

## **“One listening to the others; and all listening to the Holy Spirit.”**

These were words from the Vatican news website announcing that Pope Francis will open a three-year synodal journey, beginning in dioceses throughout the world on October 25, 2021, and culminating in the Synod of Bishops in October 2023 in Rome. The word “synod” originates from the Greek word *sunodos* – *sun* means “together” and *hodos* means “way or road”. In essence it means “common road”. Hence, you will often hear the expressions “synodal process” or “ecclesial (church) journey”. In a word, it is not a one-time event, but an ongoing ecclesial journey.

What does the Church do on a journey? Addressing members of the International Theological Commission in 2019, Pope Francis said that, “Today some think synodality is holding hands and going for a walk, having a party with young people or surveying opinions (like), ‘What do you think about women priests?’ Rather, it’s a process of process that involves the whole church and focuses on listening to one another and to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.”

If listening is essential to this synodal journey “so that the wisdom of the people of God will come forth” (Pope Francis), then the process must value and accommodate the people’s art of storytelling. As George Wilson writes, “The first thing a synod needs to ask of its participants. . . is not to ask, “what do you think about abc?” But . . . “Tell me your story.” To ask about “*abc*” is to assume at the outset that *abc* is the issue people need or want to discuss when, in fact, deeper realities may be at stake” (*Stage One of the Synod: Listening to the Faithful*, La Croix Internationale, June 16, 2021). A story is defined as an account of past event(s) in someone’s or a community’s life or in the development of something. With this definition, we can say that every person, community, family, nation or region has stories to tell. We have stories to tell because each person is a social being with the capacity for self-awareness. As social beings we are rooted in a particular culture and historical milieu, and we shape and influence our basic activities and orientation to the world (John Macquarrie, *Existentialism*). It is in the shaping and influencing of our world that stories are created. For example, the peoples of the Caribbean have stories arising from the shaping of their historical experience during slavery, indentureship, emancipation, colonialism and independence. Regrettably, however, the history of the Caribbean demonstrates that dominant cultures have the tendency or the mission to suppress, misrepresent or misinterpret the stories of weak civilizations.

What is the purpose of storytelling? Storytelling reflects on the past, provides wisdom lessons for the present, and carves out a road to the future for communities of persons. Second, storytelling reinforces and celebrates a person’s or community’s identity. Third, it builds unity around a set of common values, because storytelling is a vehicle for transmitting values. Fourth, it breathes confidence and courage in communities towards action. Aware of the power of storytelling, slave masters in Caribbean history prohibited, by law, the gathering of slaves, the use of their language and religious practices, and the use of drums – all means of storytelling towards the liberative act of emancipation.

If synodal journey involves attentive listening to each other and to the Holy Spirit, then the Church has a responsibility to create a safe, welcoming and inclusive space. Creating this safe space consists of asking, not questions garbed in ulterior motives, but open-ended questions. The Risen Christ, in his approach to the two disciples on the Emmaus Road (Luke 24:13-35), gives an example of initiating a safe space. He asked them a non-threatening, open-ended and non-conceptual question, “What are you talking about as you walk along?” The question of the Risen Christ inspired freedom in the disciples to tell their story about the Jesus of Nazareth who was considered a prophet, his death by crucifixion, their hopes for the liberation of Israel, his missing body and the empty tomb.

What is the story of the Caribbean people? We have emerged from a hybrid culture with global cultural and religious roots. There is a full reservoir of stories that speaks implicitly and explicitly of God’s journey with us. These stories have been captured in many genres by poets, artists, musicians, storytellers and literary writers. I believe that the synod is an opportune moment for the Caribbean Church to encourage people to tell their stories using the native language and the literary forms of the people, and discern God’s “Right Hand Writing in our Land.” For this synodal process to be enriching for both the regional and universal Church, a welcoming space must be established to welcome and listen to the people’s story.