

## LENTEN MESSAGE 2023

*Every year during Lent, we search anew for the experience of the Paschal mystery in everyday life. In this year's Lenten message we would like to report on the synodal journey that we have so far completed, the continental phase which is going on now and the path we still have journey together. In our pastoral plan we indicated that the synodal way is not an additional or separate spearhead of our plans, but it is like the oil that needs to be applied to all those distinctive areas so that the gears of the pastoral plan do not get stuck.*

# The synodal Church: communion, participation and mission

1. Sinds October 2021 we have joined on the path of a worldwide synodal process, in preparation of the Synod of Bishops which will take place in October 2023 in Rome on the theme: *For a Synodal Church: Communio, Participatio and Missio*. Synod literally means: journeying together. On this journey we want to include everyone, also those who stand at the sidelines or who are overlooked, to listen in all openness to each other, to the Holy Spirit and to God's Word. It's about a different way of being church. A church that desires to be the leaven, the salt and the light of the world.

# The path we've traveled so far

## *Growing awareness*

2. With over eight hundred people we embarked upon an intense dialogue. People felt free to speak their minds and got inspired by the opinions of others. In the sharing of information, a close bond was forged between participants and the awareness grew that we are church together and that the church is ours. This awareness pertained to both the parish as well as the diocese. We felt that all was connected with all, and everyone with everyone.

## *Turning point*

3. For many, the discussions led to a conversion. The church was no longer seen as an institute led by the bishop and the priests, but more as a home where we live together as brothers and sisters, and work together toward a common goal, the kingdom of God, which encompasses much more than our Church alone. We also learned that there is a diversity of views in the church and that each should be respected without losing the Catholic identity in the process.

## *Spiritual dimension*

4. The discussions began with prayer and were conducted in a prayerful atmosphere, where all were aware that we needed to listen not only to one another but also to the Holy Spirit. What does the Spirit want us to do in this time of poverty, war, climate change, but also a time of the growing equality between men and women, respect for indigenous cultures and nature with her biodiversity, an optimistic time with groundbreaking inventions in the communications technology, like the internet and mobile telephones with easy access to information, and sadly also

misinformation and manipulation. The world has become smaller and more cosmopolitan. Information about faith and the discussion about faith issues can now be shared with one another worldwide using cheap and easy means.

The participants themselves came to the conclusion that truth is not simply defined by the majority but that differing opinions must also be verified with the Bible and the teachings of the Church. Within the diocese, and even within parishes, the faithful encounter diverging ways of prayer. Some prefer silent and solemn prayer, while others wish to be more expressive. Within the church there needs to be more room for diversity. We have learned to be more tolerant toward each other and open to new things.

### *Striking the golden mean*

5. From the discussions it was put forth that local ideas and desires should be realized in dialogue with the universal church. This should be a continual process where there is reciprocal listening to one another. Each parish has its strong and its weak sides. The challenges and opportunities can also differ strongly from parish to parish. It is therefore quite necessary that these issues are talked out so that proper choices can be made. Parishes may differ from each other, because they are composed differently and have other needs. We can be one without being uniform. The deeper unity is found in the sacraments, most especially in the Eucharist.

### ***Dreaming of an ideal church***

6. The ideal church we dream of is one where God's kingdom has dawned. In this church, the gospel of Jesus Christ is fully lived. Where Christ is all in all. Other characteristics of the ideal church are: justice and peace, mercy, faith, hope and love, transparency, hospitality and kindness. A sense of belonging to the same family prevails, where everybody is respected and everyone can be himself. There is no discrimination based on ethnicity, gender, sexual preference, or social status. Everyone is equal before Christ. Everyone should be open to be formed by Christ into a child of God.

### ***Organization and leadership***

7. Above all, the parish needs strong structures where anyone can participate according to the talents one possesses. Within these structures we should work together with young and old, so that experience and entrepreneurship come together. This warrants stability and continuity. These structures should not only be aimed inwardly, but they should also be socially relevant. We need to work for justice and peace, unity among the various ethnic groups, and much attention should be given to the preservation of nature. The church should be keenly aware that not all can be done by volunteers and that a certain level of professionalism is required. This will certainly cost money and that should be generated by the faithful themselves. Those who are in positions of leadership within the organizations and structures of the church, need to be humble, with a capacity to listen to others and be committed. They need to display a servant leadership and be especially skilled in collaborating with others.

