

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time, B – Opening of Diocesan Phase of the Synod – October 17, 2021
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham – 5pm Sat. Vigil; 7:15 & 11am Sunday Masses – 675 words
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Bishop Raica has directed all priests in the diocese to use a special set of prayers for Masses this Sunday, namely the “Mass for a Council or Synod”, as we open the diocesan phase of the universal synod that the Holy Father, Pope Francis has called for the Church. This local phase is a lead-up and is meant to be a time of listening that will then help guide the bishops and others as they meet with the Holy Father in 2023. Indeed, the pope himself has clarified that this process is “not about gathering opinions, no ... it is about listening to the Holy Spirit”.¹ This is a key point to which I will return in a moment.

But first, a little history on synods. A “synod” is a council or a meeting; the word comes from the ancient Greek for “journeying together”. This concept has existed in one form or another throughout the Church’s history. Its present form dates back more or less to the First Synod of Bishops that Pope Paul VI called in 1965; periodically, since then, there have been either regional or universal synods called to assist the Holy Father in his governance of the Church Universal. These have often resulted in documents that were meant to give renewed impetus to one aspect or another of the Church’s mission.

So a synod is, in a certain sense, one of the instruments that the pope has in his tool bag for governing the Church. And it is one that Pope Francis has been emphasizing increasingly throughout his papacy, such that he now desires that it become a collaborative framework within which the Church operates on all levels. This initial diocesan phase, which goes through Easter, will be marked especially with prayer, adoration, and *lectio divina*; but also with encounters for dialogue that Bishop Raica is organizing around the northern half of the state. We will of course publish those schedules as they become available.

Now the gospel today is instructive as we respond to the Holy Father’s initiative, for in it, the Lord emphasizes the exercise of authority with humility and a servant’s heart. The gospel is, therefore, not a burden to be brought to bear on others, but a gift to be put to the benefit of all. We are continually challenged to the humble service of others, and through that service, to bear witness to Christ and the hope he gives. St. John the Baptist said it best: “He must increase, I must decrease” – this could well be a motto for us all. The pope desires that the synodal process purify the Church of any and all abuse of power.

The risk that is always run with any initiative like this – and those who work in the corporate world can attest – is that of becoming a sort of echo chamber in which we charm ourselves with our own design and plans. We could have encounters of dialogue and end up only sharing our own ideas, instead of humbly listening to God and obediently carrying out his plan. Thus the Holy Father spoke as if to say, “before you can listen rightly to each other, you must listen to the Holy Spirit – you have to hear and obey God”. Therefore, prayer will be a big part of this initiative, and we all pray that God’s will be done.

Bishop Raica has thus asked us to include a specific petition in the intercessions from now until Easter, but we should also make God’s will for the synod our own private intention besides. As your pastor, I invite you to take part in the local synodal initiatives and to share what you believe the Lord is telling you – both with the bishop and with me, especially when it relates to our great parish and its mission in downtown Birmingham. We know well that our relationship with God is never just “me and Jesus”, but “Jesus, me, and all our brothers and sisters” – that we are journeying together on the path to heaven.

¹ Discourse of the Holy Father Pope Francis to the Faithful of the Diocese of Rome, 18 September 2021.