assisi, Oct. 4, 2013)

A father of a family must lead his family, spend time with them, offer encouragement and be an instrument

of unity to preserve the family. The priest or pastor of the parish (or Families of Parishes) must assume this role, but he does so with a view to foster leadership among his people so that they, too, may accompany others in their family, in their neighborhoods or those who are away from the Church. Accompaniment entails guiding, encouraging, supporting and uniting. The Church that actively does this is a synodal Church – a Church that walks together.

**Fifth, the evangelizing community is fruitful.** Commenting on the parable of the weeds and wheat, the Holy Father says:

“An evangelizing community is always concerned with fruit, because the Lord wants her to be fruitful. It cares for the grain and does not grow impatient with the weeds. The sower when he sees weeds sprouting among the grain does not grumble or overreact. He or she finds a way to let the word take flesh in a particular situation and bear fruits of new life, however imperfect or incomplete these may appear.” (EG, 24)

Fruitfulness demands discernment and patience. The parable of the weeds and wheat speaks of distinguishing what is from the Son of Man – who sows good seed, the children of God, in the field – from the weeds, the children of the Evil One sown by the Devil. In Greek, the word used for weeds is *zizania*, which specifically refers to ryegrass. *Zizania* looks like wheat as it begins to grow, but only when it matures can one discern the difference. Jesus cautions His disciples of the need to be patient and to discern, because things are not always initially clear.

Patience and discernment help us on the journey. This will be particularly necessary during Beacons of Light. Hastiness can doom the process. Although there is urgency, patience is necessary to helping others understand why Beacons of Light is happening and to accept the reality of change. Following Jesus’ example, we try to be patient. Patience in the art of accompaniment and discernment allows the whole Church to move forward.

**The final characteristic of an evangelizing community is joy.** It celebrates even small victories in the work of evangelization (cf. *EG*, 24). Joy is the greatest experience of a missionary Church. As the source and summit of all life in the Church, the Eucharist is the sacrament which nourishes Christian joy.

In the Eucharist, Christ is among us. The joy that He has won is preserved and shared. Eucharistic joy is not incomplete or fading like the pleasures of this world. It perdures. Joy is fruit of the Holy Spirit, whom the Risen Lord breathed on the Apostles at Easter as He sent them forth!

The Church celebrates the Eucharist with the spousal joy of one promised to Christ. The liturgy is a foretaste of the eschatological banquet in which those invited

will experience the fullness of the Kingdom. Thus, the Holy Father writes:

“Evangelization with joy becomes beauty in the liturgy... The Church evangelizes and is herself evangelized through the beauty of the liturgy, which is both a celebration of the task of evangelization and the source of her renewed self-giving.” (*EG*, 24)

Given the current realities of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati, Families of Parishes, nourished by the Holy Eucharist, will have the courage to go forth, to seize the initiative, to be engaged and to accompany others so they might bear lasting fruit. They will be evangelizing communities, marked by the joy that comes from the Gospel and the Eucharist.

## FAMILIES OF PARISHES

# JOURNEYING TOGETHER

Growing up in families, almost everyone took a family trip or journey – with hopes for renewal and filled with many joys, along with a few mishaps. As the Archdiocese of Cincinnati journeys into the future, we do so together. The Greek word *synodos* means “to be on the journey together” as in a caravan or religious pilgrimage (cf. Lk 2:41-44).<sup>1</sup>

We are a “pilgrim Church,” journeying toward the heavenly Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup> Significantly, the Second Vatican Council treated the “People of God” in the second chapter of *Lumen Gentium* (*LG*, 9-17) before treating the hierarchy. If a pyramidal view of the Church had dominated in previous eras, now all the baptized, with their respective and distinctive roles,

could better understand their vocations as service to the Church. Open to the Spirit and attentive to the “signs of the times,”<sup>3</sup> the Church acts in a synodal way when exercising her prophetic charism.

*Synodality* is a way of living the faith, not in an episodic way, but in a permanent way at every level: in the parish, the family and at the peripheries.<sup>4</sup> All Church members, not just the clergy or experts, are to be engaged in this synodal way of living. Synodality describes the journeying together in history of the People of God toward the New and Eternal Jerusalem.

