

Opening Prayer Service for the Parish Phase of the Diocesan Synod

First Reading (Philippians 1:3-11)

A reading from the Letter of St. Paul to the Philippians:

I give thanks to my God at every remembrance of you,
praying always with joy in my every prayer for all of you,
because of your partnership for the gospel from the first day until now.
I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you
will continue to complete it until the day of Christ Jesus.

It is right that I should think this way about all of you,

because I hold you in my heart,

you who are all partners with me in grace,

both in my imprisonment and in the defense

and confirmation of the gospel.

For God is my witness, how I long for all of you

with the affection of Christ Jesus.

And this is my prayer: that your love may increase ever more and more
in knowledge and every kind of perception,

to discern what is of value,

so that you may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ,

filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ
for the glory and praise of God.

The Word of the Lord.

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Responsorial Psalm (Psalm 40:8-11)

R. Here I am, Lord; I come to do your will.

R. Here I am, Lord; I come to do your will.

I delight to do your will, my God;
your law is in my inner being!"

R. Here I am, Lord; I come to do your will.

When I sing of your righteousness
in a great assembly,
See, I do not restrain my lips;
as you, Lord, know.

R. Here I am, Lord; I come to do your will.

I do not conceal your righteousness
within my heart;
I speak of your loyalty and your salvation.
I do not hide your mercy or faithfulness
from a great assembly.

R. Here I am, Lord; I come to do your will.

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Gospel (Matthew 9:35-38, 10:1, 5-8)

A reading from the holy gospel according to Matthew:

Jesus went around to all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and curing every disease and illness. At the sight of the crowds, his heart was moved with pity for them because they were troubled and abandoned, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is abundant but the laborers are few; so ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers for his harvest.”

Then he summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits to drive them out and to cure every disease and every illness.

Jesus sent out these twelve after instructing them thus, “Do not go into pagan territory or enter a Samaritan town. Go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, make this proclamation: ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, drive out demons. Without cost you have received; without cost you are to give.

The Gospel of the Lord.

Opening Prayer Service for the Parish Phase of the Diocesan Synod

Order of liturgy:

Introductory remarks

Opening Prayer

First Reading (Philippians 1:3-11)

Responsory (Psalm 40:8-11)

Gospel (Matthew 9:35-38, 10:1, 5-8)

Homily

Distribution of reflection booklets

Explanation of how to use the booklets

Invite everyone to do three things during Exposition:

1. Meditate on the Synod Prayer.
2. Ponder what a vibrant, mission-oriented community of faith at St. Bavo would look like.
3. Consider how they could contribute to such a community.

Exposition of Blessed Sacrament for 30 minutes

Benediction and reposition of the Blessed Sacrament

Recite the Synod Prayer together as the Closing Prayer

Invite those who have not signed up for a discussion group to do so in the vestibule.

Introductory remarks

My brothers and sisters, we have been praying for the success of the Diocesan Synod at every Sunday Mass since late October. As I have led that prayer week after week, I've noticed a change in myself and my attitude toward the Synod. The text of the prayer, which struck me as somewhat awkward at first, has begun to speak to my heart. I hope that, after tonight, it will speak to your heart, as well.

Back in late October, I invited all our parishioners to come to an information session, to learn about the synod process, especially the parish phase, which begins tonight. Those who came to that session certainly found it edifying, but it was only a small taste of what we will experience together over the next few weeks. This evening, as we gather in this sacred space, where we are accustomed to encountering God in the sacraments and in our St. Bavo community, we pray that the Holy Spirit may guide both our personal reflections and our later communal discussions, so that we may discern how we can contribute more fully to the mission of Christ and his Church.

Opening Prayer

Heavenly Father,
you have called us to follow your Son
and to be images of Christ for others.
You have also called us to be members of his Body
through our participation in the Church.
Through this parish phase of the Synod, which we begin tonight,
help us and all our brothers and sisters at St. Bavo's to discern
how we can better carry out the mission of Christ,
as individuals and as a parish community.
Open our eyes to the needs and the possibilities before us,
that we may be faithful and effective servants.
We ask this through Christ, our Lord.

Homily

St. Paul was very pleased with the Philippians. They were probably his favorite community, among the many Christian churches that he founded. Paul was very proud of them, yet he wanted them to keep striving to be better disciples of Jesus every day, and never to grow complacent. It's in that spirit that Bishop Rhoades called for this Diocesan Synod, on the 100th anniversary of the last one. His message to all the faithful of the Diocese is not that the Church is falling apart and we have to save it from destruction. On the contrary, his message is that many good things are happening in our Church, but we can always do better, especially if we discern together where to direct our energies and how to use our gifts and our resources effectively. That's what this Synod is about — *discerning together* where to direct our energies and how to use our gifts and our resources effectively. We will do that at the parish level first, and then at the diocesan level. So, this process is very much from the ground up, not from the top down. We first pray and discern and dialogue about how we can be a more vibrant parish community here at St. Bavo. All the other parishes will do likewise. Then, the delegates from all the parishes will bring the insights that they have gleaned from their parish consultations when they meet in November for the Synod itself, with Bishop Rhoades.

All of us need to approach this synod process with a servant's mentality: "Here I am, Lord; I come to do your will." Frankly, that's how we should approach parish life, in general. We should not ask, "How can my parish serve me?" but rather, "How can I serve the people of my parish?" And we should presume that we will be called upon to share our faith with others in various ways, both within the safety of the worshipping community and outside of it. As the Psalmist said so passionately: "I do not conceal your righteousness within my heart; I speak of your loyalty and your salvation. I do not hide your mercy or faithfulness from a great assembly." Nor should we hide the righteousness, the mercy, or the faithfulness that we have experienced in our God. We should summon the courage to speak freely

about that which matters most to us, and to share the wonders that God has done for us.

