

## PASTORAL LETTER

### CONTINUING THE SYNODAL JOURNEY

My dear brothers and sisters in the faith I am here adding my piece in the dialogue, the exchange, the sharing and the journey that we have embarked upon in response to Pope Francis' invitation to the whole church to participate in the Synod on Synodality.

I have had the opportunity, and indeed the privilege, to sit in on some of the sessions in parishes, I have read individual parish reports and the summary document and my first response to all of this is to thank everyone for your engagement, your input, your feedback, your insights and your genuine interest and involvement in your parish and in your Church. A special thanks to Ms Roxanne Douglas and Sr. Elizabeth Small RSM for taking the lead on this process. Thank you, Parish coordinators, for keeping the links between parishes and the Synod Team and thanks to the Team for collating and ensuring the progress of the process.

It is clear in the report, from the comments, the map the photographs and the charts, that our Diocese is very special in so many ways; diverse, an English-speaking Diocese with Caribbean characteristics uniquely placed in South America touching into the Amazon region. A Catholic population present in all regions in Guyana, fully present in the ethnicity and very present in the indigenous communities. The Diocese has rich origins and a rich history that has brought us to where we are now. The invitation of Pope Francis to Synodality presents a unique opportunity to consolidate the gifts and goodness with which God has blessed us and shape the journey ahead together.

**Spiritual joys** was the first heading in the Diocesan Synod Report and faith communities expressed how much the liturgy, sacraments and parish events meant to them in giving a sense of identity and belonging and an experience of family and a sense of being "part of something much greater than ourselves". This is worthy of capture, that we register it, be proud of it, remember the catechesis and examples we had and be ready to continue the tradition. St. Paul in writing to Timothy mentions Timothy's "sincere faith" which first resided with his mother and grandmother and counsels Timothy to "fan into a flame the gift of God that you possess" (2 Tim 1:5-6). In the Synod process we have been able to pause and listen and pay attention to the spiritual and the joys that we otherwise might have taken for granted or overlooked.

**Concerns** followed as a section in the Synod report. The main concerns mentioned were in relation to priests; their presence, their ministry, their availability, their capacity to understand and assimilate into the culture in order to effectively accompany and journey with the people of God in their care. Thank you for reflecting these concerns back to us, the ordained ministers of the Church. We must now take these concerns into our own reflection and evaluation. A quick look at the chart on page seven (7) of the report contextualizes the richness of the harvest and the few who have signed on to labour. Our continuing journey as a church would call on us to reflect together, people and pastors,

to explore new paradigms, new ways of being Church, especially factoring in and bringing to the fore the priesthood that is stamped into our baptism.

“We must make time and space for listening” is the concluding sentence in the section of the report headed **Communication**. The first sentence and indeed the first word in St. Benedict’s Rule for monks is “Listen carefully ... with the ear of your heart”. It is good news that the report has brought to light the expressions of desire of persons and communities to know of the life and well-being of others in the Diocese. The cross-fertilization of strengths and best practices can be so uplifting and encouraging. The use of media to create the links and effect wider awareness, sharing and exchange was brought up in parish Synod sessions and reflected in the report. During the time of Covid more options of media came to the fore - streaming, Zoom, increased digital and social media dissemination of the Catholic Standard. When we opened the Synod in October 2021 we did so with joint virtual celebration. Some of the connections were tenuous but the initiative opened the way to imagine and create the networks that could serve a fuller communion, knowledge, celebration, witness and mission.

**Youth** was cited as a deep concern which I share. I am particularly anxious about the harsh elements - violence, corruption, deception, disrespect, break down in relationships - that permeate the society and reach into the lives of our young people. I am perturbed over the threatening influences that stalk our youth especially through social media where our young people may venture in natural curiosity or to meet their peers. This concern has surfaced on a number of occasions when parishes or cluster and at the Diocesan level members of the faithful have gathered to reflect on pertinent matters in the Church. More than ever our young people need the Church to offer them validation, affirmation, a wholesome sense of worth and identity, a good moral framework with deep conviction of the sanctity of life. The whole Church, a Synodal Church, needs to turn to our young people with resolve and offer this to them.

