

Through the Mission of the Son

A Response to A Synodal Church in Mission – Synthesis Report
United States Catholic Mission Association
March 19, 2024 – The Solemnity of Saint Joseph

The Father, through the mission of the Son and the gift of the Spirit, involves us in a dynamism of communion and mission that moves us from the “I” to the “we” and places us at the service of the world. (Synthesis Report, 2.a)

To the Synod on Synodality
Dear Sisters, Dear Brothers,

We received with great joy and anticipation your Synthesis Report.

As a community of mission leaders engaged in networking, formation, and advocacy for God’s mission here in the United States of America, we did a close read “of the main elements” that emerged in the dialogue, prayer, and discussion that characterized your Assembly (October 2023) in the hope that we, too, “united in the one Spirit,” could continue with you.

Over the course of six weeks (January 25 – February 29, 2024), members of our association read the Synthesis Report and gathered weekly for a conversation in the Spirit focused on how you understood “mission,” and its variants. It is our hope that our affirmations, concerns, and proposals will convey to you what the Spirit has moved within us and will contribute to, in some small way, your ongoing dialogue, prayer, and discernment about what a “synodal church in mission” looks like in our wonderful and wounded world.

Our response begins with the primacy of mission, addresses the three parts of the Synthesis Report, and offers a conclusion.

The Primacy of Mission - “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

We believe, as you do, that we are gathered and sent by the Trinity that “involves us in a dynamism of communion and mission.” (2.a), that the “Church ‘is’ mission.” (8.a), that the purpose of synodality is mission (18.a), and that “co-responsibility of all in mission must be the criterion underlying the structuring of Christian communities and the entire local church with all its services, in all its institutions, in each of its pastoral bodies” (18.b).

We believe the Assembly’s emphasis on mission, as the impetus of the Father, the purpose of the Son, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and the essential nature of the Church, is primary.

We are concerned that the voices of missionaries – from all over the world and especially from the global south where the Church is growing – have not been heard. These women and men exhaust their days caring for “the least of these.” How can a synodal church engage and include them without hindering their mission?

We are concerned about the generalization of mission. Again, we believe that mission is the essential nature of the Church and is the purpose of synodality. At the same time, mission itself is expressed

in the blood, sweat, and tears of missionaries who leave the comfort of their home to dwell among a people, for their well-being, in their reality, with only their faith in God to animate their activities.

We are concerned about the ambiguity that emerges with the use of “mission.” Some forms of evangelization – efforts to boldly proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and engage in much needed apologetics – reduces mission to one or two of its many expressions. Saint John Paul II described mission as “a single but complex reality, and it develops in a variety of ways.” (Redemptoris Missio, 41) The complexity, the beauty, the “variety of ways,” – from the streets of Kolkata to the hills of Appalachia, to the mountains of Rwanda and Haiti – needs to be recognized and celebrated. The witness of missionaries may add some color, texture, and even poetry to the word “mission” making it less abstract and more tangible.

We are concerned about commitment. While we rejoice in the reports that describe the October Assembly as an authentic and transformative experience of synodality, we have been disappointed in the past. A fresh vision or new pastoral strategy is put forward by Church leaders who lacked the personal commitment, and often the personal conversion, required for deep and lasting change.

Part I – The Face of the Synodal Church

We believe, as you do, that our identity begins as a people, flowing from our shared dignity in baptism, so we all share responsibility for the common mission of evangelization in differentiated ways (1.a), that there is a need for theological deepening (1.p), that synodality itself is a way of doing mission (1.l), that synodality can renew forms of prayer, discernment, and missionary energy (2.c), that every vocation is ordered to mission (3.d), that confirmation can be a time to awaken the call to mission (3.1), that mission embodies the preferential option for the poor (4.b), that mission involves dialogue between religions and culture (5.c), in the sacrifice of missionaries as well as the sins associated with mission (5.e), that there is a tension among different understandings of evangelization (5.1), and the opportunities 2025 provides for conversation between among the Eastern and Western Churches (7.k, 7.l).

We are concerned that the “theological deepening” (1.p) may not include missiologists and the centrality of dwelling among a people for the well-being of the people, in their context, for their integral human development. We propose the involvement of missiologists, with at least five years of cross-cultural experience, in the hope that they will help the Assembly manage the tension among different understandings of evangelization (5.i), ground “mission” in compassion for human suffering, and clarify the relationship between charisms and ministries in a missionary key (8.i).

