CONVERSATIONS BY THE WELL: A LESSON ON SYNODALITY

Aldo Miguel Constantino M. Bonifacio

The Synodal Path of Healing

Weeks before the opening of the Synod, Pope Francis addresses the diocese of Rome with a quote from Gustav Mahler, "Fidelity to tradition does not consist in worshiping ashes but in keeping a fire burning."[1] He then asks, "What are you more inclined to do: guard the ashes of the Church, in other words, your association or group, or keep the fire burning?"[2]

The Pope paints a haunting image — *ashes of the Church* — to address traditionalism. This shackle prevents the Church from continuing the pilgrim nature of the apostolic tradition and turns her into "a lovely pious association [that] keeps the Holy Spirit in a cage."[3] This image, it would seem, is also meant to illustrate other restraints that bind the Church: rigidity that restricts God's *makrothymìa* (his patient, profound, broad, and farsighted way of seeing things)[4] and sovereignty, detachment from the marginalized, complacency and clericalism, as well as other manacles gripping the ordained community. These statements make it very clear that the Church is in crisis, and she is in need of much healing.[5]

[1]Francis, *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Faithful of the Diocese of Rome*, Speeches, 18 September 2021, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2021/september/documents/20210918-fedeli-diocesiroma.html.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Ibid.

[5]Ibid.

The healing agenda of the Synod on Synodality is as overt and captivating as the Pope's daring use of language. Regardless of how one may react to such explicit declarations, what is clear is that it consistently demands one's full attention to the many wounds plaguing humanity: the COVID-19 pandemic, the conditions of immigrants and persecuted Christians, the blight of inequality and the polarization of beliefs, environmental threats, climate change, and the pervasive reality of poverty and radical ideologies.[6] Now, this is not at all out of the ordinary as the Church has, in her history, remained a steady source of morality and spirituality, albeit imperfect and thoroughly subject to the cosmic rules of history (such as the painful gift of hindsight.) What signals a change, or a movement, is how it constantly asserts new perspectives on the synod's purpose, "to plant dreams, draw forth prophecies and visions, allow hope to flourish, inspire trust, bind up wounds, weave together relationships, awaken a dawn of hope, learn from one another and create a bright resourcefulness that will enlighten minds, warm hearts, [and] give strength to our hands."[7]

The Official Handbook of the Synod for Listening and Discernment in Local Churches expresses this change more clearly:

> One of the fruits of the Second Vatican Council was the institution of the Synod of Bishops. While the Synod of Bishops has taken place up until now as a gathering of bishops with and under the authority of the Pope, the Church increasingly realizes that synodality is the path

[6]Synod on Synodality, *Preparatory Document*, 7 September 2021, https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/preparatory-document/pdf-21x21/en_prepa_book.pdf, no. 5-8.

[7]Francis, *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis at the Opening of the Synod of Bishops on Young People*, Speeches, 3 October 2018, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2018/october/documents/papa-francesco_20181003_apertura-sinodo.html.

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> for the entire People of God. Hence, the Synodal Process is no longer only an assembly of bishops but a journey for all the faithful, in which every local Church has an integral part to play.[8]

For any student of Catholic Church history, this signals a departure from the Church's prior hierarchical emphasis on papal authority (Ultramontanism).[9] It is also a turn away from previous expectations set upon the laity wherein their functions within the Church are aptly contained in the denigrating aphorism—pay, pray, and obey. What has been known as Vatican II's landmark teaching on having a more porous ecumenical approach[10] seems to have taken an even more open, inclusive, and accessible form.

In its declaration that every single member of the Church, both lay and ordained, is now part of the Synodal process, it strongly affirms and enacts the Second Vatican Council's teaching that "all the baptized, both the hierarchy and the laity, are called to be active participants in the saving mission of the Church (LG, 32-33)."[11] It also extends its call for participation not only amongst Catholics who are active in their local parishes, organizations, or other Catholic communities but also to those who are often at risk of being excluded (women,

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[8]Synod on Synodality, *Vademecum For the Synod on Synodality*, 7 September 2021, https://www.synod.va/en/news/the-vademecum-for-the-synod-on-synodality.html, no. 1.3.

[9]The *New Dictionary of Theology* defines ultramontanism as follows: "describes the theological movement which placed a strong emphasis on the authority of the papacy in matters of doctrine and ecclesiastical government." Cf. Frederick J. Cwiekowski, "Ultramontanism," *The New Dictionary of Theology*, 2014 ed., eds. Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins and Dermot A. Lane (Bangalore, India: Theological Publications India, 2014), 1064-1065.

