



PASTORAL LETTER TO THE DIOCESE OF TRENTON

“ON THE CHURCH’S SYNODAL PATH OF ‘COMMUNION, PARTICIPATION AND MISSION’”

To the clergy, consecrated religious and lay faithful of the Diocese of Trenton,

I rarely enjoy traveling alone, whether for business or pleasure. When going somewhere, especially on a longer trip, I prefer the company of others for conversation, for the exchange of ideas, for sharing different experiences, and, quite simply, just for companionship. In many ways, I think that preference explains why I began my journey to the priesthood in a religious community where the emphasis is on life and ministry with a “band of brothers” joined together by the charism of a common founder, spirit and purpose. That is the point, really, of religious life and, perhaps a unique contribution I make to diocesan priests as their diocesan bishop. I enjoy “journeying together!”

The Catholic Church in recent years --- particularly during the pontificate of Pope Francis, a religious order priest --- has become accustomed to hearing the novel expression “synodality” used to describe the nature of the Church in our day. The word itself is derived from two Greek words meaning “common road or path.” Synodality “is the specific *modus vivendi et operandi* (way of living and operating) of the Church, the People of God, which reveals and gives substance to her being as communion when all her members *journey together*, gather in assembly and take an active part in her evangelizing mission (International Theological Commission, “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” March 2, 2018, para. 6).”

While “synods” are not new to the Church, Pope St. Paul VI (1897-1978) formally established the “Synod of Bishops,” following the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), as a “permanent institution” in the Church “whereby bishops chosen from various parts of the world are to offer more effective assistance to the Supreme Shepherd ... providing information and offering advice -- Paul VI, September 15, 1965 apostolic letter *motu proprio* “*Apostolica sollicitudo* (Apostolic concern).” Such synods are convened by the Pope as “ordinary” (that is, held at fixed intervals) or “extraordinary” (that is, held to treat a matter of urgent or specific concern to the Church) gatherings of designated, elected or appointed bishops of the world with the Pope. Even when they are not in session, synods have a permanent secretariat or office in Rome, headed by a member of the hierarchy appointed by the Pope.

Writing from Rome to the bishops of the world earlier this year, Cardinal Mario Greich, General Secretary of the Synod of Bishops, reflected, “Synodality refers to the very essence of the Church, her constitutive reality, and is thus oriented towards evangelization. It is an ecclesial way of being and a prophetic example for today’s world.” Perhaps a more theological description than most of us are

used to in everyday conversation, this idea can be simplified as “a common road or path” for the life and work of the Church today, “journeying together.” The Church envisions a synod that goes far beyond a mere gathering of bishops to include and embrace the entire People of God.

Recent history provides a context to understand the current discussion of synodality.

Throughout his papacy, Pope Francis has expressed a desire to strengthen the unity, collegiality and inclusivity of Church governance on matters of faith and morals and life in the Church. To that end, drawing from his November 24, 2013 apostolic exhortation “*Evangelium Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel),” Pope Francis issued an apostolic constitution “*Episcopalis communio* (Episcopal communion)” on September 15, 2018, “to profoundly reshape all the ecclesial structures to become more *missionary* (an abiding concern of the Holy Father)... (and) to become more and more an adequate channel for the evangelization of the present world more than for self-preservation ... a privileged instrument for *listening* to the People of God.”

Three years earlier, on the 50th anniversary of Pope St. Paul VI’s establishment of the Synod of Bishops, Pope Francis wrote: “It is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium. What the Lord is asking of us is already in some sense present in the very word ‘synod.’ Journeying together — laity, pastors, the Bishop of Rome — is an easy concept to put into words, but not so easy to put into practice (October 17, 2015).”

On April 24 of this current year, Pope Francis announced the convocation of the Sixteenth Ordinary Synod --- originally scheduled for 2022 but postponed due to the pandemic until 2023 --- with the theme “For A Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission,” in a sense, “a Synod on synodality.” It will follow a newly revised programmatic structure:

This path toward the celebration of the Synod comprises of three phases, between October 2021 and October 2023, a diocesan phase and a continental phase that will give life to two different working documents and, finally, a conclusive phase at the level of the Universal Church ... The Synod of Bishops is the dynamic point of convergence that calls for mutual listening to the Holy Spirit at every level of the Church's life (General Secretariat for the Synod of Bishops, “Note on the XVI Ordinary Synod,” May 21, 2021).

The Sixteenth Ordinary Synod of Bishops opens Sunday, October 10, 2021, with a Mass celebrated in Rome at St. Peter’s Basilica by Pope Francis. Every diocese throughout the world will initiate its diocesan phase of the Synod with a Mass celebrated by its diocesan bishop on the following Sunday, October 17, 2021. In the Diocese of Trenton, that Mass will be celebrated in St. Mary of the Assumption Cathedral in Trenton at 3 p.m. The Diocese will also use that occasion to commemorate the beginning of our 140th Anniversary Year.