Pope Francis calls us to be a synodal Church. Speaking of this in 2015, he stated that it is “precisely this path

<sup>1</sup> Marcello Semeraro, *Lectio Magistralis ai membri dei Sinodo Diocesano dell'Arcidiocesi di Brindisi*, “Il Sinodo Diocesano manifesta, attua ed edifica la comunione diocesana,” April 18, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* (*LG*), Nov. 21, 1964, art. 48: *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* (*AAS*) 57 (1965) 53; *Gaudium et Spes* (*GS*), Dec. 7, 1965, art. 57: *AAS* 58 (1966) 1077.

<sup>3</sup> *GS* 4: *AAS* 58: 1027.

<sup>4</sup> José Villar, “Sinodalidad: Pastores y fieles en comunión operativa,” *Scripta Theologica* 48 (2016) 669; Kasper, “Sinodalità nella Chiesa,” 173.

of *synodality* which God expects of the Church of the third millennium.”<sup>5</sup> Echoing Pope Benedict XVI that synodality is a “constitutive element of the Church,” he described it as “nothing other than the ‘journeying together’ of God’s flock along the paths of history towards the encounter with Christ the Lord.”<sup>6</sup>

A synodal Church is one that listens and “which realizes that listening is more than simply hearing.”<sup>7</sup> This involves listening not only to each other, but also to the Spirit to know what “He says to the churches.”<sup>8</sup> Listening affirms each person’s dignity and expresses respect for the voices, legitimate desires, problems and sufferings of the People of God.<sup>9</sup>

The process of listening begins with the People of God, who, in virtue of their baptism, share in the prophetic office of Christ. Priests and bishops, attentive to the voice of the flock, listen to God to act rightly and to give credible witness to the apostolic faith. The process converges to a point of unity in faith, facilitating an encounter with the Lord in Truth.

But what would be the theological foundations for understanding the Church as a Family of God who journeys together? That is, if parishes will be grouped together into Families of Parishes in order to discern a future together that best serves evangelization, on what theological basis would this be done?

## THE MOVEMENT OF GOD TOWARD HUMANITY

# TRINITARIAN FOUNDATIONS

We begin almost every prayer with the sign of the cross, invoking the Trinity. There is a clear Trinitarian imprint on the understanding of the Church in the documents of Vatican II, which describes the Church as “a people made one with the unity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit” (*LG*, 2-4). One speaks of a “Trinitarian synodality,” *ad intra*, referring to the dynamic relationship of the Persons of the Trinity as a communion of love, and a “Trinitarian synodality,” *ad extra*, in which the persons of the Godhead “journey together” toward all of creation, the Church and humanity in history. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are the model for all forms of synodal living and, therefore, a model of living as the Church.

The Scriptures allude to this in the Divine “We” in the story of creation (Gen 1:26), in the visit of the three guests to Abraham (Gen 18:1-5), and in the journey

of God toward His people through the covenants of the Old Testament culminating in the Messiah. The New Testament, especially the Annunciation (Lk 1:26-38), recounts the Incarnation as a Trinitarian action, a journeying together: the Father sends the Spirit to overshadow the Virgin so that the Eternal Word of the Father might become incarnate. In the Trinity, there is communion and reciprocity among the Persons *and* an outpouring of love toward humanity.

The Father, Son and Holy Spirit journey together in harmony. The Triune God journeys together toward all of humanity. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit journey with us as we discern the way forward for our archdiocese. In turn, we as Families of Parishes must journey together, open to what the Spirit says and guided by the living Word (cf. Ps 119:105).

<sup>5</sup> Francis, “Address during the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops,” Oct. 17, 2015: AAS 107 (2015) 1139.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*; cf. *EG* 171: AAS 105: 1091.

<sup>8</sup> Revelation 2:7.

<sup>9</sup> Kasper, 178.



## CHRISTOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

*Synodality* is a way of living the faith in a permanent way at every level in the life of the Church and is rooted in the Paschal Mystery, through which individuals share in the communion of the Trinity. Baptism involves the human response to the call to live in union with Christ through the action of the Spirit (1 Cor 1:9). This communion purifies the person from sin, makes him or her a new creation, an adopted child of God and member of the Church, opening the door to the other sacraments including the Eucharist.

It is the Church which makes the Eucharist, just as the Eucharist makes the Church.<sup>10</sup> In virtue of the Eucharist, the People of God as the Body of Christ

journeys together with diverse members (1 Cor 10:17; 12:27) under the headship of Christ. Christ, the Good Shepherd, leads the flock on its journey. He not only leads, but He also feeds the flock.