Listed as a concern, and I am happy to see it emerge in the synodal conversations, is the area of **Social Issues**. The Church has a rich body of Social Teachings that have taken form in its commitment to education, medical outreach, outreach to the vulnerable. Our Diocese over time, faithful to the Gospel and the Social Teachings of the Church, has an impressive legacy of education, medical outreach, care for the poor, and advocacy and testimony through the printed media. In these expressions of faith is the clear evidence of awareness and extensive involvement of the lay faithful. The Sword of the Spirit, St. Vincent de Paul, Ladies of Charity, various guilds and solidarities showed a church fully alive. I am often approached with questions like “What is the Church saying?” or “What is the Bishop saying?” or “What is the Church doing?” Valid questions coming from sources where there is a perceived void and the Church is seen to be the agent that is best poised to address the void. Today under the heading of “Integral Human Development” the Church, guided by the Dicastery in the Vatican, focuses on early and ongoing formation in morals and conscience that would equip all of God’s people to live lives worthy of their dignity and worthy of their baptism so that when the Church speaks it is the whole Church speaking. Let us ensure that this will be an important part of our conversation going forward.

A bit of a sad note surfaces under the topic of **Participation**. I refer to the reported hindrances such as “Fear of criticism”, “interpersonal conflict”, “elders who hold on to positions.” That it is in the report means that it is in the hearts and minds of the faithful. These concerns have appeared in other reports as being debilitating elements in our communities. I often question where this comes from and why these things override our Christian ethos. A Gospel text that stands out for me is Jesus saying emphatically to his disciples when they are squabbling about titles and positions, “This must not happen to you”. (Luke 22:24ff, Mt 20:24ff, Mk 10:41ff). Rather the way of the Gospel is that of service, compassion, forgiveness and going the extra mile. The Christian is charged with bringing good news and harmony and communion to the world, not discord and dissonance. The text from the Synod document that stands out for me is under the heading “What is the aim of this Synod? Objectives of the Synodal Process” where it says:

“in this sense, it is clear that the purpose of this Synod is not to produce more documents. Rather, it is intended to inspire people to dream about the Church we are called to be, to make people’s hopes flourish, to stimulate trust, to bind up wounds, to weave a new and deeper relationships, to learn from one another, to build bridges, to enlighten minds, warm hearts and restore strength to our hands for our common mission. Thus the objective of this Synodal Process is not only a series of exercises that start and stop, but rather a journey of growing authentically towards the communion and mission that God calls the Church to live out in the third millennium.”

“The **Mission** that God calls the Church to live out in the third Millennium”. We are beckoned to this mission. In the words of Pope Francis “the world in which we live, and which we are called to love and serve, even with its contradictions, demands that the Church strengthen cooperation in all areas of her mission ... every one of the baptized should feel involved in the ecclesial and social change that we so greatly need. This change calls for a personal and communal conversion that makes us see things as the Lord does.”

Though the topic of **vocations** was not presented under its own heading, or as a section, the Synod Report stated that “fourteen of the seventeen reports mentioned ... the desire for local vocations to the priesthood, religious life and permanent diaconate”. We often recite the prayer for vocations and I particularly warm to the opening of the prayer that takes us to our Baptism, that primary point of reference, “... called by name ... member of the church ...” and the closing which invokes God’s Spirit “... to guide and strengthen me that I may serve your people following the example of Jesus Christ...” It is my strong belief that the more every Catholic lives their Baptism, their Christian vocation, the more it would become natural for individuals, especially among our younger members, to take the further step to full commitment. We must all be part of vocation formation.

With the Diocesan Report submitted, the first stage, the initial part of the Synod process has been completed and I restate and underscore my gratitude to all who participated. We began with a Diocesan event in October 2021 and I am proposing that we conclude

this stage of the process at our Christmas Novena this year taking up nine areas of listening and sharing in the Report and offer them in prayer as we anticipate the birth of Our Lord Jesus Christ remembering why he chose to dwell among us and what now are the elements of birth and new life that we wish God to bring to our Diocese as we continue our journey of listening and sharing that would open ways to enter a “New Jerusalem” less encumbered by our fears and anxieties and noticeably alive in Communion, Participation and Mission.

May the coming of Our Saviour at his birth bring abundant blessings to all.

+ Francis Alleyne OSB  
Bishop of Georgetown

Given this 8th day of December 2022