



Archdiocese of Southwark

Pastoral Letter for the Opening of the Synod

To be read at all Vigil and Sunday Masses over the weekend of 16/17 October 2021

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ

Our Holy Father, Pope Francis, has invited the Catholic Church across the world to begin a journey of listening attentively to the Lord and to each other. We want to deepen our understanding of what it means to live together, in union with Christ, as fellow disciples called to announce His Gospel. This experience of encounter is called a Synod and follows a Synodal process. The word Synod comes from two Greek words which mean ‘journeying forward on the way together,’ the Way who is the Lord Jesus, our Truth and our Life.¹

There are three key words for this Synodal process: communion, participation, and mission. Put simply: What does it mean for us to belong to Christ and be in relationship with His Church? What does it mean for us to be engaged and involved with Christ in His Church? What does it mean for us to be sent out, in proclamation and service, by Christ and His Church? We are being asked to rediscover together - laity, clergy, and religious - what it means to be a servant-Church, rooted in Christ who came ‘not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.’² The Synod is an opportunity for everyone baptised into Christ to consider what it means to be a missionary disciple. It begins at the grassroots and leads, through a national and continental phase, to a gathering in Rome in 2023.

¹ Cf. John 14:6

² Mk 10:45

In our own Archdiocese we have asked every parish to nominate two delegates who can work locally, in whatever way is most helpful, to enable a parish process of listening and reflection. To help with this there are some questions for consideration from the Synod Office in Rome and others prepared by our own Agency for Evangelisation and Catechesis. All this material has been sent to parishes and can be found online.³ I hope that every parish will undertake its own process of reflection which will feed into our submission to the national Synod document.

We might ask what is the purpose of the Synod? Pope Francis is quite clear. It is an event in the life of the Church where the primary agent is the Holy Spirit.⁴ We are to be a listening Church, characterised by ‘closeness, compassion and tender love.’⁵ This is the foundation and pathway for sharing all we hold to be true and good and beautiful in our Catholic faith.

At the end of the Second Vatican Council, Pope St Paul VI spoke words worth hearing again as we consider afresh our Christian calling:

‘The Church has gathered herself together in deep spiritual awareness, not to produce a learned analysis of religious psychology, or an account of her own experiences, not even to devote herself to reaffirming her rights and explaining her laws. Rather, it was to find in herself, active and alive, the Holy Spirit, the word of Christ; and to probe more deeply still the mystery, the plan and the presence of God above and within herself; to revitalise in herself that faith which is the secret of her confidence and of her wisdom, and that love which impels her to sing without ceasing the praises of God.’⁶

We have been allotted a relatively short timeline for the diocesan Synodal process. It will, however, hopefully begin a more extended discernment. This will be carried forward to shape our pastoral vision and planning into the future. It will help us understand what it means to be the Church at this time in our place. It will serve our renewal, personally and communally. As Pope Francis reminds us, we journey

³ <https://aec.rcaos.org.uk/synod>

⁴ ‘I want to say again that the Synod is not a parliament or an opinion poll; the Synod is an ecclesial event and its protagonist is the Holy Spirit.’ Pope Francis, Address for the Opening of the Synod, 9 October 2021

⁵ Pope Francis, Address for the Opening of the Synod, 9 October 2021

⁶ Address of Pope Paul VI During the Last General Meeting of the Second Vatican Council, 7 December 1965.

together as 'the one People of God...in order to experience a Church that receives and lives [the] gift of unity, and is open to the voice of the Spirit.'⁷

I encourage everyone in our Archdiocese to take part in the Synod by participating in their local parish process which will take place primarily over the next month. You can also participate by submitting a response directly online or in writing. Each parish is different, and we must be mindful of the challenges still presented by Covid 19; but please try to listen and reflect as widely as possible, including schools, people of all ages and backgrounds, and groups and organisations within the local community. I look forward to meeting with the parish delegates to hear what has emerged.

Allow me to finish by sharing again what I said when I became your Archbishop:

We have a hope in the Lord Jesus...These are the most important first words I could ever say to you. In the Lord Jesus we have a hope for our world, a world which God created, a world which God loves. In Him we have a hope for our common humanity which God shared by taking flesh and dwelling among us. In the Lord Jesus we have a hope for the Church, Christ's Body, called to announce the Gospel with confidence and joy. In Him we have a hope for each other, that our lives have a purpose, a dignity and a destiny, that we can live in love, with justice, for peace. We have a hope in the Lord Jesus, crucified and risen from the dead, alive in His Church, alive in His Word, alive in His Sacraments. Dear friends we have a hope in the Lord Jesus, alive in us by the power of the Holy Spirit.⁸

Please pray for Our Holy Father and the Synodal process in our Archdiocese and worldwide, that the Holy Spirit will draw us more closely together in the truth and send us out as a light to the nations. May God bless you as we begin this journey together, confident that the Lord always works for good through those who love Him.

Yours devotedly in Christ

+ John Wilson

Metropolitan Archbishop of Southwark

⁷ Pope Francis, Address for the Opening of the Synod, 9 October 2021.

⁸ Homily for the Mass of Installation as Archbishop of Southwark, Feast of St James the Apostle, 25 July 2019, St George's Cathedral, Southwark.