In the reception of Holy Communion, communion with God is deepened vertically and horizontally, as believers are conformed to the Mystery received.<sup>11</sup> God's own *agape* is received bodily, so that His saving work may continue in and through the Church. Conscious of the gift, the Church goes forth to draw all of humanity together in unity. A parish or Family of Parishes must remain intimately connected to Christ in the Eucharist, the "source and summit of Christian life."<sup>12</sup>

## PNEUMATIC AND MARIAN FOUNDATIONS

At the baptism of Christ, the voice of the Father was heard and the Spirit descended over Him like a dove. This same Spirit, which was poured out on the Apostles at Pentecost, has been poured into our hearts in baptism. The Holy Spirit introduces order (1 Cor 12:1-20) amid diversity of members and charisms in the Body of Christ so that members work together for the good of the whole Church (1 Cor 12:14-31). Each member is given some manifestation of the Spirit in view of the good of the body. The gifts of the Spirit are gathered in the Church, where members serve and listen to one reciprocally. The Church understands herself as a collective "we" in prayer, liturgy and discernment.<sup>13</sup>

The Spirit, who is at the core of this ecclesial "walking together," also overshadowed Mary, Mother of the Church and the model of discipleship, who lived this journey in a privileged way. Although the Spirit was operating from the dawn of creation, in the fullness of time (Gal 4:4) a qualitative leap was made in salvation history. By the Holy Spirit, Mary conceived the Word of God, who, in turn, was given as a gift to humanity. Mary and the Spirit "journey together" from the Annunciation through Pentecost.

If, in the economy of salvation, the Holy Spirit represents the condition of possibility for the self-communication

<sup>10</sup> John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, April 17, 2003, art. 26: AAS 95 (2003) 451; Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, Feb. 22, 2007, art. 14, in *Insegnamenti* III, 1 (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2008) 303-304.

<sup>11</sup> Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, Dec. 25, 2005, art. 13: AAS 93 (2006) 228. Benedict XVI writes: "The Eucharist draws us into Jesus' act of self-oblation. More than just statically receiving the incarnate *Logos*, we enter into the very dynamic of his self-giving."

<sup>12</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, Dec. 4, 1963, art. 47: AAS 56 (1964) 113.

<sup>13</sup> Herve Legrand, "La sinodalità al Vaticano II e dopo il Vaticano II. Un'indagine e una riflessione teologica e istituzionale," in *Chiesa e Sinodalità*, 67-108, ed. Riccardo Battocchio and Serena Noceti (Milano: Glossa, 2007) 72-73.

of God in Jesus on the part of the Divine, then Mary, with her *fiat*, represents the condition of possibility of this communication on the part of humanity. Through her attentive listening and openness to God, she fulfilled her mission in bringing Christ into the world. She demonstrates the characteristics of living this journey.

She journeyed with and in the Trinity, willingly receiving the love of the Father, bearing the Son within her womb, and becoming a temple of the Holy Spirit. The Mother of God is a model for all disciples and an icon of synodal life, reminding us of the universal call to listen attentively to God with an openness to the Spirit.<sup>14</sup>

## ECCLESIOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

In speaking of the Church as a family that journeys together, we can speak of synodality *in the Church* and *of the Church*. Synodality *in the Church* refers to the divine life in which members of the Church share in the synodality of the Trinity; this sharing happens in a variety of ways, most prominently through the liturgy and sacraments, in which the whole People of God journey toward the heavenly Jerusalem with members of the Church exercising their diverse charisms and ministries. Ecclesial synodality takes on flesh in institutions (synods, councils, parish finance councils, etc.) when those structures are animated by the Risen Lord and attentive to what the Spirit says.

These institutions will be extremely important in Beacons of Light as Families of Parishes develop pastoral plans. Difficult decisions will need to be made about how to work together and about finances, schools and facilities. The focus cannot be on clinging to the past or holding on to power; rather the focus must be on the mission of evangelization and discovering what the Risen Lord and the Spirit have prepared.

Synodality *in the Church* is related to the idea of *koinonia*, which refers to the new relationship that disciples have with God and one another. The communion of the Church is revealed as an initiative of the Trinity rather

than a result of the will of people who associate for reasons of convenience, common interests or business.

