

“TABLE TALK AND THE CHURCH”: SMALL GROUPS AND MISSION

I was **skeptical**, to say the least. While a seminarian in the 1980’s, my home parish participated in a national program called RENEW that met in homes. Admittedly, as one who prefers a more controlled environment, small groups are notoriously **unpredictable**. What will I say if someone disagrees? As a seminarian, will I be placed on the hot seat? Of course, **none** of that occurred. As it turned out, it was a **positive** experience, though some of my concerns were warranted. As a national program, we controlled neither the curriculum, nor the small group questions. Now is not the time to nit-pick, but some of the content was **doctrinally weak** and lent itself to the criticism of being “touchy-feely.” However, my greatest fears were misplaced. We young adults engaged in some **substantive** discussion. Some parish groups continued to meet long after the program ended, allowing Catholics—accustomed to polite nods towards one another in church—to engage in deeper discussion.

Beginning this week, you are invited to join in a small group process as part of the **Archdiocesan Synod**. Derived from two Greek words **σύν** meaning “together” + **οδος** meaning “way” or “journey,” *synod* connotes a group of people on a path towards a common goal or purpose. But as we all know, no two roads are alike, especially if you live in Saint Paul! Hopefully, this synodal road will be smoother than driving in our capital city. So, here in this Archdiocese a synod is an apt description of an assembly of Catholics meeting for a purpose. Our word “**council**” comes from the Latin language, while “**synod**” is of Greek origin. Originally, the meeting denoted either a sacred or secular gathering—the term was more generic. Later, it was restricted to ecclesial gatherings, yet still carried with it a sense of hope and expectation. This is precisely my prayer for our experience that begins in Hayden Hall this week, continuing for six weeks.

So, what does the Synod Small Group process entail? **Fr. Joe Bambenek**, Asst. Director of the Synod, is in residence here at the Cathedral. He has labored **zealously** and **tirelessly** for months, overseeing many of the details. His team has amassed 1000 volunteers, local parishioners who have put themselves forward to facilitate small groups and other details. We hope and pray for a good turnout here. We are offering **three** options for each week’s session: **Wednesday** evenings at **7:00 p.m.**; **Friday** afternoons at **1:00 pm**; **Saturday** mornings at **7:30 a.m.** All sessions take place in **Hayden Hall**. (Those attending the Friday sessions should enter the main level of Church; once inside, then head downstairs via the stairs by the baptistry or the elevator.) The other sessions will be accessed from the **lower-level** door on the Selby Ave. side, across from the parking lot.

To refresh your memory, two sessions will be devoted to each of the **three areas of focus** that Archbishop Hebda announced last year, before the pandemic related pause:

1. Forming parishes that are in the service of **evangelization**
2. Forming **missionary disciples** who know Jesus’ love and respond to his call
3. Forming **youth** and **young adults** in and for a Church that is always young

Each topic consists of two sub-areas of focus. Thus, in total **twelve** different **topics** will be discussed. As in his insightful August 26 Catholic Spirit column, Fr. Bambenek noted “in session 5 we will engage on the sub-topics of supporting Parents as the primary educators of their children and what our parishes and schools can do to help the young know and love Jesus.” Thus, everyone who attends will have his/her input tabulated through a series of multiple-choice questions that survey our thoughts on each sub-topic.

Each session includes a **video introduction** and a solid, orthodox teaching. Those have been **filmed right here**, and I am eager to see the images of our Cathedral throughout the six weeks. After the video teaching is complete, participants will engage in **discussion** with others at your **table**. Then, you will have time to fill out your individual feedback sheets before moving on to the second topic of the day. Each week operates in the same manner. You need not absolutely commit to attending all six sessions, though I hope you do! At a minimum, I invite you to **commit** to the **first two sessions** and see where the Holy Spirit leads you. If you find this fruitful, stay for the remaining four sessions.

All the feedback is entered into a database (anonymously of course) by parish volunteers. Yes, we need more. If you are handy with a computer, the process is straightforward. The forms are entered in the days following each session. **All submitted forms** will be read and tabulated by the Synod team; you may be **assured** that your input will be received. Small group leaders are invited to assist in this process, and I suspect you'll catch on immediately and this task that will only require about 30 minutes of additional time each week. For the past **18 months**, Hayden Hall has been collecting dust! I am praying that Hayden Hall will once again be **teeming with activity**, all for the good of the Church. Join us!

- Multitasking! Last **Saturday morning** was a busy one here. Simultaneously, we hosted: a special Mass in the Sacred Heart Chapel for a pilgrim group from the Diocese of New Ulm; final filming for the Archdiocesan Synod; a Men's Association meeting; the tolling of bells at specific moments in memory of 9/11. With the able assistance of **Greg Povolny**—chief sacristan and bell ringer— we were busier than termites in a sawmill and equally delighted!
- “**Always** check your **sources**,” as I am wont to say. I really should take my own advice! On the Feast of the Nativity of Mary, I stumbled across a beautiful quotation attributed to St. Augustine, describing Mary as “the flower of the field from whom bloomed the precious lily of the valley.” To me, it just **didn't sound** quite like him. All too often, online quotations fail to cite a source. I should have **trusted my gut**, but still quoted him anyway. After Mass, I discovered that the pre-Vatican II breviary misattributed a selection to Augustine. It was in fact a sermon of St. Fulbert of Chartres. Live and learn.
- We hope to resume parish **coffee and donuts** after the Sunday 10:00 a.m. Mass. First though, we need to purchase a **new coffee maker**. It has served us well, but it “died” a natural death and must be replaced. With gratitude to the Men's Association, we are considering a 21st century system that will no longer require a **60-minute** warm up cycle! We also need **volunteers**. Hint: Cathedral Young adults?
- Kudos to Cathedral Hill resident and Pioneer Press writer **Amy Felegy**, whose well-trained ears noticed something missing in the **Westminster** bell chimes. She interviewed me and produced a beautiful piece about church bells last Saturday. Repairs to church bells are depended upon travelling professionals— not just anyone climbs up there! The bells should be peeling as the lead Twin Cities Marathon (Oct. 3) runners appear at 10:08 a.m. in front of the Cathedral!

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector