

Leading the FLOCK

BY BISHOP DANIEL E. THOMAS



“Communion, Participation, Mission”

These three words are at the heart of the theme which Pope Francis has invited the entire Church to reflect on as decisive for her life and mission; “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission.”

In his homily on October 10th opening the worldwide Synodal Path toward the Synod on Synodality, the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops to take place in Rome in 2023, the Holy Father emphasized that Catholics taking part in a synodal path should strive to “become experts in the art of encounter;” and that such a path is accomplished “not so much in organizing events or theorizing about problems, as in taking time to encounter the Lord and one another.”

But before we can understand what is being asked of us, we need first to understand what the very words “synod” and “synodality” mean. Simply put, the word “synod” comes from the Greek word meaning “assembly” or “meeting.” And as presented in the International Theological Commission’s 2018 document “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” “synodality” refers to members of the Church moving forward in communion with (*syn*) Christ and one another, along a path (*odos*) under the impulse of the Holy Spirit. Early examples of synodality are recorded in Scripture and Tradition, and it was Pope St. Paul VI who in 1965 first established the “Synod of Bishops for the Universal Church” to address topics critical to the Church’s mission and proclamation of the Gospel.

In fact, in dioceses and parishes there are various permanent synodal structures which can be distinguished from a worldwide or local one time synod event, for example the parish pastoral council, the finance council and the diocesan pastoral council.

Synodality, Pope Francis has said, “is a style, it is a walk together, and it is what the Lord expects from the Church of the third millennium.” So just how will we “walk together” in this Diocesan Preparatory Phase?

As the documents from the Holy See offering guidance for how to prepare for the upcoming Synod were only recently received in September, we are still formulating how best to proceed. In fact, prior to the release of those documents and since, I have personally met, dialogued with, and received the collaboration of a number of representative groups, including our Diocesan Pastoral Council with members representing our 15 Deaneries and beyond, as well as the Religious Superiors of all the Consecrated Religious who have members serving within our diocese. I will continue personally to meet with each of the consultative bodies/councils in the diocese to engage in dialogue and collaboration regarding this diocesan preparatory phase. In addition, I am so grateful that Pat Oedy-Murray, well known to many of us, will serve as our diocesan contact person, a role called for in the documents.

Together with these consultative bodies and others, through consensus, we were able to settle on a purpose, plan and questions for our engagement in this Synodal path. It was determined that our local efforts need to be both doable and achievable. We have established a local purpose and goal for this Diocesan Phase (Oct 2021-April 2022), based on the worldwide theme provided: “Deepening our **communion** with Christ in the Holy Spirit; Deepening our **participation** with Christ in the Holy Spirit; Deepening our **mission** with Christ in the Holy Spirit.”

Together we considered the fundamental question posed in the documents that guides this consultation of the People of God: "A synodal Church, in announcing the Gospel, 'journeys together:' How is this 'journeying together' happening today in your particular Church? What steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow in our 'journeying together'?" (26, Prep Doc). Following this, we considered the "ten thematic nuclei to be explored" provided by the documents, distilling the questions in each section down to one, so as to provide focus and clarity. We have also considered an electronic component for consultation. It is these focused thematic questions which will be considered in our prayer, discernment, and dialogue throughout the diocese. The fruits of the process will then be synthesized into a brief report which will be submitted to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. The USCCB will then synthesize the insights from all the dioceses in the United States and send them to the Holy See.

Regarding the plan on how the diocesan consultation might best be carried out, there was a consensus around holding a number of diocesan wide prayer and discernment evenings, with multiple deaneries coming together, to encounter the Lord through the Liturgy of the Hours before the Blessed Sacrament, with a *Lectio Divina* and an extended time of prayerful silence to invite the movement of the Holy Spirit; and then an extended time to encounter one another with the focused thematic questions. We will keep you informed when the schedule for these meetings is determined.

In my meetings with the consultative bodies, the participants emphasized how important it was to share what a path of synodality is, and what it is not. To be sure, this path is one of engaging the faithful who, exercising the gifts and charisms of their Baptism, journey together, praying, listening, dialoguing, and discerning how best to live and proclaim Christ and His Gospel. To be sure, the path of synodality is not some sort of political process where participants vote on topics or questions. The Preparatory Document makes clear: "The consultation of the People of God does not imply the assumption within the Church of the dynamics of

democracy based on principals of majority, because there is, at the basis of participation in every synodal process, a shared passion for the common mission of evangelization and not the representation of conflicting interests. In other words, this is an ecclesial process that can only take place 'at the heart of a hierarchically structured community.' It is in the fruitful bond between the *sensus fidei* of the People of God and the magisterial function of the Pastors that the unanimous consensus of the whole Church in the same faith is realized" (14, Prep Doc).

As we embark on such a synodal path in this Diocesan Preparatory Phase, two extremes are to be avoided: on the one hand, the attitude or ideology which, even before any mutual prayer and discernment, has decided that this is a waste of time and there can be no worthwhile outcome; and on the other

hand, the attitude or ideology which, even before any mutual prayer and discernment, has decided that the results must change the nature and teaching of the Church. Instead, it is my sincere hope that our journeying together will be open to the Holy Spirit, strengthening us in communion, participation, and mission!

During this Diocesan Preparatory Phase for the Synod, I invite you to pray the official Prayer of the Synod, *Adsumus Sancte Spiritus* [usccb.org/prayers/prayer-synod-synodality] so that all our efforts, our prayer and discernment and our journeying together in our local Church may bear fruit for our Diocese and for the Church Universal!

+ *Daniel E. Thomas*

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The resources for the Synod on Synodality called for by the Holy Father Pope Francis may be found here: www.synod.va
For diocesan resources, please visit our "Reconnect" website: www.reconnecttoledo.org/synod