*Koinonia* is an unconditional gift from God who desires that all share in the life of His Son and share solidarity with one another; it is also a spiritual work involving sharing in the suffering and consolation of others (cf. Rom 12:13; 2 Cor 1:5-7; Phil 3:10; 4:14) and performing concrete works of charity (cf. Rom 15:26; 2 Cor 8:4; 9:13; Gal 2:9; Phil 1:5; Phil 6). *Koinonia* refers to a spiritual union *and* to a visibly operating concordance of hearts and minds (cf. Acts 2:42), beginning with baptism, through which one is incorporated into the life of Christ *and* the Church, forming a *societas*.<sup>15</sup>

Journeying together as a family is one of the most visible and meaningful forms of ecclesial communion, involving many modes of participation in the Church. If communion is a sharing in the faith and mission of the Church, this journeying is the sign and fulfillment of communion through which communion appears in all its complex dimensions: divine and human; invisible and visible; animated by the Spirit and organized by humans.<sup>16</sup>

Additionally, we can also speak of the synodality *of the Church*, which refers to the Church as a “sacrament or

<sup>14</sup> LG 64; AAS 57: 64. The Council stated: “The Church indeed, contemplating her hidden sanctity, imitating her charity and faithfully fulfilling the Father’s will, by receiving the word of God in faith, becomes herself a mother. By her preaching she brings forth to a new and immortal life the sons who are born to her in baptism, conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of God. She herself is a virgin, who keeps the faith given to her by her Spouse whole and entire. Imitating the mother of her Lord, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, she keeps with virginal purity an entire faith, a firm hope and a sincere charity.”

<sup>15</sup> Giuseppe Barbaglio, “La fede cristiana, In-sein mistico e Mit-sein sociale: la prospettiva ecclesiology di Paolo,” in *Chiesa e Sinodalità*, 31-66, ed. Riccardo Battocchio and Serena Noceti (Milano: Glossa, 2007) 37-38. Barbaglio sees a movement from a Christic *in-Sein* which has a mystical imprint or stamp to a *Mit-Sein*, which is markedly social and ecclesial: that is, believers form a solid *societas* inasmuch as all equally share, by grace, in the salvific event of Christ and are equally inserted into the vital space of the Risen Christ.

<sup>16</sup> Antonio Lanfranchi, “Prassi spirituale del discernimento comunitario,” in *Chiesa e Sinodalità*, 181-194, ed. Riccardo Battocchio and Serena Noceti (Milano: Glossa, 2007) 184.

sign and instrument both of a very close-knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race” and which “desires now to unfold more fully to the faithful of the Church and to the whole world its own inner nature and universal mission.”<sup>17</sup> It describes the journey of the Church with all of humanity in history.

This way of being is properly understood not as an expression of power, but as a *representatio ecclesiae*, whose authority comes from Christ for the service of

humanity.<sup>18</sup> What type of face do we as a Church want to show? Can we be a Samaritan Church? Precisely because the Archdiocese of Cincinnati offers so many services through schools, hospitals, Catholic Charities and the like to so many non-Catholics, we must be conscious of our responsibility toward those whom we serve in the wider community. A focus on *service*, rather than *power*, can help us discern the way forward in promoting the common good and bringing the joy of the Gospel to those around us.

## FAMILIES OF PARISHES

# DISCERNMENT AND CO-RESPONSIBILITY

The road that lies ahead for the Archdiocese of Cincinnati will not be an easy one. It will require discernment at an individual and communal level. In *The Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis invites every particular Church to enter into a resolute process of discernment, purification and reform so that the missionary impulse of the Church might be more focused, generous and fruitful,<sup>19</sup> adding that the important thing is “to not walk alone, but to rely on each other as brothers and sisters, and especially under the leadership of the bishops, in a wise and realistic pastoral discernment.”<sup>20</sup> Three phrases that can help in understanding the concept of discernment are: *to recognize*; *to interpret*; and *to choose*.

### *To recognize.*

Individuals and communities must be able to confront situations and difficulties in life and they need to be able to recognize and name these difficulties. At the same time, they also must possess a sense of

self-awareness. Many today are well-educated in the sciences and have a refined background but are illiterate when it comes to affectivity. Hence, there is a grave need to form people and communities in recognizing the interior movements of the spirit and to have an honest assessment of one’s own identity. There must be a recognition of those movements of the spirit which bring joy and which last, and those that do not.

### *To interpret.*

Individuals and communities must not only recognize challenges, but also interpret experiences in the light of faith. As individuals and communities attempt to understand the *meaning* of that which they are experiencing and how to evaluate experiences, the hierarchy of truths of the Catholic faith can assist in the discernment process. While clergy have a special responsibility to develop the ability to discern what is of God and what is not, even in “gray areas” of pastoral ministry,<sup>21</sup> cultivating discernment in all the faithful is essential.

<sup>17</sup> LG 1: AAS 57: 5.

