

DIOCESE OF SAULT STE. MARIE



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A LISTENING AND DISCERNING CHURCH

Dear brothers and sisters,

As some of you may have heard, Pope Francis has invited the universal Church to participate in the upcoming Synod of Bishops on the topic of synodality. I have asked our parishes to launch the diocesan phase of this journey on the 3rd Sunday of Advent, which is also known as Gaudete Sunday: the Sunday of Rejoicing. With this letter I wish to take a moment and explain a bit further what Pope Francis' invitation to participate means.

Back in the 1960's Saint Pope Paul VI established a universal body called the Synod of Bishops. This body, which meets on average every 3 years, discusses topics established by the Pope. The Bishops of the world elect delegates from their various countries and regions, and other members of the faithful are also present as either members or observers. The usual final product of the Synod is a document presented to the Pope to serve as input for him to write a post-Synodal "exhortation", a kind of summary of the discussions of the meeting that can also serve as a record of decisions and an action plan.

I was blessed to be a delegate to the Synod of Bishops held in 2018. The topic was young people. In addition to Bishops, we were blessed with the presence of men and women religious, experts in theology, representatives from other churches, and a whole host of young people. The hopeful energy in the group was amazing, and one big question we asked ourselves was, "How can we keep this spirit going?" And so, when the Pope asked us what we thought the best topic would be for the next Synod, many of us recommended that it be on the synods themselves, and on the spirit that animated us during our experience together.

The Pope took up this recommendation, and so in 2022 there will be a special Synod of Bishops on the topic of "synodality" itself. To help prepare for this Synod, Pope Francis wants to engage in a vast global consultation on the topic.

So what is "synodality"? At its core is the idea that the Church is ultimately led by the Holy Spirit. This Holy Spirit is given to us in Baptism and our union in the Spirit is strengthened in confirmation, such that everyone (not just clergy) has a part to play in listening to the Holy Spirit's desire for the Church and in making that desire a reality.

What we therefore need to do is make the Church more adept at *listening* to the voice of the Holy Spirit as he acts in the hearts of believers, and more able to *respond* to the will of the Spirit once that voice has been discerned.

Interestingly, we see this kind of institutional listening in all sorts of places. How many times have we been asked to respond to a survey after buying a product or service? It is a form of listening. How many organizations have a telephone number or web page which we can use to raise an issue or complaint? It is a form of listening. How many community groups have meetings where the path forward for the group is determined together? It is a way for listening to turn into common action.

Pope Francis wants our Church to listen more to the Holy Spirit, and to respond to that voice with common action. I am willing to bet he already has a few ideas as to how, but he wants to hear our point of view as well. It just makes sense, given the theme of the Synod.

For myself, I believe a lot in synodality, for all the reasons given above. For this reason I am inviting the people of our Diocese, starting on December 12, the third Sunday of Advent, to begin a time of prayer for the success of the synodal process. Parishes are asked to include an intercession for the Synod, and I ask each of us to include the Synod in our personal prayer. Then, in January, parishes will be invited to allow for small groups to meet and reflect on a series of questions. Finally, any individual or group is welcome to communicate with the Diocese of Sault Ste. Marie to let us know of your hopes and dreams for our Church.

I wish you all the best for the remainder of Advent and for a blessed season of Christmas. May you be blessed, with your families, and be renewed in the grace of Jesus.

Yours in Christ,



+Thomas Dowd
Bishop of Sault Ste. Marie

2021-12-01

