



OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

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My sisters and brothers,

On October 2, 2024, the Second Session of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops began in Rome. On that occasion, bishops from around the world and dozens of religious and lay men and women gathered to reflect on the fruits of the synodal journey that began in 2021 on the theme “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission.” It is a crucial moment for the life of the Church, and I want to encourage each one of you to accompany the work of the Synod participants with your minds, hearts and prayers.

Thinking about this meeting in Rome allows me to reflect on our diocese’s participation in the synod process. More than 7,000 people participated in the synodal conversations that happened in the spring of 2022 to respond to Pope Francis’ invitation to all local churches to contribute to the Synod. Furthermore, diocesan offices and ministries, representatives of the presbyterate, parish catechetical leaders, and members of parish pastoral councils gathered earlier this year to reflect on the document published by the synod assembly that gathered in Rome last October. The fruits of all these moments of conversation and reflection were transmitted to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and used to compile a series of national documents.

Most importantly, though, participating in the Synod has given us an occasion to look at the joys, challenges, and hopes that mark the life of our diocese. I have learned so much from studying the fruits of all the synodal conversations and have kept the needs they identified in mind in these first few months of my episcopal ministry. Please know that I am incredibly grateful to all the people who took part in the Synod in our diocese and all those who made it possible. In particular, I want to express my special gratitude to Bishop Peter Jugis. His support in making such a robust participation in the Synod possible has left me with an amazing gift. Your participation in the Synod has allowed me to gain a clear sense of the needs of our diocese. The hopes you expressed are in my heart and mind, and I pray for the grace to be a shepherd who leads his flock by walking with and listening to you.

In coming months, I will have a chance to reflect more on the themes that emerged in the synodal conversations as I visit you across the diocese. Furthermore, I intend to discern ways to take concrete steps (some already begun) to implement the suggestions emerging from the Synod at the

diocesan and global levels. Finally, I also look forward to following the work of the upcoming synod assembly in Rome and studying the document it will publish and any document that Pope Francis might promulgate in its aftermath.

I realize that for many of you the notion of synodality may sound unfamiliar and abstract. I also know that some look with suspicion and worry at the Synod and are concerned that it may somehow lead the Church astray. To the latter, I want to say: be not afraid! Do not listen to the false prophets of doom who constantly criticize and sow seeds of doubt regarding some things that Pope Francis says and does. The Holy Father has often clarified that the Synod's goal is not to change what the Church teaches but to discern how the Church may embody it more effectively in today's age. That is his job! From the beginning of his pontificate, Pope Francis has told us that his main desire is to allow everyone to experience the joy and fullness that the encounter with Christ makes possible. He does not want a Church that changes its teachings but a Church that becomes filled with missionary disciples that may bring the Good News of the Gospel to everyone. The Synod is a time in which the whole Church comes together to look at the current circumstances and discern how the Holy Spirit is calling us to be credible witnesses of the Risen Lord. If the Synod suggests paths of conversion and reform, it will be to let us enter into the truth of the Gospel more fully and not to stray from it or water it down.

Moreover, synodality helps us to realize the difference between being a believer and being a disciple. Jesus calls us all to be the latter and synodality helps us to realize that this cannot be done in the silo of "my spiritual journey." Rather, discipleship is a communal act and requires first the willingness to hear the call and listen to those with whom we have been called. As the Peace Prayer of St. Francis reminds us so powerfully, it is better to understand than to be understood – that is the heart of this process which Pope Francis is championing.

Synodality is a novel word that describes and suggests ways to embody something that is at the heart of the Christian faith, namely, the notion of communion. Shortly before His Passion, Jesus prayed that His followers might be "one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me" (John 17:21). He also insisted that the greatest commandment is to "love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:26). For these reasons, the apostle John writes that "this is the message you have heard from the beginning: we should love one another" (1 John 4:11). Love – communion with God and with one another – is the center of the Christian life: "beloved, let us love one another, because love is of God; everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God. Whoever is without love does not know God, for God is love" (1 John 4:7). In fact, the Catechism teaches us that the Eucharist, the source and summit of the Christian life, is the sign and cause of the communion in the divine life and the unity of the People of God that allow the Church to exist (cf. CCC, no. 1325). Synodality is a way to live out concretely the communion with God and one another that we are called to.

In particular, synodality helps us to live ecclesial communion in two ways. First, it encourages us to live the Church's daily life in ways that emphasize walking together, supporting each other, and learning from one another. Synodality spurs us to let our lives be inspired by the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. The Lord made Himself present to them by walking with them, opening the Word, and breaking the Bread. Thus, we should live our lives in the Church in the same way.

Second, synodality suggests a way of making and taking decisions in the Church that involves reciprocal listening, dialogue and discernment inspired by the descriptions of the first Christian community in the Acts of the Apostles. Synodality is based upon the conviction that all the baptized are called to participate fully in the life and mission of the Church. Thus, synodality is a way to organize the lives of our communities so that each person may contribute to them according to her responsibility, charism and skills. In this context, those who exercise authority are asked to do so in relational and collaborative ways to recognize and lift up the particular gifts the Lord has given to the faithful for the sake of the whole Church.

Let me clarify that, as Pope Francis and the Synod have explained, synodality is not an end in itself. It is a style and a method that allows the Church to announce the Gospel to contemporary men and women. Synodality exists for the sake of mission so that all the baptized may become "joyful messengers of challenging proposals, guardians of the goodness and beauty which shine forth in a life of fidelity to the Gospel" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 168). Jesus has not made us part of the Church to be in church. Instead, we are gathered by the Lord, shaped by His Word, and nourished by His Eucharistic Body to go and announce the Gospel to all nations and bring His love to all people, especially the poor and the marginalized. Believer or Disciple – which will you be?

It is my heartfelt desire that we all respond with generosity and enthusiasm to Pope Francis' invitation to renew our personal encounter with Christ, let Him heal us from our wounds and sins, and follow His commandment to put out into the deep to shine His light in our world. I am excited to listen to where the Holy Spirit will lead us all as a universal Church as well as the Diocese of Charlotte. May Mary, Mother of the Church, give us the ability to follow her example, her "Yes," and to listen to her words: "do whatever He tells you!"

Peace,



Most Reverend Michael T. Martin, OFM Conv.
Bishop of Charlotte