[10]Joaquin Yap, "The Ecclesiology of Vatican II" (Lecture Notes, Quezon City, 2019), 4.

[11]Synod on Synodality, *Vademecum on Synodality*, 1.3.

the handicapped, refugees, migrants, the elderly, people who live in poverty) including individuals who rarely practice their faith, and those who no longer do,[12] commonly known as the disaffiliated.[13]

Suppose these statements are not enough to convince us that the papacy has left the pulpit and that the Church no longer hides behind a veil of innocence or speaks from a dais of perfection. In that case, then a solemn display of her deepest wounds may convince us otherwise:

> However, we cannot hide from the fact that the Church herself must face the lack of faith and the corruption even within herself. In particular, we cannot forget the suffering experienced by minors and vulnerable people "due to sexual abuse, the abuse of power and the abuse of conscience perpetrated by a significant number of clerics and consecrated persons." We are continually challenged "as the People of God to take on the pain of our brothers and sisters wounded in their flesh and in their spirit." For too long, the cry of the victims has been a cry that the Church has not been able to hear sufficiently. These are deep wounds that are difficult to heal, for which forgiveness can never be asked for enough, and which constitute obstacles, sometimes imposing ones, to advancing in the direction of "journeying together."[14]

What is most astonishing about these assertions is that the Church no longer excludes herself as an object of concern. She does instead, quite dramatically, claim her weaknesses, wounds, and sins, addressing her own distance and, I daresay,

[12]Ibid., 2.1.

[13]Robert J. McCarty and John M. Vitek, *Going, Going, Gone: The Dynamics of Disaffiliation in Young Catholics, a study by Saint Mary's Press in collaboration with the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate* (Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 2017), 5.

[14]Synod on Synodality, *Preparatory Document*, 6.

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her own disaffiliation.[15] In more ways than one, when the documents ask us to "allow people to express themselves, to walk in faith even though they have had difficulties in life, and to be part of the community's life without being hindered, rejected or judged,"[16] the Church it would seem, is also speaking of herself. She is asking us to dialogue away from bejeweled rostrums, pleading for our sympathy, for the gavel to be held with the tender hand of empathy and compassion instead of the callousness of indifference.[17] One could even say she places herself front and center, ready to receive our confrontations, and at the same time, she is also at the very end of the line, stooped, bloody, and bowed in hopeful anticipation for any consolation that comes her way.

The Church's bravery, of course, has not been free of controversy and has met strong opposition, concerns that this paper will not tackle. Instead, it chooses to assent and listen to her wisdom with meekness and joy. In other words, we will approach her painful disclosure with an open heart and mind.

This leads us to formulate two principles that we believe are necessary for synodality: [1] only when we understand the nature of our unbelonging can we truly discover the nature of our belonging; [2] and that meeting the other where they are goes both ways. But first, we must remove from ourselves any notion that what we are proposing is easy. It most certainly is

[15]This insight, which serves as a key element for this paper, was inspired by Markus Locker when he asked (during the initial defense panel) whether the Church needed to admit her own shortcomings for healing to transpire. Aside from providing the inspiration, he also supplied the needed courage to tackle it in this paper.

[16]Francis, *Homily of His Holiness Pope Francis during the Opening of the Synodal Path*, Homilies, 10 October 2021, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2021/documents/20211010-omelia-sinodo-vescovi.html.

[17]The emphasis on empathy and compassion throughout this paper was inspired by Ted Gonzales SJ.

not. The synodal journey requires modesty and grit. It is not a journey for the faint of heart, nor is it for hardened ones. At least on paper, the Church, led by the Pope, seems prepared for the journey ahead. Her shoes, worn. Her cloak, torn (Acts 12:8). Her spirit, ever ready and ever strong (Mt 26:41). She is ready for the synodal path, a path paved with the blood, sweat, tears, and spirit of the lamb that is meant for all of us: the ordained and the laity, the learned and the unwise, the hungry, the satisfied, the healthy and the addict, the poor, the well-kept, the recognized, and the discarded.

"W*e are the Church, all of us together,*"[18] cries the heir of Peter as the cock crows.

We shall begin exploring these paradoxes by engaging two brave characters who, we may say, teach us synodality's quintessence. Let us join Jesus and the Samaritan Woman in their conversation by the well.

