

**Together in Mission**

**A Time to Begin Again**

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**A Pastoral Letter convoking a Diocesan Synod**

### **Together in Mission – A Time to Begin Again**

In recent years the journey or “Camino” to Santiago de Compostela in Spain has become popular. People who go on it say it’s a life-changing experience; they get time to think; they meet interesting people along the way; they strike up conversations with fellow pilgrims that leave a deep impression; they discover a new direction in their life; they work out some problem that might be hurting them; they come back with a new vision.

With this pastoral letter I invite all of us in the Diocese of Limerick to set out together on a “Camino”. What I have in mind is what the Church calls a “Synod”. In deciding to convoke the Synod I have consulted with the College of Consultors, the Priests’ Council and lay members of the Pastoral Areas. It will be the first Synod for our Diocese since the 1930s and indeed in Ireland since the 1950s.

#### **What is a Synod?**

The actual meaning of the word “Synod” is “journeying together”. It is a long-established practice in the Church to use this term for significant meetings where members of the Church come together to review things and make decisions. Pope Francis describes a Synod as a “wonderful experience”, “an intense moment of growth”.

In our case the Synod will be a large three-day meeting with around 400 representatives of the life of faith in this Diocese. Many matters of relevance to life in this Diocese will be discussed enabling the wisdom and experience of all, inspired by the Spirit, to be spoken and heard.

The official launching of the Synod will take place on December 7<sup>th</sup> 2014 with a liturgy in St. John's Cathedral and the actual meeting of the Synod will take place in Spring 2016. Between the launching of the Synod and the 2016 gathering, we will engage in a process of reflection and sharing, catechesis and prayer. It is my hope that this process leading up to the Synod over the next year and a half will involve as many as possible throughout the diocese.

### **Preparing for the Synod**

A first step in the coming months will be to set up a steering group called *The Preparatory Commission*. The task for the Preparatory Commission is to identify and recruit delegates who will attend the Synod event in 2016. They will be drawn from, and in turn, represent the various strands of life in our diocese.

To be truly representative, the approximately 400 delegates will come from parishes, schools (primary and secondary), third level colleges, Health Care communities, members of the Travelling Community and other minority and migrant communities, youth ministry groups and ecclesial communities such as Muintearas Íosa, Charismatic Renewal and others, the Irish, Polish and other language speaking communities, representatives of the city of Limerick, regeneration areas, the worlds of business, the arts, sport and other areas of culture.

Once we have recruited the delegates they will need to receive some training and formation to enable them to undertake their task of listening and discerning. Throughout the process they will engage in regular in-service. What a wonderful resource these delegates will be for their own communities and the life of the Diocese!

The delegates will engage in a process of listening and discerning together with those they represent to determine what exactly our needs, concerns and

possibilities are at this time. Once the material which this listening and discernment has surfaced is gathered together, the Preparatory Commission will need to prioritise and group these into themes that will form the basis for the discussions at the Synod in 2016. Indeed, not alone will they need to group the material into themes but also hopefully provide background study material on each theme that will inform and enrich the discussion at the Synod proper.

Most importantly, all of this work takes place under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and so prayer will be an integral aspect of all that we do.

It is vital also that we deepen our knowledge of the faith during this year and a half ahead in order to inform our deliberations and reflections. For that reason, the Diocese will engage in a programme of catechetical updating for all of us.

The gathering in Spring 2016 will bring the delegates together to draw conclusions. As a result of the Synod I am hopeful and confident that we will have worked out a Pastoral Plan that will take us forward into the challenging years ahead. I also hope that we will have an opportunity to clarify and articulate the policies and guidelines that guide our work.

I have appointed Fr. Éamonn Fitzgibbon, Episcopal Vicar, as Director of the Synod. It will be his task to co-ordinate the many strands of preparation for the Synod as well as the Synod event itself.

### **Why a Synod?**

The first Christians were known as people of the Journey, that is, people following Jesus who called himself “the Way”. Jesus didn’t leave us orphans. He promised the Holy Spirit would guide us along our way through life and declare to us the things that are to come (cf. Jn 16:13). It is important now and then to pause and seek together the guidance of the Spirit as we discern the direction God is calling us to follow at this stage of our journey. There are several factors behind the decision to hold a Synod in the Diocese of Limerick at this time.

*Gratitude to our ancestors.* The Diocese of Limerick has been a community journeying together in faith for some nine hundred years since it was established by the Synod of Rathbreasail in 1111. Our roots go back to Saints Munchin and Ita of

the sixth century. We have a wonderful heritage of faith, holiness and prayer, architecture and art, institutions, religious orders and communities as well as numerous initiatives.<sup>1</sup> We owe a debt of gratitude to previous generations. Without expressing our gratitude we become cynical. How better to express our “thanks” to those who have gone before us that to recommit ourselves with new zeal to hand on the joy of the Gospel to future generations.

For that we need to come together to let the Holy Spirit indicate what is being asked of us. Our ancestors wrote their chapter of diocesan history. Now it is up to us to write ours. Put simply, we can’t count on heritage alone. As has been said, there’s no such thing as a second or third generation Catholic. Each baptised person is a first generation Catholic, called to be alive with the fire of the Holy Spirit in his or her time, just as it was for the early Christians and for many of our ancestors in the Diocese.

*The Second Vatican Council.* A second reason for a Synod is that we still have to “digest” the spirit and teachings of the Second Vatican Council held fifty years ago between 1962-1965. Next year, 2015 will mark the fiftieth anniversary of the conclusion of the Council. Although fifty years might seem a long time ago for a lot of people, it is a relatively short time in terms of Church history. The Council was an enormous event during which the Holy Spirit spoke powerfully to the Church. It still is a compass to guide us.

The Council invited us to enter into a new experience of God to be lived together and not simply as scattered isolated individuals in private relationships with

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<sup>1</sup> The Diocese of Limerick has been wonderfully blessed with the contribution of many diocesan priests, members of religious orders, lay members of confraternities and third orders, associations, communities and movements as well as many other church-affiliated groups. We can be proud of our Diocesan college, St. Munchin’s College, Mary Immaculate College, the 108 primary schools, the 23 Catholic voluntary schools as well as our involvement in other second level schools. We can acknowledge gratefully the work of Catholic lay people and chaplains in hospitals, the prison, schools and third-level colleges, the Catholic Marriage Care service, *Accord* and nursing homes. A vital element of the Diocese’s contribution to society has been the work of the Limerick Social Services as well as the commitment of many priests and lay people in regeneration areas. There are many other activities and initiatives in the Diocese. Let’s be grateful for them all, remembering in a special way the work of Limerick priests, religious and lay people who have been or are currently “on the missions”. Above all, we cannot but be mindful of countless unsung heroes whose daily life of faith has contributed to building up their family, their Church and society in Limerick.

God. We go to God together – that was the big message of the Council. As it put it, the Church is "a people made one with the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit".<sup>2</sup> Precisely because the roots of the Church are in God, Father, Son and Spirit (the Divine Community of Love), we need each other; our relationships with one another in Jesus Christ are vital to our spiritual journey. We are to welcome one another as Christ has welcomed us (Rom 15:7).

What the Council proposed was much more than structural changes. It meant a renewal in the way we are Church. And that also means pastoral conversion for all of us and ministerial conversion on the part of the Bishop and priests. We all need to be helped in this. How are we to be a people in communion with one another, based on the Word of God, the sacraments and our community life, in a way that speaks to today's world? As Pope Francis puts it, "in her ongoing discernment, the Church can also come to see that certain customs not directly connected to the heart of the Gospel, even some which have deep historical roots, are no longer properly understood and appreciated. Some of these customs may be beautiful, but they no longer serve as means of communicating the Gospel. We should not be afraid to re-examine them."

The Council also invited us to look beyond our normal horizons. We are to build up contact with Christians of other traditions, members of other world religions, people of no religious conviction and generally contribute to society through our daily witness as a community. The Council reminded us that the Church is to be, in Christ, "like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race".<sup>3</sup> The procedures for Diocesan Synods encourage members of other churches and faith traditions attending as observers and it is my hope to create this opportunity.

We can be grateful that we have a solid basis upon which to let the Holy Spirit repeat the message of the Second Vatican Council to us here in the Diocese of Limerick. There are still a lot of people of all ages in the Diocese who have a vibrant sense of belonging to the Church. Some 90,000 go to Mass regularly with around 2,000 going daily. There are over 800 volunteers on the boards of Catholic schools.

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<sup>2</sup> See the Council's Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, 4.

<sup>3</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 1.

There are countless numbers of people who use their talents to build up the church community in a variety of ways and, above all, there are many who are striving to bring their faith into their family life, their work commitment, their neighbourhood. The Diocese has engaged for some years now in listening processes as well as in the development of clusters and pastoral areas. The Synod will build on that.

*Changing Times.* A third reason for a Synod is to help one another come to grips with the at times bewildering speed of social and cultural change that impacts on our lives.

Immediately after the Second Vatican Council there was new energy and creativity in the Diocese. We can think of the Muintearas Íosa and other initiatives. Thankfully, there are still new things developing in the Diocese.<sup>4</sup> But the changes of the Council were also accompanied by various winds of secularisation. It hasn't always been easy to discern what God is saying to us in the Church in this atmosphere of change. Many feel insecure in their faith or drifted away or feel estranged from the Church as it now presents itself. We are probably only beginning to recognise the full extent of the socio-cultural changes in Ireland and the degree of renewal to which they call us.

In more recent years we've lived through a profound financial crisis that has hit our country very hard. People have lost work, resources that supported people in need were severely cut back, many young people were robbed of a future in Ireland. Our self-confidence got shaken. Now that we are beginning to emerge from this crisis, we also need to help each other read what has been like a parable that we've lived through. What lessons can we draw from it for our own personal life and our life as a society? What prophetic role does the Church as a community need to play in times of boom as well as times of bust? What values do we want to promote as we move forward? How does the Church ensure it gives the leadership, both in

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<sup>4</sup> Without claiming to provide a full list and at the risk of omitting very important initiatives in the Diocese, I would like to mention here some recent developments within the Diocese or ones to which Diocese is linked such as: the Bedford Row Family Project, supporting families of prisoners; Limerick Enterprise and Development Project, with the mission of employment retention and generation, developing education and supporting neighbourhoods; The Children's Grief Project, a support service for school-aged children and young people affected by loss through death, separation or divorce; Limerick Youth Service working with over 3,000 young people annually in providing a diverse range of educational, social, training and personal development programmes.

community and faith, needed so that this 'second beginning' of the new millennium is not as morally challenged locally and nationally as the first?

Above all, members of the Church have experienced bewilderment because of revelations of the horrible deeds done to children in our midst. I don't think it's too strong to say there has been an ecclesial trauma and that it has shaken all of us. It has made us ask: What was going on? How did things go so wrong? Can it be that we drifted so far from the Gospel? Healing and renewal are never automatic. They take time and we need to give each other room for that process to begin. A Synod will be a place for naming the wounds that have traumatised children and their families and the entire Church-body. It will also be a place for us to understand the further healing we have to give and what we need to do so we can all embark on a new journey together in trust and faith.

*Practical Issues.* Another reason for a Synod is that we are facing several practical challenges requiring new arrangements in our Diocese. Faith practice has declined; young people often do not find what they are looking for in our faith communities; in today's culture faith is often relegated to the private sphere. There's a sense that while the outer shell of our Christian practice in Ireland is still a good deal healthier than in many other European countries, there are problems. Recent surveys on religious practice and values in Ireland indicate we are faced with many challenges. It's enough to think of the almost disappearance of the practice of regular Confession in the lives of many Catholics today.

People often comment that they don't like institutionalised religion or practice their faith regularly, yet they desire spirituality and prayer and acknowledge a sense of mystery. They find it hard to see the link between faith and life, faith and culture, yet they want to promote values and a better world. It's clear that a Church viewed simply as a "shannon doc"-type agency for our family special occasions such as funerals and weddings, baptisms, First Communion and Confirmation ceremonies, is not meeting people's deeper needs.

Certainly we can be grateful that most people in Ireland have heard of Jesus Christ, but is there a passion for his cause? I've been struck by the depth of passion and feeling I have seen in the Diocese for sport. For instance, when it comes to hurling, in spite of heartache and disappointments people continue to be committed

followers who are filled with enthusiasm and hope. Is this not a reminder to us of the positive passion and enthusiasm that can stir people who really believe in a particular cause? Can we say that we are truly 'on fire' with our faith? Yes, we have all heard about Jesus Christ and are in some way familiar with his message but, let's be honest, we need to be re-evangelised so that this faith consumes us in a positive way. We need to stoke the fire and let the embers of faith come alight again! It is vital that we rediscover the power of the Gospel to transform our whole life.

And for that to happen, we need, on the one hand, to pray to the Holy Spirit who alone can change hearts and, on the other, adopt new structures fit for purpose. I make my own the words of Pope Francis in his Apostolic Letter on the Joy of the Gospel: 'I dream of a "missionary option", that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channelled for the evangelization of today's world rather than for her self-preservation.' (n. 27). I often hear people talk about the "Miracle Match", a great day back in 2003, when Munster, against all the odds, by determination, by working together, and above all by having a dream advanced to the semi-finals of the Heineken Cup. If we work together with a new enthusiasm we, too, can advance as a Church. It is my hope that we will pursue Pope Francis' dream of a missionary option and achieve new direction for our mission of helping people rediscover the Church as a community of deep relationships and a place where meaningful answers can be offered to people's deepest yearnings.

*The Pope Francis Effect.* Finally and by no means least of all, another reason for holding the Synod at this time is the Pope Francis effect. Since his election people have begun to look again at the Catholic Church, to try and understand it more, to give it another chance. We've been given the gift of a wonderful new Pope who is putting it up to all of us to rediscover the joy of the Gospel and communicate it. A constant theme of his is the need to reach out to new peripheries around us – not just the peripheries of socio-economic poverty but also existential margins such as people disillusioned by life, those whose family life has been badly damaged, those who feel far from the Church, those who have been abandoned in society... While Pope Francis has captured the imagination of many, we all have to avoid the temptation of saying to ourselves, "Pope Francis is great –

he's saying exactly what I think about the Church and how it needs to change" but in reality thinking the "Church" applies to others, forgetting that Pope Francis' words are also addressed personally to me, to each one of us.

### **What will the Synod discuss?**

I have already mentioned that delegates will engage in a process of listening and discerning with many others over the coming year, asking what topics should the Synod address. We don't live in a vacuum so what we discuss at the Synod and also on the journey towards the Synod will need to take account of the major issues that are focussing the mind of the Church around the world at this time especially the topics of family; young people and social issues.

I don't want to set pre-determined outcomes for what we'll discuss at the Synod. I like to think of it as a two-sided coin. On the one side, there's the aspect of story-telling. We will need to share with one another the difference the Gospel and our Catholic faith have made and are making in our lives. It is good to listen to each other's story and recognise that God is still working among us.

It is impressive to read in the Acts of the Apostles how often the apostles updated the community on the new missionary experiences and developments they had experienced. I know there are many positive faith experiences in Limerick. But we also need to hear and share our stories. Recently, during the annual pilgrimage to Lourdes, I was very impressed by the 100 young adults who were with us. One of them commented how the experience "has opened my eyes about my understanding of Christianity and it has extremely strengthened the faith I have in God." And another said, "I realised that to be loved and to love others leads to happiness". There are many young people in our Diocese who also have their story to tell.

I invite all parishes, religious orders, movements and groups, agencies and institutions of the Diocese to take this time of preparation for the Synod to recognise how God is at work in their story and share that story. Let's use all the media possibilities available to us to share our good news.

The Church as a whole has its Good News in the form of Jesus' teachings. The Synod is also a time to deepen our understanding of the Gospel and of our

Catholic faith, learning more about it and for that we'll be dedicating much time to catechesis in the coming year. It is important to know the contents of faith.

The other side of the coin, however, is the range of challenges and problems, failings and difficulties we are facing. In the story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (a favourite episode to which Pope Francis often refers) Jesus asks them: "what are you discussing with each other while you walk along?". They share their bad news with him! It is good and healthy to name problems. If we run away from shadows we discover they keep following us and even appear to be getting bigger. It is better to turn around and face them.

During his trip to Brazil last year, Pope Francis took up the image of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. They had left Jerusalem where Jesus had died and were walking away. Pope Francis reminded us that many people today have walked away from the Church:

Here we have to face the difficult mystery of those people who leave the Church, who, under the illusion of alternative ideas, now think that the Church – their Jerusalem – can no longer offer them anything meaningful and important. So they set off on the road alone, with their disappointment. Perhaps the Church appeared too weak, perhaps too distant from their needs, perhaps too poor to respond to their concerns, perhaps too cold, perhaps too caught up with itself, perhaps a prisoner of its own rigid formulas.

It is a fact that nowadays an increasing number of people are like the two disciples of Emmaus. Pope Francis recognises it can often seem to them that the Church is a relic of the past, something needed when you are a child but then to be discarded when you get older. And yet people have a sense of mystery, a desire for spirituality. They are searching for a word of meaning. On the day of my ordination as bishop, I referred to a song by Bono some years ago. Its words ran something like this: 'I have climbed highest mountains, I have run through the fields, only to be with you, only to be with you. I have run, I have crawled, I have scaled these city walls, these city walls, only to be with you. But I still haven't found what I'm looking for.' As I said that day, I don't know what Bono had in mind but these words can be applied to the situation many find themselves in with regard to faith. Moments of difficulty and searching are written into the Christian journey of faith.

Faced with this situation, Pope Francis invites us to connect with those who have gone away or who feel doubt in the area of faith. As he puts it, we need to be, a Church unafraid of going forth into their night. We need a Church capable of meeting them on their way. We need a Church capable of entering into their conversation. We need a Church able to dialogue with those disciples who, having left Jerusalem behind, are wandering aimlessly, alone, with their own disappointment, disillusioned by a Christianity now considered barren, fruitless soil, incapable of generating meaning.

The Synod will need to provide forums where people can discuss the dark issues and the practical problems, their disappointments and their inner search. We need to name why 'mission' is not fully alive among us. I would like to see people of all ages involved in this.

But it is not enough to name problems. We will need to discern together what is the Holy Spirit suggesting to us today. And we need to have confidence that the Spirit is with us! Difficulties are never the last word in the Christian vocabulary. Let's listen again to Pope Francis,

We do well to keep in mind the early Christians and our many brothers and sisters throughout history who were filled with joy, unflagging courage and zeal in proclaiming the Gospel. Some people nowadays console themselves by saying that things are not as easy as they used to be, yet we know that the Roman empire was not conducive to the Gospel message, the struggle for justice, or the defence of human dignity... Let us not say, then, that things are harder today; they are simply different. But let us learn also from the saints who have gone before us, who confronted the difficulties of their own day.

### **Setting the Compass**

If the synod were to be no more than an event of a few days, it would probably be a waste of time. The risk would be that it would only produce a report gathering dust on the shelf. The Synod will have to mark a real step forward, indicating a realistic pathway of genuine renewal for all of us who feel faith is important.

For the Synod to be successful it will need to touch each one of us personally. It will have to be underwritten by a “soul” dimension. In other words, the spiritual attitude with which we approach this period of discernment is very important. It needs to be a spiritual experience of journeying together in communion with one another. For that reason I would like to highlight three sources to draw upon during the Synod.

*The Gospel.* Every true renewal in the Church has come from a rediscovery of the Gospel as a code of life to be put into practice. We can think of the Irish monks decorating the Gospel that was so central to the flourishing of Irish monasticism that developed into a major missionary outreach in Europe. The Gospel is not just a book to console us, teach us or guide our prayers. It contains the unique and universal, eternal and powerful words of Jesus that can change our lives.

To understand the Gospel, we need to put it into practice. St. James reminds us: “But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers....For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.” (James 1:22-25).

Before Christmas 2014 a pocket-size version of the Gospel of Luke will be distributed to everyone in the Diocese. I invite everyone in the diocese to see how they can discover the Gospel in a new way and “do” it. Perhaps read some part of the Gospel every day either on your own or with your family; take the Sunday readings you hear at Mass and read them reflectively at home; select a short passage of the Gospel as a motto for every day or for a week or month to guide you. Most importantly, find others with whom you can share your experiences of the Gospel either in your family or in a community or in a group such as a *lectio divina* group.

*Our love for one another.* If the Synod is to be effective, we will need to recommit ourselves to living the New Commandment Jesus gave us: love one another as I have loved you (cf. Jn 13:34). It is the fundamental “law” of the Church. Without this love, we will not sense God’s presence; we will be deaf to his words and blind to

his ways. It is in love for one another that our spiritual antennae are alerted to what God is saying to the Church.

For a wonderful description of what that means for us, let's listen to what a freeman of Limerick City, Saint John Paul, wrote some years ago when he invited all of us to make of the Church a school and home of communion.<sup>5</sup> He explained that we need to have 'an ability to think of our brothers and sisters in faith within the profound unity of the Mystical Body, and therefore as "those who are a part of me".' He referred to the dynamic of relating to others in such a way as to be "able to share their joys and sufferings, to sense their desires and attend to their needs, to offer them deep and genuine friendship".

The Pope pointed out that our love for one another 'implies also the ability to see what is positive in others, to welcome it and prize it as a gift from God: not only as a gift for the brother or sister who has received it directly, but also as a "gift for me".' Saint John Paul affirms we need 'to know how to "make room" for our brothers and sisters, bearing "each other's burdens" (Gal 6:2)' and resisting the selfish temptations which constantly beset us and provoke competition, careerism, distrust and jealousy.'

At the heart of Saint John Paul's concern was the need to provide our institutions with a "soul". We need to live together a spirituality of communion. None of us can claim we already know it or live it perfectly. The Synod will be an opportunity to "train" in living the spirituality of communion as we listen to one another, speak with one another and discern together.

*The Crucified and Risen Jesus Christ.* Nothing worthwhile is achieved in the Christian life without the mystery of the Cross. In laying down his life for us, Jesus brought about our union with God and with one another. Christians have always seen in the Cross the sign of God's immense love for each person. Jesus Christ reaches us in our sinfulness and need. As the Limerick poet, Tadhg Gaelach Ó Suilleabháin put it, Jesus was "astray...from heaven, tormented in our midst in a way that cannot be estimated". ["Ar fán... ó neamh...cráite trínne, i slí nach léir a mheas".] The Crucified Christ is the key to living through our sufferings and

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<sup>5</sup> See John Paul II, Apostolic Letter, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 43.

difficulties. Uniting our trials with those of Jesus on the Cross, we find the strength to live like him in laying down our lives for others. This is what we celebrate and remember at every Mass.

To set out on a journey always involve some element of difficulty – fatigue, unexpected delays, loss of direction, need to check the map, re-fuelling. Setting out on our journey towards the Synod we can expect it won't always be easy. There may be moments of difficulty in understanding one another, in persevering once we've started, in clashing points of view, in needing to take time to deepen our faith, in trying to come to clear conclusions.

It will be important to recognise in tensions that might arise the presence of the Crucified Christ who took onto himself all the divisions and tensions of this world and transformed them on the Cross. He even reached the point of crying out “why?” at the end of his life. But his question became the answer to all our questions. After all he had said: “unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (Jn 12:24).

