



R.C. DIOCESE OF ABERDEEN

BISHOP'S OFFICE

St Mary's House, 14 Chanonry, Aberdeen AB24 1RP

E-mail: bishophugh@rcda.scot

Bishop of Aberdeen
Rt Rev Hugh Gilbert O.S.B.

Pastoral Letter for the 2nd Sunday of Ordinary Time To be read and / or otherwise distributed on 15 / 16 January 2022

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I hope you have been refreshed by the celebrations of Christmas and New Year.

As you know, Pope Francis has invited the whole Church to embark on a “synodal journey”, one that will climax at the next Synod of Bishops in October 2023.

This is new language for us. What is it about? The English words “synod”, “synodal”, “synodality” have roots in the ancient languages. There, they suggest “*travelling together*” and “*meeting together*”. The early Church used them.

At the organisational level, “Synods”, *meetings* of bishops and others, have been a feature of Church life ever since. They were called to discuss major issues and come to good decisions. At a deeper level though, these words can help us see what the Church is. According to St John Chrysostom, “Church” is “a name for travelling together” – being synodal¹. The Church is the community of believers, an organic whole, the People of God, the Body of Christ, a “sacrament of unity”. The Church is all of us who believe, and she and we are on a common journey through time to eternity, through the ups and downs of history, to the heavenly Jerusalem God will show us. She “presses forwards”, as St Augustine says, “between the persecutions of the world and the consolations of God”.² Through her missionary activity, she works to draw the whole of humanity with her. The Lord appointed the apostles to lead and guide her in his name, a role passed on to the bishops and their helpers in the priesthood and diaconate. The Church is hierarchical in structure. At the same time, though, she can be called “synodal”. We “are all companions on the way”, wrote St Ignatius of Antioch, “God-bearers and temple-bearers, Christ-bearers, bearers of holy things”.³ We are all responsible for one another, fellow¹-travellers, bearing one another’s burdens. “A single Christian is no Christian”, wrote St Cyprian. “In the one Spirit, says St Paul, we were all baptised into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free - and all were made to drink of one Spirit”.⁴ And St John: “you have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all have knowledge”.⁵ So, whatever the variety of

1 *Commentary* on Ps 149.1.

2 *City of God*, 18, 51, 2.

3 Eph 9:1.

4 1 Cor 13:12.

vocations and graces, offices and ministries among us, all Christians “are called, each according to his or her particular condition, to exercise the mission which God entrusted to the Church to fulfil in the world”.⁶ Before and after all the distinctions, there is what we have in common: “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all”.⁷ We are members of one Body moved by the one Holy Spirit. And generation after generation we make our way, side by side, from this world to the Father.

The Holy Father wants this self-awareness to revive in us. He is echoing the Second Vatican Council and its teaching. He wants the Church to fire on all cylinders, to mobilise its full potential. He is hoping for a new culture among us: not passivity but engagement, not isolation but participation, with clericalism and sectarianism left in the past. Like all humanity, the Church is not enjoying an easy passage at present. There have been self-inflicted wounds, internal divisions, pressures from a de-christianised society and all the rest. The pandemic has not helped. There is general uncertainty about the future. In simple practical terms, the Pope wants us to respond by drawing closer together: to *meet together* in order to *journey together* better: to meet, listen and discern.⁸ A first stage in this will be meetings within the parishes and the different communities and associations in the diocese. These are now ready to begin. I do encourage you to take part. Our Diocesan Synodal Team has been working hard to find facilitators to guide discussions and has met with an enthusiastic response. Thank you to them! We are to ask ourselves what our experience of being a “synodal” Church is, how it falls short and how we might better it. The Pope calls for a process of discernment “that unfolds in adoration, in prayer and in dialogue with the word of God.” So, it’s good to begin with shared Bible reading and / or Eucharistic adoration. It’s not about pressing our own agendas, but discovering the Lord’s with the help of each other. In the Gospels, we see how our Lord interacted with his disciples, and in the Acts of the Apostles⁹ we see how the early Church responded to the challenges it faced. By means of these discussions, and further deanery and diocesan meetings, it is hoped that by mid-August we can arrive at some insights and decisions, and share these with other dioceses and finally with the whole Church.

And let’s not forget: we are most “synodal” when, Sunday after Sunday, we meet together to celebrate the Eucharist!

We need be neither cynical nor in illusion about this process. Let us, rather, be *realistic* and *hopeful*. It is not about changing the essential nature of the Church or of submitting everything to majority votes. But neither is it about endorsing the status quo. It is about sharing what is in our hearts as members of the Church, and with the help of the Holy Spirit seeing more clearly what the Lord is inviting us to do at this time. It’s to increase our joy in being members of the Church, heal wounds and

⁵ 1 Jn 2:20.

⁶ *Code of Canon Law*, c. 204/1

⁷ Eph 4:5-6.

⁸ cf. Homily of Pope Francis for 10 October 2021

⁹ Eg. Ch. 10.

rekindle our missionary zeal. Hidden in the language of synodality is the Greek word for “way” (*hodos*). Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth and the life”.¹⁰ If we bring our water, he will turn it into his wine. May our efforts be blessed by God and bring us together along the way of Christ!

Yours devotedly in Christ,

+*Hugh* OSB

Synod Prayer

We stand before You, Holy Spirit,
As we gather together in Your name.

With You alone to guide us,
make Yourself at home in our hearts;
Teach us the way we must go
And how we are to pursue it.

We are weak and sinful;
do not let us promote disorder.
Do not let ignorance lead us down the wrong path
nor partiality influence our actions.

Let us find in You our unity
so that we may journey together to eternal life
and not stray from the truth
and what is right.

All this we ask of You,
who are at work in every place and time,
in the communion of the Father and the Son,
forever and ever. Amen.

13 January 2022

Hugh Gilbert OSB
Bishop of Aberdeen

¹⁰ Jn 14:6