The program or “path” of the diocesan phase for “journeying together” is described in the General Secretariat’s May 21, 2021 “Note,” referenced above:

Each bishop will appoint a diocesan contact person (and eventually a team) for the synodal consultation; they shall be a point of reference and link with the Episcopal Conference. They will accompany all the stages of the consultation process in the local church.

*Consultation in the particular Churches will include those groups of participation as envisioned in **Episcopalis Communio**, without excluding other modalities deemed appropriate for the consultation to be real and effective (cf. **Episcopalis Communio**, 6).*

Consultation with the People of God in each particular Church will conclude with a pre-synodal meeting, which will be the culmination of diocesan discernment.

After the conclusion of the diocesan phase, each particular Church will submit their contributions to their Episcopal Conference on a date determined by the Episcopal Conference itself. The Eastern Churches will submit their contributions to their corresponding bodies.

Elements of the diocesan phase of the Synod for the Diocese of Trenton are being prepared.

An integral part of the diocesan synodal journey itself with its principal themes of “communion, participation, mission,” is the effort to reach out to as many Catholics of the Diocese as possible: clergy and consecrated religious, active as well as “lapsed” or non-practicing Catholic lay faithful women and men, both married and single, of every generation, race, national and ethnic background, different point of view, social, political and economic status. In other words, all those who have in the past or still call the Catholic Church “home” are called to actively participate in the synodality of the Church by pausing to listen to one another on this journey together.

Some questions and points of reflection for all the participants described above include: what has been/is your experience of the Catholic Church? How has that experience shaped or affected your life and your faith in God? What obstacles to worship, learning and service have you encountered that may have negatively influenced the practice of your Catholic faith? What do you need as a Catholic to be a stronger, more intentional, more committed, more connected member of the Church, to belong and feel like you belong to the Church? How can we better “journey together” as Catholics in Mercer, Burlington, Ocean and Monmouth counties?

As I think of the meaning of synodality in the Catholic Church, I am reminded of the Irish poet and novelist James Joyce’s (1882-1941) famous description of the Catholic Church in “Finnegan’s Wake”: “Here comes everybody!” Can that ever be true of our Church again? Can the diocesan synodal journey take us there together?

Since there are two other later phases to this Synod --- the “continental phase” at the level of the Episcopal Conference (that is, for us, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops) and the “universal phase” in Rome --- the Sixteenth Ordinary Synod of Bishops will not be completed until October 2023. Hopefully, it will not end there.

At the conclusion of each Synod of Bishops, the Pope usually issues a post-synod “apostolic exhortation,” summarizing the major emphases and determinations of the Synod. Along with a review by the College of bishops attending, these documents are considered part of the Pope’s ordinary magisterium or teaching authority, to be believed by all the faithful.

That is the program or plan for our Church’s “journeying together” through 2023. The success and fruits of these undertakings will depend upon our common development and application of its contents by the Church at every level and, most importantly, upon our openness to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. The enduring results of the Synod will, of course, take time to emerge.

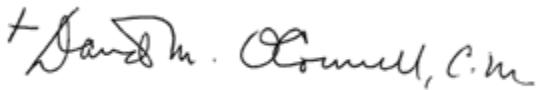
As Cardinal Greich has stated, “the Synod is not just an event but also a process that involves in synergy (that is, by collaboration and cooperation) the People of God, the college of bishops and the Bishop of Rome, each according to their proper function.” He cautions, however, that this Synod “is not about democracy or populism or anything like that. Rather, it is the Church as the People of God, a People who, by virtue of baptism, is an active *subject* in the life of the Church.” That is how the Church fulfills its missionary role: a “listening Church;” a “discerning Church;” a Church of “communion, participation and mission,” “journeying together.”

I ask the clergy, religious and lay faithful of the Diocese of Trenton to pray for the Church as it prepares for this important spiritual endeavor. It is my hope, as Bishop of the Diocese, that we will all fruitfully participate in and benefit from the Synod at the diocesan level, listening to one another as we share our different “stories,” experiences, challenges and hopes for the Church at this exciting time in its history.

In conclusion, I invite the entire Diocese of Trenton to join in this “Prayer for the Success of the Synod”:

We stand before You, Holy Spirit, as we gather together in Your name. With You alone to guide us, make Yourself at home in our hearts; Teach us the way we must go and how we are to pursue it. We are weak and sinful; do not let us promote disorder. Do not let ignorance lead us down the wrong path nor partiality influence our actions. Let us find in You our unity so that we may journey together to eternal life and not stray from the way of truth and what is right. All this we ask of You, who are at work in every place and time, in the communion of the Father and the Son, forever and ever. Amen.

Given at the Chancery of the Diocese of Trenton on this Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time, October 10th in the Year of Our Lord 2021.



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Bishop of Trenton