<sup>18</sup> Giuseppe Ruggieri, “I Sinodi tra Storia e Teologia,” in *Chiesa e Sinodalità*, 129-161, ed. Riccardo Battocchio and Serena Noceti (Milano: Glossa, 2007) 145-146. Ruggieri believes this idea complements the patristic idea of a “spiritual symphony” conducted and guided by the Holy Spirit.

<sup>19</sup> EG 30: AAS 105: 1033.

<sup>20</sup> EG 33: AAS 105: 1034.

<sup>21</sup> Addressing clergy in Poland, Pope Francis said: “For this, in the Exercises of Saint Ignatius, he asks that he be introduced both to the intentions of the Lord of Life and to those of the enemy of human nature and his lies. What he has written is truly bold; it is bold, but discernment is precisely this ... We need to truly understand this: in life, not all is black on white or white on black. No! The shades of grey prevail in life. We must teach them to discern in this grey area.” In “Un incontro privato a Cracovia con Papa Francesco,” *La Civiltà Cattolica* 3989/17 (2016) 349.

Pope Francis commented: “Each Christian and every community must discern the path that the Lord points out, but all of us are asked to obey His call to go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the ‘peripheries’ in need of the light of the Gospel.”<sup>22</sup>

The process of discernment and deliberation is critical. People and parishes will need to weigh the pros and cons, using both faith and reason, when making proposals or decisions. Laity across the spectrum are called to fulfill the responsibilities of their baptism, to work for the sanctification of the world and to take part in the evangelizing mission of the Church, offering insights from their professional, personal and spiritual experiences.

Religious men and women are uniquely positioned to illuminate the transcendent and eschatological dimensions of some of the issues that will arise. As co-workers of the bishop, priests, especially pastors, possess the experience of shepherding and accompanying the flock; thus, they can offer their theological, spiritual and pastoral insights, standing as Christ in their midst.

### *To choose.*

Discernment demands being able to choose. Mindful of their duty to listen to the flock, pastors must have the “smell of the sheep.” Ultimately the bishop, the pastor of the flock entrusted to his care, or the Pope in the case of the universal Church, has a personal and specific responsibility to witness to the truth and preserve the unity and integrity of the faith and the flock. After careful discernment, flowing from the unanimity of the consent emanating from the deliberations in the Beacons of Light process, the Archbishop will have to make decisions, but his choices will come only after input from the people and clergy of the archdiocese and after prayerful discernment.

For example, in the Beacons of Light process, the grouping of parishes into Families of Parishes demands

gathering insights and data from lay men and women, pastors, pastoral councils and staff, and working together to look at possible groupings. Input was sought from the deans, presbyteral council, and heads of archdiocesan departments. Priests and school principals were invited to offer their insights. Finally, after a three-week period of public comment, the Archbishop will approve the finalized groupings. Later in the process, each Family of Parishes will create a pastoral plan that is in alignment with the overall purpose of Beacons of Light and propose its acceptance by the Archbishop.

This consent is never an assertion of power but remains a service to the truth and to the Church in the name of the Lord Jesus. Ultimately, discernment is of a communitarian nature and an expression of the co-responsibility that believers have; it demands that its members have an ecclesial conscience leading to communion.<sup>23</sup> The keyword is “co-responsibility.”

In 2009, Pope Benedict XVI said:

“It is necessary to improve pastoral structures in such a way that the co-responsibility of all the members of the People of God in their entirety is gradually promoted, with respect for vocations and for the respective roles of the consecrated and of lay people. This demands a change in mindset, particularly concerning lay people. They must no longer be viewed as ‘collaborators’ of the clergy but truly be recognized as ‘co-responsible’ for the Church’s being and action, thereby fostering the consolidation of a mature and committed laity.”<sup>24</sup>

Difficult decisions and choices must be made. Everyone can expect to experience some pain in the process, but, if the process is a shared one, then, in the end, it is hoped that our local Church will be in a better position to carry out the mission of evangelization and our parishes will truly be Beacons of Light.

<sup>22</sup> EG 20: AAS 105: 1028.

<sup>23</sup> Antonio Lanfranchi, “Prassi spirituale del discernimento comunitario,” 194.

<sup>24</sup> Benedict XVI, “Discorso all’apertura del convegno pastorale della diocesi di Roma sul tema: ‘appartenenza ecclesiale e corresponsabilità pastorale,’” May 26, 2009, in *Insegnamenti V*, 1 (2010) 903-904.