Jesus and the Woman from Samaria

In his commentary, Francis Moloney divides the story of Jesus and the Samaritan Woman into two sections. The first (4:1-15) consists of the general introduction and setting of the encounter and the initial discussion between Jesus and the Samaritan woman on water. The following section (4:16-30) focuses on the question of the person of Jesus and proper worship.[19] For our reading, we will also divide it into two sections, but we will skip the general introduction and setting:

> [7]A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." [8](His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) [9] The Samaritan woman said to him,

[18]Francis, *Address to the Faithful of the Diocese of Rome* (18 Sept. 2021).

[19]Francis J. Moloney, "The Gospel of John," *Sacra Pagina*, vol.4, ed. Daniel J. Harrington (Collegeville, MN: 1998), 114-136.

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> "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) (John 4:7-9 NRSV)

The story begins by showing us that the Samaritan woman is fully aware of the genuine distance between her (a Samaritan and a woman) and Jesus (a man and a Jew.) In that distant time, we can say neither of these characters belonged in the transpiring scene. The absurdity of it all was not only recognized by the author, who felt the need to clarify for the reader, but also by the disciples at the story's conclusion when they arrive astonished, left to wonder what the woman wanted or why Jesus was speaking with her (v. 27).[20]

What we are trying to point out here, concerning our assertion, is that in this scene, the Samaritan woman was possibly experiencing a state of unbelonging, which her response elucidated well. As identified by Father Moloney, her words had a nuance of mockery (v. 9a).[21] This is the only time Jesus is called an *Ioudaios* in the Fourth Gospel, and from the Samaritan perspective, the woman threw him a righteous insult—*pōs su Ioudaios*.[22] This is a critical insight in our reflection. Her response to this situation of unbelonging is one of shock and aggression, which we may say may have also been filled with fear and anger. Both characters were already fully aware of the unbelonging taking place, but she still felt the need to emphasize the scene's preposterousness — *you; a Jew; of me; a woman; of Samaria*?

The important part here is that the Samaritan woman engaged. She could have just ignored Jesus, left, and come back another time. If she did, then not only would we have missed out

[20]Ibid, 116-117.

[21]Ibid.

[22]Ibid.

on this beautiful encounter, but so would the other Samaritans who benefited from her boldness considerably, as we will see at the end of the story. Though her initial disposition was found wanting, her engagement allowed for the freedom of grace to enter, which we can say was much more than what she could have possibly desired—water, a pail full, nothing more.

> [10] Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." [11] The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? [12] Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" [13] Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, [14] but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." [15] The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water." (4:10-15)

Immediately, we can recognize the consequence of the woman's off-putting engagement—grace. In her first engagement, she responds mockingly. Here, her disposition changes even though the situation observingly becomes more ludicrous. Jesus not only corrects her by claiming that rather than he, she is the one who should be asking for a drink, even though he is visibly incapable of providing any. Surprisingly, she is unfazed and addresses her inquiry now in a more respectful manner, "*Kyrie.*" Jew suddenly turns into a respectful – sir.[23] She continues to question him, to learn more about what he means, and she even does so rather argumentatively, "*...oute antlēma echeis, kai to phrear estin bathy; pothen oun echeis to hydōr*

[23]Ibid., 117-118.

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to zōn?". She rushes to conclude the engagement by asking for the miracle water so that she may no longer experience thirst or be burdened by the means to quench it. But now, she is engaged in a much more open disposition; her curiosity piqued, her attention captured, and her life open to the possibility of being changed forever.

The second portion of this engagement begins rather remarkably with the familiar threefold prophetic command: *go, call,* and *come*.[24] It signals that this encounter between Jesus and the woman will take an incredible turn that will bridge two divided worlds, Samaritanism and Judaism.[25]

> [16] Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." [17] The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; [18] for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" [19] The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. [20] Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." (4:16-20)

As a result of her engagement, she is now locked in dialogue with Jesus, and they are no longer talking about water, living water, or wells. Immediately, Jesus breaks away from that narrative and reveals a secret we assume she kept well hidden.[26] There is an essential nuance in both her declaration that she had no husband and in Jesus' verification of this statement by his declaration that what she said was, in fact, true. What happened here was an exercise of truth-telling. It begins with a command by Jesus that leads to the woman revealing a truth, although only partially. Jesus then reveals a more profound

[24]Ibid., 127.

[25]Ibid., 128.

[26]Ibid., 126-128.

and painful truth about her, and he does it instantly without forgetting to commend her honesty. To use a famous saying, he gave credit where credit was due. In the initial exchange, what Jesus revealed to her was beyond her comprehension, thus resulting in her sudden desire for a conclusion, but revelations about the inner secrets of her life were almost impossible to deny.[27] She could not turn away.

Now, let us remember the absurdity of this entire scene. This, in the first place, should not be happening. With these revelations, this truth-telling that is going on, one would expect the woman to start lambasting Jesus for being rude and inappropriate and start referring to him once again as an *Ioudaios.* Instead, her curiosity and attention remain piqued and captured, decisively even more so. She responds, with even greater respect and now, with absolute wonder, "*Kyrie, theōrō hoti prophētēs ei sy.*"[28] No longer interested in her own life, she proceeds to questions of faith, tradition, religion, and the living embodiments of the spiritual beyond.

Again, let us pause to appreciate the farcicality and profundity of this exchange. Jesus revealed something deeply personal about her that could have made her justifiably indignant, yet her focus now turns from herself toward the man, the Jew, the stranger in front of her—Jesus. We have to take note of the progression here. In one conversation, Jesus, the son of the living God, the king of the universe, went from a mocked *Jew,* to a strange S*ir* and now, quite possibly, an intriguing *Sir-Prophet*. Only Jesus is capable of such things. Let us proceed.

> [21] Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. [22] You worship what you do

[27]Ibid., 127.

[28]Ibid., 127-128.

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> not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. [23] But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. [24] God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." [25] The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." (4:21-25)

Now, there are many things that we can identify here. First is to remember that the woman presented an argument for Samaritanism, and rightfully so. One would only expect that from a Samaritan. Jesus, though, as inclusive as he is in this entire engagement, speaks powerfully of the superiority of the Jewish traditions, unbending with the truth of Judaism.[29] He accommodates her and engages her when his own culture, in a way, demands him not to, yet his inclusivity remains grounded. He uses the plural we, while he criticizes the Samaritans and their practices with the plural you. That is a firm position, almost as strong as his claim that salvation is from the Jews.[30] There is, again, a clear distinction between the two characters. There is a reality of unbelonging that is being shared. But see, that is the thing; it is an unbelonging that is addressed and discussed. It is not hidden, not spoken of behind closed doors, not buried deep within one's heart and mind. It is an unbelonging that is being truthfully spoken without embellishment.

Of course, these strong statements by Jesus are prefaced with a previous accommodation. He brought her to a safe place first, so to speak, by addressing her for the first time in the entire encounter with an identifier, *gynai* or woman, which he follows with an affirmation that a time is coming when she will worship the Father. He acknowledges her personally, as much

[29]Ibid., 128.

[30]Ibid.

as he concedes God's rightful place as Father. This accommodation resumes once Jesus solidifies the Jewish position by disclosing an even greater revelation that would impact not only her but the rest of humanity. She once again misunderstands, utterly oblivious to the possibility that she is, in fact, speaking with Christ himself.

> [26] Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you." [27] Just then, his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?" [28] Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, [29] "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" [30] They left the city and were on their way to him. (4:26-30)

Here again, we can see this reality of unbelonging. Upon the arrival of the disciples, assumingly composed of primarily Jewish men, the woman immediately rushes off the scene, leaving behind her jar of water. Now, there are two apparent ways to observe this situation. One way is, just as we have mentioned, the woman felt uneasy, awkward, or uncomfortable and ran off to avoid further discomfort, supporting our assertion of the unbelonging that is happening. This is a common understanding of the situation and not a unique take. Another way is that the final revelation of Jesus so moved her that her only response was to flee haphazardly, leaving her precious water behind. Jesus' usage of the formula of revelation: *egō eimi ho legōn soi* ("'I AM' [is] the one speaking to you." Cf. NRSV: "I am he, the one who is speaking to you.")[31] already signals to us the immensity of his self-revelation. Could she have realized what this meant? Well, the fact that she questioned the identity of Jesus immediately after by asking if he was indeed the Messiah

[31]Ibid., 130.

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shows us that she did not. Even more so, with her focus shifting from the ongoing theological debate to the revelation of everything she has ever done, which is another absurdity (an exaggeration of Jesus' revelation about her marital situation.)

