

## FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT (26 FEB 2022) Homily by Cardinal Charles Bo

This past week, we started the sacred season of Lent where we are invited to a time of renewal and transformation. Every time we begin this period in the life of the church, we hear many people asking the question, ‘what should I give up this Lent?’. If Lent is only reduced to “giving up” things and only taking them back after Lent, then Lent becomes just a passing moment with no lasting effects on our lives. Lent must have a more lasting effect on our lives.

Every year on the First Sunday of Lent, we hear the gospel passage on the Temptation of Christ in the wilderness just after his baptism. There have been many ways in which this passage has been expounded and reflected on. Essentially, in all three temptations of Jesus, the devil challenges the identity of Jesus by saying, “if you are the Son of God”; whereas Jesus had just been affirmed by the voice from heaven, “This is my Son whom I love’.

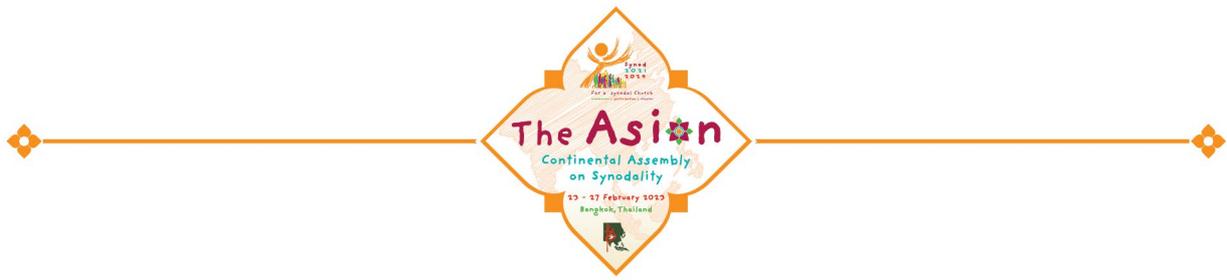
The synodal journey is somewhat like Jesus’ journey in the wilderness, challenging but necessary. It is necessary because it will only enable the Church to better witness the Gospel through a process of listening, encountering, and discerning.

The issues before us, as we have heard these days, are perhaps overwhelming and daunting, but what is required above all is a change in the way How do we do that? I would like to offer the word L.E.N.T as an acronym for this attitudinal change as we journey together.

L = Letting Go. If this journeying together is to be meaningful, we need to learn how to let go of all that prevents us from being that synodal church. Shedding is a prerequisite for growth. Part of the resistance that we experience in the church in this synodal journey is the reluctance to let go – letting go of our prejudices, biases, fears, and even the privileged status that we have acquired over some time.

To move forward, we need to let go of things and attitudes, those things that hold us back from moving forward. Jesus even tells his disciples not to take anything on the journey (cf. Luke 9:3). Letting go would also mean that we step out of our comfort zones even though it may cause anxiety and irritation, it is the only way

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that we can move as one people of God. Letting go also means the willingness to be vulnerable. I believe vulnerability allows us to admit our imperfections and that of others, and most importantly, accept that everyone is still worthy of love.

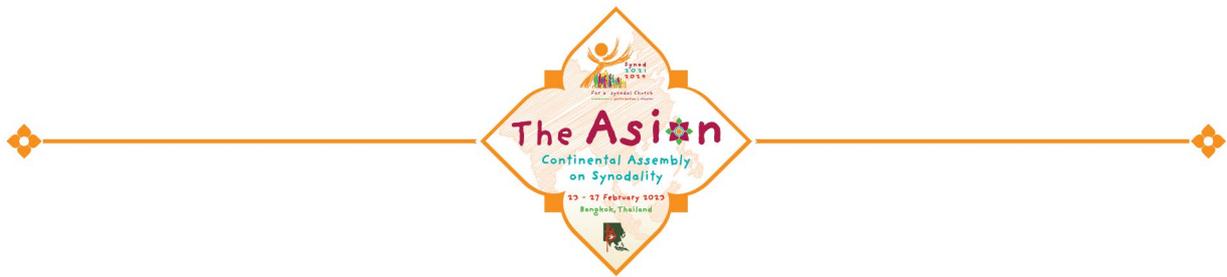
E = Encounter. Journeying on the path of discipleship has a specific goal – that is, to encounter Christ. However, along this path, we meet many people, events, and experiences along the way. We can never walk this path blindfolded because if we do, we will only stumble and fall or go astray. The culture of encounter must be at the heart of the church’s mission. In Asia, we encounter a variety of cultures, social, economic, political, and spiritual.

In his morning meditation on 13 September 2016, Pope Francis speaks of the ‘culture of encounter’. He says, “ An invitation to work for “the culture of encounter”, in a simple way, “as Jesus did”: not just seeing, but looking; not just hearing, but listening; not just passing people by, but stopping with them; not just saying “what a shame, poor people!”, but allowing yourself to be moved with compassion; “and then to draw near, to touch and to say: ‘Do not weep’ and to give at least a drop of life”. If we (the church) are going to be the “bridge” that helps people to encounter God, we must also bridge the divisions that continually holds us back from moving forward.

N = Neighbourliness. The parable of the Good Samaritan was preceded by the question. ‘who is my neighbour?’ (cf. Lk 10:29). In the end, it was the one who showed mercy. In Asia, we are a minority and we live amidst so many tensions, that includes, social, political, and even religious. Amid such tension, the temptation may be to regress, to build a defence shield around, or in extreme conditions, to retaliate to the extremities. We recognise that in Asia, many conflicts often derive from deeply rooted religious and ethnic differences, and struggles over minority rights. Such tensions are not helped when religions are made used for political expediency. How do we live “neighbourliness” in such harsh conditions?

The work of reconciliation, healing, and peace-building must be at the heart of the church’s life and ministry. The church exists for all and not just for the baptised. We acknowledge that the church “exists to evangelise” but in the context of Asia, there are places where a direct proclamation will be met with

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opposition and even persecution. Being missionary disciples is not about preservation but about being a neighbour to others - being the face of God's mercy and compassion to others.

T = Transformation. In Psalm 104 we read these words: "Send forth your Spirit, O Lord, and renew the face of the earth." In this synodal journey, we are called to hear what the Holy Spirit is saying to us. Despite all these human efforts, we must keep reminding ourselves that the work of transforming comes from God and God alone. In the 'Ad sumus' prayer, we say "with You alone to guide us, make Yourself at home in our hearts". The Holy Spirit dwelling within us can and does transform our lives, the Church and the world.

Therefore, if we are walking together to bring about a renewal in the life of the church, we need the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. By ourselves, we cannot achieve anything but we need that transforming grace to make all this happen. Much of the anxiety of this synodal journey is caused by the uncertainty of whether the change will happen. We must learn to entrust this journey to the Holy Spirit because it is only the Spirit that can give direction and definition to our witness, as a church.

In conclusion, if the temptation ended with these words of Jesus: You must worship the Lord your God, and serve him alone, our synodal journey must begin with these same words. Recognising that we need the presence of the Holy Spirit, we then walk this synodal journey as we seek 'to serve Him alone'. On this journey, may we embrace the attitudes of letting go, encountering, and neighbourliness, and allow the transforming power of the Holy Spirit truly renew the face of the earth. Amen.

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