

## A PASTORAL LETTER FROM THE BISHOP OF LANCASTER FOR OUR SYNODAL JOURNEY

Appointed to be read at all Public Masses on the weekend of 16th/17th October 2021,  
in all churches and chapels of the Diocese of Lancaster

11th October 2021

My dear People,

Some of you may be aware that the Holy Father, Pope Francis, has called the whole Church to take part in a 'synodal journey'; I suspect that many of you may not be aware of this, and that several of you are not particularly interested, and that the majority will be asking what it is anyway!

At heart, a synod is to do with sharing a journey (from the Greek, 'together' 'way'). From the Gospels and the life of the early Christians we can see that it came to mean more than just another meeting. It became a characteristic of the way the Church lived and worked together. Pope Francis does not want us to lose this characteristic. He is telling us that we all have a place in the life and Mission of Christ, and that each of us has something to say, something to contribute to that Mission. In particular, the Holy Father wishes us to have conversations that draw people to Jesus as well as to one another. Such conversations will actually help us hear the voice of God, and recognize the Word of God.

This first phase of preparation is to take place throughout the Diocese, please God, in all the parishes. We are invited to pray, speaking our mind (with respect and charity of course!), careful listening, discernment and openness to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. The Bishops who meet in Rome in 2023 will have received your deliberations on the theme: For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission.

I can hear some saying that we have been hear before, and that our meetings so easily become talking shops. I disagree. At this time we are in a new place, where we have never been before. Time is passing. Also, those meetings are listening-shops, when we respect one another, and when we are open to hear what the other is saying.

I am asking all our parishes to pray for the success of the Synod of Bishops due to take place in October 2023. As well as praying for the Synod, I want parishes to meet and actually help form the Church, making it Fit for Mission for these times. We are already well on along the road so please don't think we are still only at the beginning. Those who laboured before us did not do so in vain. There is much to be encouraged by.

Remember that we do not meet as some sort of Parliament body, disputing over policies. We meet as fellow pilgrims, working together for the good of all, and what enables us to do that is our hearing the Holy Spirit, and following Christ the Good Shepherd.

The questions received for our attention in this Diocesan phase are both wide ranging and significant for the life of both the Universal Church and for our own local Church that is the Diocese of Lancaster. They invite us to 1) deepen our sense of communion in our parishes and diocese, as well as with the wider Catholic Church

and Holy Father, 2) to affirm our baptismal dignity together with the gifts and charisms we share through our parishes, work and family life, 3) to deepen our adult formation as disciples of Christ for His Mission, building on what we received and promised in Baptism and Confirmation.

Father Jim Burns has agreed to be the contact person for the Synod process. At this stage we are still organizing ourselves to send material out to parishes in more detail about how you participate in the process. Many of us still recall the intense and extensive Fit for Mission consultation. This will not be on that scale. I would prefer if we aim for something far briefer, especially given the continued restrictions on social life. Of course there will be opportunity to use online facilities, but these are not easy for some, and can weaken parish communities as well as strengthen them. Let's look after our local parishes as best we can. Rather than splinter groups of particular interest I want us to unite.

Whatever is submitted from parishes will be collated into a single report limited to ten pages (although they never specified the font size!) to be received by the beginning of February 2022. These Diocesan reports will feed into the Conference of England and Wales, 22 Dioceses. These will be collated into a report that will be fed into the European continental body, gathering from the various nations. Obviously they will collate what they receive and feed a report to Rome in advance of the October Synod 2023. The more focused and clear we are the better.

More detailed information will come your way very soon. I ask parishes to give this matter significant priority, although do not let it distort what you are already actively engaged with. We will use the Diocesan Website, the Catholic Voice, and parish communications to help provide information. The principal documentation from the Holy See can be freely accessed directly at:

<https://www.synod.va/en.html>

An old Medieval proverb stated that 'What touches all ought to be considered and approved by all'. Approval by all sounds ambitious, but it is one Faith we adhere to, and One Church that shelters us. We know all too well how easy it is to become divided as families and as a Church. The greatest threat to any strong party will come from within its own ranks rather than from the opposition party. We face many crucial issues, and any one of them could cause the flock to be scattered if we lose our bond with the Good Shepherd. He gave His life for our salvation; let us not allow indifference to be our response to so great a gift.

With all my thanks, prayers and every blessing,

Paul Swarbrick, Bishop of Lancaster