



DIOCESE *of* LACROSSE
OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

October 25, 2021

Dear Brothers in Christ:

May the Lord give you peace.

In April 2021, Pope Francis initiated a synodal journey of the whole People of God to begin in October 2021 in each local church and culminating in October 2023 in the Sixteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. This path was solemnly opened in Rome on the 9th–10th of October. During our Fall Ministry Conference in La Crosse, I opened the diocesan phase of this path with the celebration of the Holy Mass. The theme of the 2023 synod is “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission.” Pope Francis has remarked that “it is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium” (*Address of October 17, 2015*).

The Synod of Bishops, in its preparatory document for the forthcoming assembly, notes that synodality is much more than the celebration of ecclesial meetings and bishops’ assemblies, or a matter of simple internal administration within the Church. Rather, as the International Theological Commission has described, it is “the specific *modus vivendi et operandi* of the Church, the People of God, which reveals and gives substance to her being in communion when all her members journey together, gather in assembly, and take an active part in her evangelizing mission” (*Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, March 2, 2018).

The stated objective of the synod is not to produce more documents but to listen, as the entire People of God, to what the Holy Spirit is saying to the Church. As I mentioned in my homily at the opening Mass, we are to “come away and rest a while” in this synodal journey (cf. Mk. 6:31). This process is guided by the following fundamental questions: *A synodal Church, in announcing the Gospel, “journeys together:” How does this “journeying together” take place today on different levels in the Church (from the local level to the universal one), allowing her to proclaim the Gospel? What steps is the Holy Spirit inviting us to take in order to grow in our “journeying together”?*

The first, or diocesan, phase of the synodal journey is to foster a broad consultation process in order to gather the wealth of the experiences of lived synodality, in its different articulations and facets, involving the pastors and the faithful of the diocese. The objective of this phase is to consult the People of God so that the synodal process is carried out through listening to all the baptized. As the Synod of Bishops expresses, the objective is a spiritual process, not a mechanical data-gathering exercise or a series of meetings and debates. Pope Francis characterizes the two interrelated goals of this process of listening: “to listen to God, so that with Him we may hear the cry of His people; [and] to listen to His people until we are in harmony with the will to which God calls us” (*Address of October 17, 2015*).

In our diocese, I am asking each parish to have a special meeting of the parish pastoral council before February 15, 2022 to foster the consultation requested and to listen to the “joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties” of the baptized. My predecessor, Bishop John J. Paul, noted

that consultation in the church “is nothing more and nothing less than the familial conversation between pastors and their people in striving to live the life of Christ more fully” and that “the end in view is not a vote by which the majority can rule the minority, but rather a mutual exchange by which true understanding is achieved” (*On Consultation*, May 1, 1985). Thus, this special meeting of the pastoral council should be a familial conversation between pastors and the faithful, discussing and discerning the main questions for consultation. No other regular business should be done at this meeting. While the representation of the pastoral council should already include members from the different aspects of pastoral work in the parish, and of the different states of life, and social and professional conditions of the parishioners, for this special meeting you are encouraged to reach out to involve those on the periphery who are often excluded and forgotten, including Catholics who rarely or never practice their faith.

Before this special meeting of the parish pastoral council, please send out the attached participants’ guide to the members of the council and other invitees in order to allow everyone time to prepare for the discussion and discernment. The questions accompanying the ten themes can be used as a starting point or as helpful guidelines. Your conversation and dialogue, however, need not be limited to the questions posed. A recorder should be nominated at the meeting to take notes on the consultation that takes place during the discussion.

At the end of the meeting, a synthesis of the meeting should be compiled. This synthesis does not have to be “meeting minutes” in the strict sense but rather should convey the main fruits of the discussion and discernment. It should reflect the diversity of views and opinions expressed, both positive and negative. Points of view that are contrary to one another need not be omitted but can be acknowledged and stated as such. I have named Father Alan Guanella as the diocesan contact person for the diocesan phase of the synodal journey. Each parish’s synthesis should be sent to Father Guanella at aguanella@diolclergy.org by February 21, 2022.

Father Guanella will then compile the parish syntheses into a diocesan synthesis which will convey the main fruits of the discernment of the whole People of God across the diocese. This synthesis will then be sent to the USCCB who will in turn draft their own synthesis on the basis of the diocesan syntheses that they have received. The syntheses of the episcopal conferences will be submitted to the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, which will compose the first edition of the working document of the synod assembly (*the Instrumentum Laboris*) on the basis of what was shared and experienced at the local level. The parish syntheses will also serve as means for identifying our next steps in the diocesan journey on the path of synodality, including the revival of the diocesan pastoral council and future pastoral planning initiatives.

I want to thank you for your cooperation in the diocesan phase of the synodal journey. By journeying together on the journey that has been made, the Church will be able to learn through her experience which processes can help her to live communion, to achieve participation, and to open herself to mission.

In the heart of Mary and Jesus, I am,

Fraternally yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "William Patrick Callahan". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style. To the left of the signature is a small plus sign (+).

+Bishop William Patrick Callahan, OFM Conv.
Bishop of La Crosse