But the woman does not need to understand everything. This exchange teaches us that having questions, misunderstanding, or wrestling with our faith and divine encounters is a crucial part of our faith journey that leads to grace. At the end of his life, Thomas Aquinas, famous for his incredible theological contributions to the Church, experienced this profoundly. After witnessing a beatific vision of the Lord, he declares, "The end of my labors has come. All that I have written appears to be as so much straw after the things that have been revealed to me."[32] Knowledge and understanding are essential, but they are consequences, great consequences of that which is of utmost importance — our sincere engagement. This is true for the woman and Aquinas as much as it is true for us.

> [39] Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." [40] So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. [41] And many more believed because of his word. [42] They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world." (4:39-42)

[32]This quote from Thomas Aquinas was taken from the website *Catholic Answers*. I encountered this quote from the late Michael La Guardia SDB when I took the class Theo 273.1 – Studies in Medieval Theological Themes. Cf. Peggy Frye, "When St. Thomas Aquinas likened his work to straw, was that a retraction of what he wrote?" *Catholic.com,* accessed 13 March 2023, https://www.catholic.com/qa/when-st-thomas-aquinas-likened-his-work-to-straw-was-that-a-retraction-of-what-he-wrote.

The woman's willingness to engage in an encounter of truth-telling with Jesus and how he was able to listen to her compassionately led her to believe that He revealed *everything she had ever done*. Despite her situation (which was considered as that of an outcast, being married five times during that time), Jesus met her where she was by allowing her to meet him where he was. In that one encounter, she was heard, recognized, seen, and accepted, as she was also able to hear and see — beyond her hearing; beyond her seeing. The encounter between her and the Jew-Sir-Prophet-Messiah named Jesus brought two divided worlds toward oneness. It was her courage and humility that led others to believe in Him; it was her engagement that made all the difference.

This leads us to draw several conclusions that may aid our synodal journey.

Lessons by the Well

The first is the importance of engagement and the disposition in which we choose to place ourselves. This pericope shows us that there is a way for us to encounter each other no matter how evident and robust the state of unbelonging is. What is crucial is our willingness to participate in the encounter and how accommodating we are to those taking part. Just as Jesus has shown, being accommodating does not mean bending the truths of our faith and traditions in order to prevent others from getting hurt or feeling rejected. There is a way to stand firm and committed to our beliefs while remaining inviting to questions and possible contestations. It is through our careful listening and our acknowledgment of realities that are begging to be acknowledged and having the courage to face them with an unbending resolve while having an accommodating disposition. This is how we journey together with mutual respect.

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The second is that truth-telling leads to revelations of our innermost lives, which inevitably leads to pain as revelations of well-hidden things often do. The encounter between Jesus and the woman shows us that this is okay, and we must not be afraid of the pain that comes with it. In being honest with our own experience of unbelonging, whether to ourselves or the other, we find ourselves in common ground, which is a necessary starting point for any meaningful encounter. An obvious example is the discourse about the woman's past and what was lacking in her faith. But, what is not easily seen is how Jesus placed himself on equal footing with the woman; he was thirsty and needed drink (19:28).[33] He asked for help, just as the Church asks for our help. Just like the progression of the woman's way of identifying Jesus as Jew-Sir-Prophet-Messiah, true honesty removes the lies we at times so viciously attach to the other — disaffiliated, hypocrite, inauthentic, pretentious, lapsed, bigot, leftist, right-wing extremist, liberal, conservative — labels that further separate and disregard the truth of the other that is begging to be revealed. We must go beyond this and move toward relating with each other "not as a giant of our dreams, nor a dwarf of our fears, but as a person, part of a whole, with a share in its purpose."[34] This is how we live in synodality.

The third lesson is a new understanding of what Pope Francis has been requesting since the early days of his papacy — *to meet the other where they are.* The saying has often been understood from an evangelical perspective, where we are called to go to the margins, for the rich to encounter the poor, for priests to encounter the laity, and so on. What the Samaritan Woman and Jesus showed us in this beautiful exchange is that it goes both

[33]This insight came from Francis Alvarez SJ.

[34]Taken from the Daytop Creed.

ways. Jesus, dragging his band of derring-do do-gooders with him, travels to a distant land in order to meet the Samaritan Woman.[35] Just as the Woman, carrying her burdens, fears, and anxieties, traversed the great walls of indifference to remain in dialogue with the Jew-Sir-Prophet. What this story shows us is that, indeed, the other also has to meet us where we are. But this is not the only meaning of this assertion we are making.

Through this Synod on Synodality and the Church's painful disclosure of what we have called her own disengagement or disaffiliation, we must also meet her where she is. We must also carry out an accommodating disposition while remaining firm in our complaints and misgivings, headstrong with our awareness of her faults and mistakes. But we must not disregard her unbending truths, strengths, divine qualities, and undeniable humility. We must be ready to withhold our judgments, unclench our fists, soften our voices, and temper our sharp tones. There is a state of unbelonging between the Church and her flock; we are all aware of the distance, and its absurdity has left many of us astonished. The Church is ready to address and discuss this unbelonging with us, no longer hidden and spoken of behind closed doors. She has spoken of it truthfully without embellishment, no longer buried deep in her heart and mind. The question is, how are we going to respond?

Earlier, we stated that the logical explanation and common understanding for the woman's quick exit is due to the disciples' arrival. This, we claimed, she may have done haphazardly, which may be evidenced by the jar of water she left behind. Another way of understanding what may have happened is she was so moved by the encounter that she could not contain her excitement and ran off to share the experience with her

[35]This insight came from Markus Locker.

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community. But if we look closely, we may be able to identify that the woman was presented with an obstacle prior to her enthusiastic return. The clue is in the setting of the encounter — it happened at noon.[36]

The time of the encounter tells us that the woman may have been an outcast. She made sure to be by the well when no one else would be around. Now, we cannot immediately assume that she was a loose woman since contemporary interpretations shed light on the intricacies of levirite marriage. But, we can safely make the assumption that she was experiencing a significant amount of shame, that she was in a state of unbelonging with the community, and that she was, in her own right, disengaged or disaffiliated.

So, what could have made her forget about her genuine shame and allowed her to return to the community she felt she did not belong to? It was the experience of grace that led to her surrender. Her encounter with Jesus allowed her to let go of her shame, worries, fears, misconceptions, and pride — her unbelonging. With the help of imagination, we can even say the moment she left her jar of water was when she finally knew she belonged, when she finally surrendered.[37]

Pope Francis alluded to this type of surrender at Benediction Hall when he recalled the story of Naaman, a valiant general of the Syrian army known for capturing fame, power, esteem, honors, and glory. Yet, beneath the glitter of his armor was "a frail, wounded, and diseased humanity."[38] He was a leper. Naaman is a mirror to all of us, especially those whose armors

[36]This insight came from Francis Alvarez, SJ.

[37]This insight came from Francis Alvarez, SJ.

[38]Francis, *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Roman Curia*, Speeches, 23 December 2021, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2021/december/documents/20211223-curia-romana.html (accessed 8 March 2023).

are well-worn and meticulously adorned with achievements, rhetoric, gifts, talents, and skills. "Sometimes great gifts are the armor that covers great frailties..." says the Pope. "[But] we cannot spend our lives hiding behind armor, a role we play, or social recognition; in the end, it hurts us. The moment comes in each individual's life when he or she desires to set aside the glitter of this world's glory for the fullness of an authentic life, with no further need for armor or masks."[39]

What the Pope is trying to teach us, or rather, is reminding us, is that to be vulnerable is imperative to being Christian. And sharing our vulnerability is imperative to finding common ground, to finding each other. Pope Francis understands this when he sharply says, "Once we strip ourselves of our robes, our prerogatives, positions, and titles, all of us are lepers, all of us are in need of healing."[40] The Pope, once again, pierces our steel by showing us that underneath the glitter, our armors are made with serrated surfaces, their edges jagged and spiked. Inside, all of us are the same: lepers through each other's sins, victims of each other's indifference.

Indeed, as we have seen, revelation and faith, oneness in God and with one another, may be found in places of isolation and desolation, in places of unbelonging, as long as there is openness, willingness, and space for grace to enter. This truth has been revealed many times in scripture, though many of us seem to have forgotten. Jesus and the Samaritan Woman reminds us of that.

It is by the well underneath the scorching heat of the sun. It is beneath the loneliness of the distant fig tree. It is through the constant denial until the cock crows. And it is through forty

[39]Ibid.

[40]Ibid.

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years of wandering in endless sand — our faith has always been found in places of unbelonging. Grace always finds us in exile.

So, once again, how must we respond to the synodal call? How must we walk the synodal path?

> We gather by the well, where all and none belong.
>
> And when the dark settles with its haunting
>
> We meet the other as they are;
>
> Where the fire burns — ever so brightly.
>
> We keep the fire burning.