A concise summary of intention for the Peoples’ Synod in Dallas:

“Living well with the tension between love and law.”

Paper in support of this intention:

The “new covenant” is the truth of Christ, fulfilling the law (Exodus 20:1-17) and the prophets (Jeremiah 31:31-34). Love of the ‘other’ is indistinguishable from love of God, and upon these “hang all the law and the prophets” (Matthew 22:40).

There is a tension between the law and the Spirit, a tension whose maintenance is central to the life of the community. The community that resolves that tension by relying upon the law dies when reliance upon the law takes precedence over the Spirit (see Romans 8:1).

It is the same for tradition, which takes the law by the hand in order to follow the Spirit. At its best, tradition preserves the tension. At its worst, tradition hardens into law. The Church’s teaching on marriage is an example. How should what Jesus said about marriage be interpreted? If interpreted through the lens of the Mosaic Law, what Jesus said becomes the principle of indissolubility, which tradition has moderated to some extent. The annulment procedure is an example of that moderation. But would it not be more in keeping with the presence of the Risen Christ to interpret what Jesus said about marriage through the lens of the reign of God? This is what Christ preached, the fulfillment of the law (Mark 1:15).

The preaching of Jesus called us toward his Spirit, written on our hearts as the prophet Jeremiah said, not toward another law that simply sets a higher bar. The joy of love is the fruit of possibility, not the attainments of drawn lines. Joy and happiness come from taking reality as it is, not as we idealize it to be, and creatively investing that reality with love.

And yet the tension between law and Spirit remains. We are limited creatures, and have need for the law. It is good for the community to maintain order, even though its primary service to the reign of God is to promote in the hearts of its members a greater responsiveness to the Spirit within.

Have we learned nothing from Jeremiah, who expressed God’s frustration at the way the leaders of the community used the law as a mode of slavery? The Apostle Paul echoed this frustration in his Letter to the Galatians. Did Christ speak to no purpose when he set the love which he embodied above “all the law and the prophets”?

No. The community has been learning all along. Slowly, to be sure, but learning nonetheless. Living tradition reflects that learning. Look to what the people of God are doing, on the ground, at the grass roots. Do not expect the clarity provided by the law. Such clarity would be an idealization that is not real. The reign of God will emerge, not as law but through the Spirit.

The Spirit is always and everywhere at work, and cannot be suppressed. Yet the larger community – the institutional Church – seems to lag behind at the same time as the work of the Spirit at the grass roots seems unfinished. There is tension here as well, a tension that is real. It is a tension that is inherent in God’s creation. It is a tension to be embraced rather than avoided as the people of God continue their journey toward being one in Christ.

Is there a better way to frame these tensions, between law and Spirit and between grass roots and the institutional Church? Is it possible to maintain these tensions and at the same time disentangle the gentle thread of the Spirit from the heavy cords of the law? This gentle thread – manifest in conscience – has priority in principle but history shows the law ascendant in practice in the relations between the fiduciaries of the institutional Church and the people at the grass roots. Jeremiah railed against this ascendancy, insisting that God’s law was accessible directly in the hearts of the people. Jesus confirmed the reign of God in the human heart by the Good News that loving one another not only fulfills the law but is the source and measure of the law.

And still the gentle thread of the Spirit is entangled by the law.

The Synod in Dallas will have before it a proposal for framing these tensions in a different way, a proposal that can be considered and reworked by the people and taken back to their communities to be tried and tested. It is a simple proposal. Reframe these tensions by focusing the law on what is necessary for good order within the community, leaving everything else to the patient but deliberate work of cultivating the Spirit within the human heart. In this reframing it becomes evident that Christ’s “new covenant” is a prescription for unity across diverse human manifestations of the same Spirit.

What is necessary for good order? This does not resolve the tension between the people and their institutions or between the law and the Spirit. But it provides an objective focus that addresses the community’s concern for stability and coherence. Once this concern is reasonably satisfied by appropriate measures that enforce such necessary laws, then the community can with reasonable confidence take a different and more Christ-like approach to everything else. Compassion and mercy are better tools for achieving the primacy of the Spirit, which may be a matter of conscientious discernment. The point of primacy of the Spirit is to privilege the gentle process of God’s justice over compliance with the objective judgment of the community (see John 8:1-11).

This non-judgmental focus will free up the resources of the community to discern and build mutual trust in the Spirit rather than sow discord over different objective formulations of what it means to love one another. In a sense, this approach may be understood as a more loving and flexible way for the community to enforce the law, allowing the law to bend where it is in conflict with the Great Commandments to love God and neighbor. And does this not comport with the experience of loving parents in relationship with their young adults?

The difficulty of evangelization using this approach need not be understated. Change of perspective is hard. Jesus spoke in parables in order to prompt *metanoia*, a “turning around” which did not always take place. But maturity of the People of God is consistent with building the reign of God from the grass roots, a project with ecumenical significance (see Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations* , v.17, no.16).

The Dallas Synod can contribute to this project.