

## SYNOD 2007

In 1968 one of the great scholars and pastors of the Christian faith died. Karl Barth, was once described by Pope Pius XII as the most important theologian since Thomas Aquinas. Barth has wholeheartedly welcomed Vat 2. He once famously said that each day the Christian should read the newspaper and the Bible (cf. *Tablet*, 30 Sept. 2000:1317). In the newspaper (today TV, media) we read, we're told about the great movements of social, political and cultural change; about the truly amazing human achievements of the technological age; and also, sadly, about the too many situations of violence, war, crime, abuse, disease, poverty and human suffering. Yet, this is the real world in which we live out our Christian calling in solidarity with all people.

Vat 2 reminded us of this when it stated, "The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the people of our own time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well" (GSp1). In the Bible, in God's word, and in the Church's teaching based on that word, we search for meaning, guidance and strength in facing the difficulties and challenges confronting us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Barth, of course, had in mind the words of Jesus himself, when on several occasions (cf. Mt 16:4; Lk 13:56) he spoke about the need to read the "signs of the times", i.e., to discern in the events, the circumstances and the people of our times what God is saying to us.

Addressing the opening session of Vat 2 in October 1962, Pope John 23 spoke of the need for the Church to be continually engaged in reading the signs of the times if it (Church) is to remain faithful to its calling and mission. The substance of the truths of salvation, Pope John said, remains the same: the manner in which we present them, speak about them, can change and does change. Fr Albert Nolan in *Jesus Today*, speaking about the Gospel imperative to read the signs of the times, says, "what matters is that we *allow* God to challenge us through our reading of the signs" (2006:1).

The Catholic Church at Vat 2, we believe, allowed itself to be challenged. In turn, each local church (diocese) has been challenged to engage in a prayerful reading of the signs of the times as a means of spiritual and pastoral renewal. In this apostolic letter, *At the beginning of the new millennium*, in January 2001, Pope John Paul 2 wrote that the Church is now on a new stage of its journey. "Now is the time", he said, "for each local church to access its fervour and find fresh enthusiasm for its spiritual and pastoral responsibilities, by reflecting on what the Spirit has been saying to the people of God" (NMI3). The Pope went on to speak about the need for each local church to draw up an effective pastoral plan to implement these objectives (NMI 15).

Here in Cape Town, we formally began that assessment of our fervour and that search for fresh enthusiasm early in 2005. Since then, by means of consultation, discussion and listening, we have engaged in what we have called a ‘conversation’ at all levels throughout the Archdiocese, a ‘conversation’ between friends (homileo, Greek, disciples on way to Emmaus, Lk 24:14), friends on a journey of faith, listening to one another, and prayerfully listening together to the Spirit. We began to reflect on what the Spirit is saying to the People of God in the Archdiocese of Cape Town.

A diocesan **Synod**, therefore, is described as the local church listening together to the Holy Spirit. The primary **purpose** in holding a synod is to provide a **vision**, of the Church and a **pastoral plan**, aimed at the renewal of the Church in Cape Town in the light of the Gospel, the teachings of the Church, and attentive to the signs of the times.

In order to be faithful to the teachings of Vat 2 and of the Church since then, we chose **communion** as the central theme. Through baptism we are given a share in the communion of life of the Blessed Trinity itself. As Church, our **primary mission is to be** a communion of brother and sisters, to be a “sacrament”, a sign (although imperfectly) of the perfect communion of persons within the Trinity; to generously share our lives, our faith hope and love, and to bring that spirit of communion to the people and the world we serve. In 2001 the late Pope John Pope 2 declared that “the great challenge facing the Church the home and school of communion “(NMI 43). During this Synod, we will discuss and reflect upon the major concerns identified in our Archdiocesan ‘conversation’ Through, as it were, the **prism** of Church, understood as communion.

This is the **first** synod being held in the Archdiocese: it simply cannot be the last. The 1998 Roman *Instruction on Synod* (part 3) allows for the holding of further synods at intervals to be determined by the bishop (e.g. Durban). Hopefully, we can learn from and, in the years to come, build upon this first synodal experience. In between, of course, resolutions accepted followed up and implemented. The holding of a diocesan Synod, is therefore, not meant to be a “one-off” experience: it is a listening and a ‘conversation’ that must continue. The gradual growth in what Pope John Paul 2 called “a spirituality of communion” (NMI 43) demands that our ‘conversation’ as local Church continues. In fact, it can be rightly said, that our ongoing ‘conversation’ as sisters and brothers of this local church, is demanded by the reality of the communion we already share: it is essential to the “new” way of being Church. Fr Timothy Radcliffe in *What’s the point of being a Christian* says that “human unity is founded on our ability to talk to each other. Language is the breakthrough into a new sort of communion” (2005:158).

May we continue during the coming years to walk together on our journey, conversing with one another, knowing in faith that the Lord walks with us, that it is he, through his Spirit, who will make our hearts burn within, as he opens the scriptures and breaks bread for us.

The poet, William Butler Yeats, once wrote: “But I being poor, have only my dreams. I have spread my dreams under your feet. Tread softly, because you tread on my dreams”.

Today, I would like to spread my dreams under your feet. I believe, in fact, that they are the dreams the Lord wants all of us, young and old, alike to have:

**I have a dream ...** for our Catholic Church, with over 1 billion members throughout the world.

**I have a dream ...** for our Church in South Africa, a community serving throughout the world.

**I have a dream ...**for our local Church in Cape Town

**I have a dream ...** for this Synod assembly meeting over the coming 3 days.

**And my dream is ...** that having accepted the Lord’s invitation to gather here, that during these days we will experience the reality of the communion we share; that we will pray together, listening deeply to the Spirit and to one another; that we will come here (as Enda McDonagh says) dressed in our baptismal robe (*Vulnerable to the Holy*, 2004:30), the symbol of our fundamental dignity as sons and daughters of the Father, brothers and sisters of Jesus, leaving aside “status and privileges”, and in a genuine spirit of communion, allow the Risen Lord to breath his Spirit of love and unity on us, as he once did on his friends in the Upper Room, so that we become witnesses of his Spirit on communion to the people of our diocese, and to all the people of our country, South Africa.

**Dear sisters and brothers, I have spread these dreams under your feet. Please tread softly because you tread, I believe, on the dreams of the people of the Archdiocese.**

Fr Sean Cahill OFMCap  
Sunday 23 September 2007