The first sisters of Mercy in Limerick remembered Catherine McAuley's good advice to them on how to live the mystery of the Cross in their lives: "Don't let crosses vex and tease. Meet them all with peace and ease... Attend to one thing at a time, You've sixteen hours from morning prime."

In uniting ourselves to the Crucified Christ and in imitation of him as we persevere along the journey, we will experience the great gift of his Risen presence among us to guide us. We will experience what the disciples on the Road to Emmaus described when they said: “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road” (Lk 24: 32). It is my hope that we will indeed experience the Risen Jesus among us because he brings the Spirit who fills us with joy and ardour, peace and hope. Let's listen again to Pope Francis,

Christ's resurrection is not an event of the past; it contains a vital power which has permeated this world. Where all seems to be dead, signs of the resurrection suddenly spring up... Faith also means believing in God, believing that he truly loves us, that he is alive, that he is mysteriously capable of intervening, that he does not abandon us and that he brings good out of evil

by his power and his infinite creativity... Christ's resurrection everywhere calls forth seeds of that new world; even if they are cut back, they grow again, for the resurrection is already secretly woven into the fabric of this history, for Jesus did not rise in vain. May we never remain on the sidelines of this march of living hope!

### **Avoiding Pitfalls**

As on any journey, we need to be aware of possible pitfalls that could hamper our progress during this time of synodality. I want to name some of them.

The first is the temptation of focussing only on structures. I think it is helpful if we consider the Synod in terms of the whole Diocese going on a time of mission or spiritual retreat together. Conversion and renewal are at the heart of what we are about. A Synod cannot be reduced simply to tweaking or varnishing some structures. In other words, it's not just about changing mass times, working out how to administer parishes with less priests, strategizing for financial challenges we might have, developing pathways for promoting vocations. It will involve some of this but it's much more about our Diocese needing to discern the main evangelising priorities for the coming years and then how to go about achieving our goals.

A second major pitfall would be to focus just on ourselves and our immediate concerns - our diocese, our parish, our half-parish, our specialised ministry. In recent years the development of clusters and now pastoral areas, has shown us how we are stronger together. A Synod should be an opportunity to open up, look around us, see things from other points of view, move out in missionary outreach to what Pope Francis calls "the peripheries" that we find in our lives and society. We will need to think long-term. And this also means broadening our perspectives to the measure of the whole Church. It's one thing to describe the Church in its already existing structures that we know of locally in our own parish or particular ministry. But we need to open ourselves to God's view of the Church and ask: what's God's plan for the Church? Then we can go on to ask: what God's plan for the Church here in our area, in our context? After all, the Gospel is about transforming our world with the love that comes from God. And every baptised person has this universal mission. Indeed, as Pope Francis puts it, everyone "is" a mission.

It is also important not to think of the Church only in its specifically religious or liturgical aspects. When he was in Limerick, Saint John Paul underlined the lay vocation. In expressing the Gospel in our lives, lay women and men act as a leaven in the world in which we live and work:

The great forces which shape the world—politics, the mass media, science, technology, culture, education, industry and work—are precisely the areas where lay people are especially competent to exercise their mission. If these forces are guided by people who are true disciples of Christ, and who are, at the same time, fully competent in the relevant secular knowledge and skill, then indeed will the world be transformed from within by Christ's redeeming power.

A Synod will be a time to dialogue with people from the worlds of employment and economics, politics and culture, the arts and sport, the media and social initiatives. It will be a time to reflect on ecology and peace, life issues and migrancy. Let's keep the bigger picture in view.

A third pitfall we need to avoid is a lack of focus in formulating the final outcomes of the Synod. As we proceed along the journey of the Synod itself, we need to be careful that, while our discussions might be wide-ranging, the Synod itself needs to keep a focus so that its conclusions will be realistic and do-able. We need to be ambitious in asking our heavenly Father to send us many graces from heaven in this period. Yet the Synod isn't about imagining a utopia (a "wish list") that cannot be achieved. It will be important for us to gather up the fruits of what we have discerned from the Spirit and know how best to plan for the coming ten years. I am under no illusion that our Synod is going to resolve all our problems, answer all our questions or cover every issue. What will be important, however, is our ability to implement the directions that open up for us at the Synod.

