**Synod 2021-2023**

**Two-year journey to guide the future of the Church begins at the local level**

How is your parish journeying together; and how should we be journeying together into the future as a universal Church? These are the fundamental questions the Holy Father wants the faithful to prayerfully and reflectively consider and document as the Church moves further into the third millennium.

Pope Francis opened the worldwide Synod on Synodality on October 9, 2021, to give a voice to the faithful and a roadmap for the Church. The process begins now for the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston.

In early September, Rev. Msgr. Eugene Ostrowski directed all pastors in the diocese to select a representative to coordinate their parish(s) synodal consultation process presented by the Vatican. These coordinators are tasked with conducting listening sessions in the local parishes (and missions), and maintaining records of those conversations to be presented to the diocese. This first phase of the two-year process which begins at the parish level gets to the heart of the synodal process, according to the Pontiff. The purpose is not to dwell on a church in peril, but to work together and guide the future of the Church with the Holy Spirit as our guide.

“Synodality” is the new buzzword coming from Pope Francis. While many Catholics may not be familiar with this word and its meaning the Holy Father wants to change that.

So, what is “Synodality” according to the pontiff? It “is much more than the celebration of ecclesial meetings and Bishops’ assemblies, or a matter of simple internal administration within the Church; it is the specific *modus vivendi et operandi* (way of living and working) of the Church, the People of God, which reveals and gives substance to her being as communion when all her members journey together, gather in assembly, and take an active part in her evangelizing mission,” the synod documents state.

The General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops with the Holy Father declared the theme “For a Synodal Church: communion, participation, and mission.” Pope Francis said the key to success is having the faithful “to journey together” toward Christ and discern how the Holy Spirit is guiding us to grow as a Church into the third millennium.

The diocese will conduct training sessions in the six vicariates – Beckley, Charleston, Clarksburg, Martinsburg, Parkersburg, and Wheeling - for the local coordinators of the parishes and missions “to prepare and gather the People of God, so they can give voice to their experience in their local church,” the Vatican handbook for the Synod states.

In order for the parish listening sessions to be truly productive and on task, the local gatherings will be held in a “spiritual setting that supports openness in sharing as well as hearing.”

The Vatican guidelines call for listening, dialogue, and community discernment sessions in which each and every person can participate and contribute. Coordinators will be trained on how to avoid pitfalls including the temptation to only focus on the problems of the Church, noting “fixating on the problems will only lead us to be overwhelmed, discouraged, and cynical.” When we allow ourselves to foster the negative, we are not allowing the Holy Spirit to show us how God can work more fully in our lives and the life of the Church. The goal must focus on “walking together” forward into the future.

While we learn from the past, the journey is not about where we have been, but where we are headed. The Holy Father wants this process to strengthen our unity in Christ as we pray that the Holy Spirit will “work in us so that we may be a community and a people of grace.”

This synodal journey will involve all the baptized - pastors, deacons, lay faithful, parish associations, consecrated men and women and other participatory bodies of the local churches. Pope Francis notes in the documents that special care must be made to personally reach out to those who otherwise may be excluded, including “those who have left the church, those who rarely or never practice their faith, those who experience poverty or marginalization, refugees, (youth) etc.” The document also states that “no one – no matter their religious affiliation – should be excluded from sharing their perspective…, insofar as they want to help the Church on her synodal journey of seeking what is good and true.”

Further the Vatican documents note it is critical in the local diocesan phase to foster participation. The training for coordinators will encourage involving others who hold different views. “Listening to those who have the same views as we do bears no fruit,” the documents state. “We must make a special effort to listen to those we may be tempted to see as unimportant and those who force us to consider new points of view that may change our way of thinking.”

Pope Francis’ vision for synodality includes having specific attitudes such as humility, patience, openness to conversion and change, ability to turn away from prejudices and stereotypes, the will to learn from one another, hopefulness, and forward thinking.

Once the information is collected a synthesis will be written about the discussions. These documents will then go to the diocese in March, and then to the episcopal conferences in April, where they will compile the input and feedback in order to formulate syntheses that reflect the local level contributions. This phase is to be completed by September of 2022.

The initial working documents then become part of the international meetings of the seven continental assemblies in order to produce a working document for the Vatican by June 2023. All of this information that began at our local parishes and missions will ultimately be used by the Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in October 2023. The Vatican council of bishops, selected from around the world, will counsel and consult the Pontiff on how the People of God around the world with the Holy Spirit as their guide discerned as the way the Church journey together to carry out her mission and continue the work of Jesus Christ on earth.

**Prayer for the Synod:**

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 way of 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.

**What to expect at the Parish Level**

Each parish or in smaller congregations a group of parish(s) and missions will hold a consultation and listening session. The faithful are encouraged to be alert to their parish’s routine means of communication, such as bulletins, websites, social media pages, and emails, which will announce specific details about their local synod process.

These gatherings will be sensitive to COVID-19 and offered in-person. Other accommodations may be made to adapt to the needs of the community. These will be determined at the local level and communicated by the parish. The focus will be on maximum inclusion and participation.

The experience will be structured in order to keep the conversation productive so the coordinator can write the working document effectively. It is not a time for defamation, but a time for authentic reflection and prayerful discernment as we journey together. The Holy Father emphasizes the synodal process “is first and foremost a spiritual process. It is not a mechanical data-gathering exercise or a series of meetings and debates.”

Coordinators will pose two fundamental questions:

1. How is this “journeying together” happening today in your local Church?
2. What steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow in our “journeying together”?

Before responding to the coordinator, we are asked to:

* *Recall* our experiences: What experiences of our local Church does this question call to mind?
* *Reflect* on these experiences in greater depth: What joys did they bring? What difficulties and obstacles have they encountered? What wounds did they reveal? What insights have they elicited?
* *Gather* the fruits to share: Where in these experiences does the voice of the Holy Spirit resound? What is the Spirit asking of us? What are the points to be confirmed, the prospects for change, the steps to be taken? Where do we register a consensus? What paths are opening up for our local Church?

Synod documents state, the two interrelated goals of the process are to listen to God, so we may hear the cry of His people; and to listen to His people until we are in harmony to do what God calls us.

The process from October 2021 to April 2022 will include information gathered from discussions not only among parishes, but also Catholic schools, religious congregations, and other groups whose voices are seldom heard, but together desire to deepen communion, obtain fuller participation, and strengthen the mission of the Church.

The documents from the local levels collected by March 2022, as well as the diocesan level finalized in April 2022, will not be generic notes that record everything that was said, but rather a document that reflects the spirit, attitude, and dreams of the faithful for the Church.

**Bishop Mark Brennan’s Role**

The primary role for Most Rev. Bishop Mark Brennan will be to listen to the People of God he shepherds. In order to complete this task, he has appointed Rev. Msgr. Eugene Ostrowski as the diocesan contact person for the synodal process in the diocese to assist the priests and parish coordinators in the diocese. Bishop Brennan will also communicate with the Diocesan Pastoral Council, the Presbyteral Council, and other pastoral ministries, as well as listen to their feedback to be included in the diocesan synthesis. He will also oversee Monsignor Ostrowski with the formation of a diocesan synodal team, who will be charged with creating a document reflective of the local parishes’ reports. This team will reflect the diversity of the diocese in laity, clergy, men, women, young, old, etc. Bishop Brennan is to also ensure the diocesan synthesis is an honest report of all that was shared in order to build and strengthen the Holy Church.