

OUR PROJECT: CHRIST'S MISSION

OUR PATH: SYNODALITY

Pastoral Letter on the Follow-up to the Synodal Process

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Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the ruler, and Saul. While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off. (Acts 13, 1-3)

I – Introduction

Here are two words: an old one—mission—and a new one—synodality.

We've long talked about mission in the Church: "Go, of all nations make disciples," said Jesus to his Apostles. When I was young, I participated in missioning celebrations when a priest or a religious woman of my diocese would leave for a foreign country to go announce the Gospel to the "pagans." I've since learned to let go of that imagery to discover that the mission, today, is close to home: in our families, among our friends, in our work places, our centres of leisure, and our neighbourhoods. Christ entrusts this mission to me, to you, to each one of us. The word might be old, but the reality it evokes today is new.

Synodality, however, really is a new expression, tailor-made—you could say—to express two growing convictions in the Church: that the Holy Spirit breathes over the whole People of God and that it is necessary to listen to this People to discern God’s will for his Church. Pope Francis has even made it the theme of the next Synod of Bishops in 2022: “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission.”

Since the beginning, the Church has chosen the path of synodality to enact the mission Jesus entrusted to her. In Antioch, where Jesus’s disciples were first called “Christians,” it was the entire community that sought to discern the paths of the future for the Church. In prayer, discussion, and reflection, the voice of the Holy Spirit was discerned. This is how this young community made the decision to send Barnabas and Saul (Saint Paul) to bring the Good News of Jesus to foreign lands.

II — The diocesan synodal process 2018–2021

In the fall of 2018, after consulting with the Diocesan Pastoral Council and the Presbyteral Council, I decided to engage the diocese in a synodal process that would similarly allow us to come together as a People of God to pray, discuss and reflect together. The goal was to set some pastoral priorities for the coming years, priorities that would engage the Christian communities of our diocese in a true “pastoral conversion.” This conversion, both personal and communal, seeks to help us become the “outward-bound Church” of which Pope Francis so often speaks. To manifest this desire to open up to the world, our synodal process was given the title: “Christ, us, our communities, our neighbourhoods.”

The coordinating committee of the synodal process had structured it in three stages—see, judge, act—stages which were originally planned to follow in close succession. But we soon realized that, in order to experience the synodal process in a serious way, we had to give ourselves more time. The stages were thus lengthened ... and then pandemic came, just as we were preparing for the final event.

Despite the lockdown, and thanks to the internet, many delegates from our parishes, church movements and religious communities were able to continue the process by continuing the dialogue on themes such as evangelization and engagement in our communities, all the while sharing their current challenges and the best practices. These exchanges broadened our thinking and anchored it in the harsh reality that we were—that we still are—experiencing.

III — What have we learned?

These meetings helped to understand how the pandemic has changed our perspectives and concerns. It revealed fragilities that we had more or less ignored. It raised urgent questions concerning:

- ❖ the relevance and viability of our Christian communities,
- ❖ ministry,
- ❖ the commitment of volunteers,
- ❖ the place of the Church in our society,
- ❖ the effectiveness of our forms of outreach and support, etc.

At the same time, it raised new needs:

- ❖ for training for our families, which will increasingly become schools of faith for children and young people;
- ❖ for learning new communication techniques for the development of a “hybrid” missionary pastoral ministry, one where face-to-face and virtual experiences are combined;
- ❖ for companionship for our parishioners and other elderly citizens who often suffer from great loneliness;
- ❖ for support for our Christian communities faced with the precariousness of human and financial resources.

Let us complete this overview by naming a few of the fruits gathered since the beginning of the process.

- ❖ We determined that “partnership” must be a key principle for the future of our Christian communities: partnership between the various communities (especially those that are in a same pastoral zone), partnership between the communities and the diocesan team, partnership with community organizations in our communities.
- ❖ We have become more radically aware of the difference between urban and rural areas, a difference that must be respected in all our considerations and in our future projects.
- ❖ Many of the faithful are becoming increasingly convinced of the need for true pastoral and missionary conversion in our Church.
- ❖ Our immigrant communities are a lifeblood for many of our parishes, though we are often slow in incorporating them in our communities in a way which could lead to a dynamic mutual enrichment.