### ***What are our strong sides?***

8. As the first and most important strong side the Eucharist was named, along with the other sacraments which comprise the whole of life. An especially positive side of our church is that we have strong institutes and structures which can withstand the tests of time. So we have, for example, our own schools to help guide the education of our children. The care for the elderly is well-organized but still very expensive and unaffordable for those with average incomes. There are many strong families – even though not all have a Christian marriage as their basis – which constitute the archetypal backbone of the church. This becomes evident in all the baptisms of children, and that first communion and confirmation als initiation sacraments are still highly appreciated. At anniversaries, blessing of homes, businesses, factories and other objects, funeral services, pilgrimages, etc. it is very obvious each time how deeply rooted the faith still is and how far people are prepared to go to express their faith at these occasions. There are active church-goers and many volunteers who do the work out of love. We have good communication media like Omhoog, Radio Immanuel, t.v. programs and social media networks. We have dedicated and well educated priests and deacons and religious sisters, who dedicate themselves completely to the church and the people. We have a strong social involvement and we do not shy away from denouncing injustice.

### ***What are our weak sides?***

9. There are too few priests for such a large number of faithful, who in addition live far apart from each other, speak different languages, have different cultures, en belong to a diversity of ethnic groups. Worship, especially in towns and districts, is done predominantly in Dutch, while not everyone is fluent in that language. Where a priest is absent, church life declines. The parish is too dependent on the initiatives of the parish priest or what he can cope with. In the

interior of Suriname, the long practiced pastoral ministry for that part of our country has ensured that church life can continue qualitatively well without the permanent presence of a priest. Our towns and districts can learn from this.

10. There is a lack of knowledge of the Bible and the church. There are parents who themselves do not go to church, but they do send their children. These children stop coming as soon as they can decide for themselves. There are Catholics who are not proud of their church and do not defend their faith. There can also be harsh judgement of others and there is not enough appreciation for each other's work. There is the impression that many have left the church, although the official statistics of the country provide another picture. There exists duplicit or multiplicit affiliation, i.e. people belong simultaneously to the Catholic church, to an evangelical church and to the Winti religion. Without being bothered with some inner contradiction, people can switch codes as it suits them. It is also quite notable that few men go to church and the religious upbringing of children is left to the mothers. Singing in church leaves much to be desired. The music has not kept up with the times and culture of the people. Catholics are generally not very open to newcomers. They do not get special attention to feel at home, but they are left to find their own way. Church is often in the last place on the list of priorities, very often after recreation and sport. People care more for worldly affairs than for God.

### ***What are our chances?***

11. We are nominally the largest church in Suriname. We ought to keep that lead by being more missionary. Catholics are reluctant to stand up for their faith and they therefore need to allow themselves to receive formation in that regard. We should endeavour to draw others to us with our exemplary lives and we need also to make

better use of the modern means of communication that we possess. All this requires training and formation, in order to produce programs with good content. In general, Catholics offer minimal financial support for the maintenance of the church. With a focused stewardship program all of us could ensure that the church becomes financially stable and no longer be constantly begging for funds. We have an extensive network of schools, boarding houses, nursing homes, sports and formation centers, but we hardly employ them to pass on the Catholic values and norms. We do too little to make sure that in our institutes we appoint well motivated Catholic individuals who are prepared to go the extra mile for the weak in our society. The way marriage preparation is done needs to improve. The preparation and accompaniment of couples for marriage needs to be done more professionally and systematically. By increasing our knowledge of the Bible we can better fulfil our spiritual and social tasks. We belong to an international church and we can therefore access those contacts that can help us grow into a church that is capable of carrying out her missionary mandate and make Christ known to all of creation. We are familiar with dedicated priests and religious and we need to be more open to other forms of community life. For example, communities that do not require lifelong commitment or where married couples can also be members of a religious community. The Catholic church in Suriname is furthermore characterized by a close collaboration in ecumenical context within the Council of Christian Churches (CCK), and the inter-religious dialogue is structured within the Inter-Religious Council (IRIS), where the bishop is the president. Many social questions are discussed and addressed within these contexts.