We are concerned specifically about the U.S. Church and how it will embrace the missionary Church within its midst and embody a “synodal perspective” to animate “a missionary energy” (2.c) We propose a U.S. Synod on Mission preceded by diocesan gatherings that bring missionaries, pastors, bishops, and others together for Conversations in the Spirit about what mission looks like locally and what peoples the Holy Spirit is calling the local Church to embrace through mission.

We are concerned about the explicit connection between Eucharist and mission. We propose a few edits to underscore this connection; “from the Eucharist and is celebrated in it, configures and directs the paths of synodality and mission” (3.e) for example.

We are concerned about the “Eucharistic famine” that many mission areas suffer around the world, especially in the global south that has witnessed a tremendous growth within the Church. We propose that the theologians in service to the Assembly (1.p) take up this essential need and frame a question for conversation among the Assembly in October 2024.

We share the concern for ecumenism and endorse your proposal for “an ecumenical Synod on common mission in the contemporary world” (7.n).

Part II – All Disciples, All Missionaries

We believe, as you do, that mission is primary (see above), that we need to recognize the apostolic capacities of persons with disabilities (8.k), that women are often the “first missionaries” (9.d), the vitality those called to religious profession gives to a synodal Church (10.b) the need for “missionary synodality” (10.i), the need to weave mission *ad gentes* into the formation of deacons and priests (11.b), and the critical “mission of the bishop” (12.e), especially the Bishop of Rome (13.a).

We are concerned about the dignity of the diaconate as a “differentiated co-responsibility” in service to mission (1.a, 9.n, 11.h, 11.i). We propose reclaiming the diaconate in its own right and open to all the baptized, so “the orders” of the Church begin in, and serve, mission.

Part III – Weaving Bonds, Building Communities

We believe, as you do, on the importance of formation (14.a) for a synodal church in mission, that we need to “think together in the service of mission” (15.i), that listening is required for mission (16.b) essential for healing (16.f), and a prerequisite for “walking together” (16.h), that the “digital culture represents a fundamental change” (17.a), that the structures of participation must be based on the “co-responsibility of all in mission” (18.b), in the interdependence of the Church and the need for structures to facilitate the exchange of “spiritual riches, missionary discipleship, and material goods” (19.a), and the need for personal conversion to animate a “new culture of synodality” (20.c).

We are concerned that, to be present in the digital culture, we might abandon person to person, face to face, encounter. We propose a concerted effort, in the formation of digital missionaries as well as “ordinary” missionaries, some type of “cross training” so they harmonize their gifts, strengths, and responsibilities in service to the Church in mission.

We are concerned about the structures of participation and the personal conversion needed to create a new culture of synodality. Pope Francis, in his 2024 World Mission Day Message, wrote:

The mission for all requires the commitment of all. We need to continue our journey towards a fully synodal and missionary Church in the service of the Gospel. Synodality is essentially missionary and, vice versa, mission is always synodal. Consequently, close missionary cooperation is today all the more urgent and necessary, both in the universal Church and in the particular Churches. (3.3)

We repeat our proposal for a U.S. Synod on Mission and our support for a global ecumenical synod on mission. We commend the parish twinning model of mission as an excellent way for the faithful, especially the laity, deacons, and diocesan priests, can experience the universal, and interdependent, nature of the Church. These twinning relationships facilitate the exchange of “spiritual riches, missionary discipleship, and material goods.”

Conclusion

Spirit of the Living God is a popular spiritual in the United States of America inspired by the evangelical movement in the 1920's. Its haunting power lies in simplicity of its message – Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me. Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me. Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me.

We believe that the Spirit is the animating force for the Church and the protagonist of mission. We believe the Spirit called the Church to Synod and awakened its synodal nature in service to a deeply wounded and divided humanity. We confess our weakness and sinfulness and rely on the tender mercies of the Spirit to be our guide, our source of unity, and our promise of truth.

Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful, and kindle in us the fire of your love. Melt us, mold us, fill us, and use us. May we, your missionary disciples, be “the seed sown” (Matthew 13:19), the servants who invite everyone (1 Tim 2:4) to the banquet of the Lord (Matthew 22:9), making disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19), and relishing the companionship of our Lord Jesus “until the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:20).

Approved
USCMA Board of Directors
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