When Jesus sent out the Twelve to preach and to heal in his name, he gave them a share of his own power. It was the grace of Christ working in them and through them which would accomplish so many miracles. That is still true of us today. Christ works through the Church to touch the hearts and minds of his people, to strengthen them in holiness and to bring them to salvation. And he works through all of us. It's not just the sacraments and the ordained ministers that function as conduits of that grace; it's all the faithful of the Church. It is the responsibility of every baptized Christian to make Christ present and visible in the world. We cannot simply be passive recipients of grace; we must be active dispensers of grace, as well. As Jesus told his disciples: "Without cost you have received; without cost you are to give."

In this synod process, all the faithful are called upon to reflect on how grace is moving in our Church, how we are cooperating with that grace, and how we can do a better job of bringing that grace to areas where it seems to be lacking. In other words, we will try to discern our strengths and weaknesses as a parish community and as a diocese; we will look at ourselves honestly to assess what we are doing or not doing to make things better; and we will ask how we can work together to carry out the mission of Christ even better in the future.

Obviously, for this process to succeed, we will need widespread participation from the faithful. We need their insights, their ideas, and their energy. And we need to listen to each other and to the Holy Spirit. The synod process is designed to help us do that, but we must all encourage our brothers and sisters of the parish to join us in this effort. I am very grateful to all of you who are here tonight. I know that I can count on your participation. But I also need you to encourage others who are not so motivated. Over the next several weeks, we're going to be using our reflection booklets, which I'll share with you in a moment, in preparation for our small group consultations in the second week of March. Each week, I'll

be writing a meditation for our bulletin on one of the synod themes, and I'll be inviting people to sign up for one of the small groups. I need all of you to reinforce that message. Don't just do the reflection on your own. Ask your friends and neighbors if they are doing the reflections at home. Share your insights with each other in one-on-one conversations. Make sure that everyone signs up for one of the small groups. Make it clear to all that you see this as a golden opportunity for us to strengthen our Church and our parish life, and invite them to seize the opportunity with you.

[Distribute reflection booklets.]

How to Use the Reflection Booklet

Four parts for each theme:

1. Scripture and Tradition
2. Reflect: [Topic] in Our Parish
3. Pray and Discern: [Topic] in My Life
4. Blank space for Notes

As you use the reflection booklets each week, I anticipate that most of you will have a predictable series of responses.

1. First, the Scripture and Tradition section will elicit an *intellectual* response. You will ponder the meaning and significance of the topic for that week, at a *theoretical* level.
2. Then, the series of questions about parish life will bring you down to a more *practical* level. These questions will prompt you to do some critical thinking about what is happening and what is not happening in our parish. They might also prompt you to *investigate* what is happening or not happening, if you find yourself answering repeatedly, "I don't know." As you reflect on our parish life together, you might experience some sadness, disappointment or frustration because of the deficiencies that you see. That's a good thing. In order to grow as a parish community, we must see our shortcomings clearly and acknowledge them honestly. However, the point of this exercise is not

to sit in judgment and point fingers at others; it's to seek solutions and find ways to improve. That requires everyone's participation. Hence, the next set of questions challenges you to look at yourself.

3. This final phase of your weekly reflection essentially invites you to explore what *you* are doing or not doing to contribute to the Church's mission in that particular area. You might find yourself confronted with the hard truth that *you* need to do more, *you* need to care more, *you* need to offer yourself more generously. And, once again, the goal here is not to beat yourself up, but to seek ways that you can contribute to a more vibrant and mission-oriented parish life.
4. Finally, after you have done all of this self-reflection, you should take some time to write down notes for yourself. These are not for anyone else to see, but only to jog your memory later.

This is the process that you will follow each of the next five weeks, as we ponder the key Synod themes. Then there is one final week of reflection with the three summary questions at the end of the booklet.

1. The first question asks, "What are the *most pressing needs* of our parish (or our diocese) at this time?" This is where your notes will really come in handy. You will review the deficiencies that you identified earlier and *prioritize* them. What are the most glaring weaknesses which require attention? Where should we focus our attention and our energy?
2. The second question asks, "Where is our parish (or our diocese) *excelling* right now?" It's important to identify our *strengths*, as well as our weaknesses. Looking at what we do well already might give us some insights into how we can address the problems that we have identified.
3. Finally, the third question asks, "Where does our parish (or our diocese) need to *grow* right now?" The answer to this question depends on the first two, because it's all about our *potential for growth*. Where do we see possibilities to bring our gifts to bear on an area that needs attention? The practical solutions that we come up with in response to this question are really where the whole Synod process is ultimately

heading, but all of us have to go through the other steps to arrive at that positive result.

Be sure to record your responses to all three questions, for later reference and sharing with others. You can consider the fourth question — about ecumenical and interfaith relationships and activities — if you wish, but that question will not be included in our parish consultations.

After these six weeks of prayerful reflection, we will finally gather for our parish consultations in small groups. We have sign-up sheets in the main vestibule for those of you who have not signed up for a time yet. I gave a brief description of the consultation process in the bulletin back in October, and I explained it in detail at the information session on November 5. You can check our parish website for all the details, if you wish. For those of you who missed both of those opportunities, let me just say that it is a process of *group discernment*, which involves more listening than speaking. You will discuss the three summary questions from the booklet, which you already pondered on your own, and you will listen attentively to what others have to say and where the Holy Spirit seems to be guiding your discussion.

In a moment, I'm going to expose the Blessed Sacrament on the altar, for 30 minutes of adoration. During that quiet time in the presence of the Lord, I invite everyone to do three things:

1. Meditate on the Synod Prayer.
2. Imagine what a more vibrant, mission-oriented community of faith at St. Bavo might look like.
3. Consider how *you* can contribute to such a community.