### ***What are the threats and obstacles?***

12. From an historical perspective, we are a church that was ministered by Dutch priests and religious for many centuries. We

have never properly learned to be independent. A lot of money came from the Netherlands and the church is still very much dependent on foreign donors for the funding of projects. We urgently need to learn how to be financially independent and also invest in a vocations ministry, so that our church can be led by priests and religious from our own soil. Where we have listened to little to each other we will need to pay more attention to good mutual communication, so as to avoid division and conflict amongst ourselves. We need to stop working in isolation, where every parish only cares for itself. The awareness that we are one big family needs to grow. An enormous threat comes also from the influence of Western values and norms: materialism and individualism are growing on a daily basis. The extended family structures of old are falling apart and increasingly more people are left to fend for themselves. A great obstacle is the impoverishment of the Surinamese population due to negative economic growth in the country. The result is that people are more than ever occupied with survival and little time and money remains for other things like faith.

### *Subjects that are taboo or sensitive*

13. During the deliberations we became painfully aware that there are subjects in the Catholic church which we still cannot discuss openly and freely. The position of women in the church is perhaps the most sensitive of them all. Although in general women are the ones who sustain the church, they are still excluded from the ordained offices of priesthood and diaconate. Women can, however, still exert a lot of influence in the church and there are gradually more and more women in leadership positions in het church. Still, the discussion in the church on this topic continues to falter and remain unsatisfactory. Because of an increase in divorces at young ages more and more people feel left out by the church.



The church's attitude is regarded as inflexible while many civilly remarried persons desire to do more with their faith.

The topic of celibacy is also viewed as a taboo subject, even though there are enough young men who would like to join the priesthood if there were no requirement for celibacy. The abuse of power by priests is also viewed as a sensitive topic. People who have clashed with a priest often have nowhere to go to appeal their case, do not feel heard and are no longer included in church activities. Minority groups like homosexuals, transgenders, feel ostracized and find it difficult to properly live their faith within the community.

## **The continental phase**

14. After we had completed the diocesan phase of the synod, the Caribbean bishops composed a synthesis for all the Caribbean countries and islands that are member of the Antilles Episcopal Conference. The position of the church in Suriname shows remarkable similarity with the other Caribbean countries. The differences are just in geographical positioning whereby the island nations face a greater threat from hurricanes due to climate change. Also, many islands are much more dependent on the tourism industry and the problems that flow from that. Suriname has a greater challenge when it comes to inter-religious dialogue because of the multi-religious composition of the population. The continental phase succeeds the phase which the episcopal conferences have now completed. This continental phase is now in full swing.

## How do we proceed?

15. The awareness that we are a synodal church has already taken root in all who actively participate in church life. More and more, decisionmaking is postponed until all are heard and have had a say. This wider consultation has also enabled that people get to know each other and the problems better. This creates a stronger bond among people and promotes the participation of all. What now remains is for us to dare to become more missionary. That will be a great and difficult step, because it has become almost like a reflex of Catholics to not flaunt their beliefs. However, when we think mission, we don't mean campaigns and billboards to draw people to us, but a Christian lifestyle like the first Christians had, so that people can say: *See how they love each other! I also wish to belong to that group.*

16. In the first round we have fallen short in having a serious conversation with societal groups like sport clubs, journalists, medics and other scientists, politicians and social institutes. This is something that we still need to do. In composing annual programs and action plans to execute the diocesan pastoral plan, the synodal path is pre-eminently the way in which to realize those endeavours. In doing so, we will notice that it is more about the bonds we develop with one another than about the goals we accomplish together. There we will experience the joy of the resurrection, without actually being focused on it explicitly. This is God's miraculous way of working in our lives.

17. We can conclude that the synodal path feels like that which those on the road to Emmaus experienced. They were dejected, disappointed and in despair. They were going downhill, away from Jerusalem, the city of peace. And while they were on the road with

their sorrows, Jesus joins them unnoticed, listens to them attentively and then explains the Scriptures to them. A warm feeling develops in their hearts. Their hospitality is rewarded when Jesus turns his role as guest into host, takes the bread and blesses it. They recognize Him as the risen Lord in the breaking of the bread, but He disappears out of their sight. This is the miracle that we experience every time we journey together to celebrate the Eucharist.



*+Karel Choennie*  
*Bishop of Paramaribo*