### **How can I be involved?**

In the coming year and a half there will be many gatherings for discussion, catechesis and prayer. We will be opening a website for the Synod. I invite you send in observations or suggestions. And by 'you' I mean people of strong faith, of diminished faith and of lost faith. For the Synod to be the journey it needs to be, we

must all travel together. Everyone has an opinion worth listening to and we must listen in order to learn.

No one should feel a stranger to the Synod process. It is my hope that many will participate in some form in the Synod. As well as making the effort in the three ways I suggested above (Gospel, love for one another, following the Crucified-Risen Jesus Christ), I would also suggest that each of us can be involved through personal prayer and prayer together for the Synod, imploring the assistance of the Holy Spirit. We will count also on the prayers of the sick and housebound. They too should know their contribution is important.

### **Conclusion**

We are about to set out on a journey. It's a chance to ask ourselves: what Church do we want to be as we face the challenges ahead of us? What face of the Church do we want to present to society today in order to serve it with humility? How best can we be salt, light and leaven for the world around us?

In concluding this letter I want to suggest that for the next year and a half we pray at all Masses for the Synod. At the Eucharist we get a chance to unite our simple prayers with Jesus whose prayer, in the Spirit, to the Father on our behalf, is powerful. Ultimately, a Synod in the Church finds its deepest roots in the Eucharist because that is where the Church is born. As Pope Francis says, the Eucharist "is a gift of Christ, who makes himself present and gathers us around him, to nourish us with his Word and with his life. This means that the mission and the very identity of the Church flows from there, from the Eucharist, and there always takes its shape."

At every Mass we remember those who have died. I am sure that countless generations of the faithful of the Diocese of Limerick who have passed into the next Life, will accompany us with their prayer and support.

I would like to suggest the following prayer be said before the final blessing at Mass and at other occasions when Catholics gather. It is the *Adsumus* prayer, an ancient prayer composed probably by St. Isidore of Seville in the seventh century and recited every day during the Second Vatican Council.

Here we are, O Lord, Holy Spirit,

we stand before you, hampered by our sins,  
but for a special purpose  
gathered together in your name.  
Come to us and be with us and enter our hearts.  
Teach us what we are to do and  
where we ought to tend;  
show us what we must accomplish,  
so that, with your help,  
we may be able to please you in all things.  
May you alone be the beginning and  
catalyst of our judgments,  
you alone who with God the Father and  
his Son possess a glorious name.  
Do not allow us to disturb the order of justice,  
you who love equity above all things.  
Let not ignorance draw us to what is wrong.  
Let not partiality sway our minds  
or respect of riches or persons  
pervert our judgment.  
But unite us strongly to you  
by the gift of your grace alone,  
that we may be one in you  
and never forsake the truth;

in as much as we are gathered together in your name,  
so may we in all things hold fast to justice  
tempered by mercy,  
so that in this life  
our judgment may in no way be at variance with you,  
and in the life to come we may receive  
everlasting rewards for deeds well done.

One last word. As we set out towards the Synod, let's entrust our journey to Mary, the mother and first disciple of Jesus. Her journey of faith is a model for all Christians. She reminds us to be attentive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. She knows better than any of us where, in God's grace and mercy, our journey is ultimately heading – eternal life in the new heaven and new earth that God is preparing for us.

We are at a crucial time in the history of our Diocese. The missionary commitment of each one of us is essential. Our help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth.

*Is tú stiúir agus sciath d'Eaglaise, a Thiarna. Doirt ar do sheirbhísigh, impímid ort, spiorad na tiusceana, na fírinne agus na síochána. Go dtuige said ina gcroí cad is toil leat, agus go saothraí said é le fonn.*

With kind regards,

+ Brendan Leahy, 28 September 2014