- ❖ Finally, the very principle of synodality has prevailed among us: people want to continue to exchange, to deepen the questions together and to participate actively in the discernment of the paths to be taken for the future ... as in Antioch!

IV — The way forward

A few months ago, I drew up a proposal, the fruit of the reflection of the Diocesan Pastoral Animation Committee. This proposal was studied and discussed by the Diocesan Pastoral Council, the Presbyteral Council and several parish delegates. A consensus has emerged from these exchanges that allows me to outline the paths to follow in our diocese for the next few years.

- i. **Pastoral Priorities for this time**
 - a. The **pastoral conversion of our communities and movements** remains a priority. More and more, we want to be open to the world which is ours, there to live Christ's mission individually and together. All our activities will become opportunities to share the gospel and to live in solidarity. In all things, we will help our brothers and sisters in humanity to discover Jesus Christ, to build a relationship with Him, and to cultivate His Kingdom of justice, peace, and joy in our midst. The title of the synodal process — “Christ, us, our communities, our neighbourhoods”—will continue to be relevant. We will pay special attention to two groups in our midst.
 - b. The first priority group: our **young families**, particularly immigrant families. They need to be welcomed, accompanied and integrated into our Christian communities. In this regard, we will favour an intergenerational approach to the catechesis of children and adults, faith formation and youth ministry. We will seek to celebrate the “year of the family” decreed by Pope Francis and currently in progress.
 - c. The second priority group: our elderly, who are often isolated. They suffer from loneliness and need presence, a listening ear and support. Our communities will become attentive to the elderly, particularly those who have no family or friends nearby.

- d. To give hands and feet to the mission, we will opt for two approaches: first, **partnership**. This will be our favoured path forward, especially given the context of growing fragility experienced by our Christian communities. We cannot take on Christ's mission if we cultivate parochialism. The partnership that already exists will flourish between the diocesan team and parish teams; between parishes of a common zone; between parishes and movements. We will be able to count on one another to move forward together with confidence.
- e. A second path we will favour—the pandemic forces us, in spite of ourselves, to adopt it—is **hybrid pastoral ministry**. This pastoral approach combines virtual and in-person experiences in an intelligent and creative way. We will equip ourselves and learn to efficiently use the tools that modern technology offers us. The best practices in this field will allow us to reach the greatest number with the Good News of Jesus.

ii. Synodal Structures to Be Created and Strengthened

We will set up a new diocesan structure: a **permanent synodal assembly**. This will bring together priests and other mandated people with delegates from parishes, movements and sectors. It will meet once or twice a year to be consulted on specific topics. The diocesan pastoral council will be the executive committee and ensure the preparation, animation, evaluation and follow-up from the meetings of the permanent synodal assembly.

In addition, we will **strengthen the synodal structures that already exist** at both the parish and diocesan levels (councils and committees) so that they can play their deliberative role more actively in discernment and decision-making.

iii. Next steps

I entrust the diocesan pastoral animation committee—with the participation of the diocesan pastoral council—with the preparation of an action plan including establishing priorities, concrete objectives, proposed activities and a timetable.

I ask the same committee to look at Pope Francis's recent initiative: to engage all the dioceses of the world in a broad consultation in preparation for the Synod of Bishops in 2023. Our participation in this initiative will have to be harmoniously integrated into the implementation of our own pastoral priorities.

V — Conclusion

The recent celebration of Pentecost recalled this great day on which the Holy Spirit has been given to all the disciples of Christ. This same Spirit was given to us at our baptism, uniting us with Christ, the Beloved Son of the Father. It was given to us again at our confirmation, uniting us to Christ, sent by the Father. Yes, the Spirit empowers every baptized-confirmed Christian to participate in the identity and mission of Christ. It is in this capacity that all are called to take part in the discernment and implementation of the impulses of the Spirit.

Let us heed Pope Francis's words: "The path of synodality is the path that God expects from the Church of the third millennium."¹ Let's respond to this beautiful challenge together, uniting our voices to sing our faith and joining our hands to walk the roads of this world that God has so loved.

I bless you with all my heart.

+ Paul-André Durocher

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¹ Pope Francis *Speech on the occasion of the ceremony commemorating the 50th anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops* (17 October 2015)