



JESUS WALKED WITH THEM

(Luke 24:15)

Pastoral Message for the Opening in the Local Churches of the Synod on Communion, Participation and Mission

Beloved brothers and sisters in Christ:

Future generations will look back to this day the seventeenth of October 2021 as a historic milestone in the life of the Church. The Holy Father convokes a General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in October 2023. Because the topic is on the process itself of Synodality, he wishes all the local churches to be involved in the two-year preparation for the said event. He will launch it universally on October 10, 2021 and expects every bishop to launch it in every local church around the world on October 17, 2021. The pre-synodal consultations on the diocesan level will lead to parallel event on the national level (episcopal conference), the continental level (regional federations of episcopal conferences) and the global level (General Assembly in Rome). The Pope believes that the path of synodality is the plan of God for the Church of the third millennium. Let us walk together listening. We grow by listening.

A synod is not just an event; it is a journey. A synod is not just a meeting; it is the life of the Church. A synod is not just an assembly in view of administration; it is a convocation guided by the Spirit for the challenge of mission. St. John Chrysostom aptly said that the *“Church and synod are synonymous”*.

Two Landscapes

What will happen in the next months? We will gather together in small circles in parishes, schools and basic ecclesial communities to pray together and ask the Spirit to lend us His eyes and mind and heart. We will look at two landscapes not with our eyes but with the eyes of the Lord.

The first is *“How is our Church within?”* The Pope asks us: “How is this journeying together happening today in our local Church? What steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow in our “journeying together”? How are the shepherds and the shepherded? How is the life of worship brought to the life of charity? How is faith lived and shared? How is our Church discipline and life?”

The second is *“How is the Church together with the entire human family?”* Are we still salt and light for the world? Is dialogue our way of life? How willing are we to listen with humility and respect despite differences? Have we become haughty or insensitive to the groans of suffering humanity?

Many Signs

In looking at the Church from the inside and looking at the Church with the entire human family, we cannot ignore the signs of our times. We are not blind to the challenges that the Covid-19 pandemic has confronted us with. We cannot disregard the sexual and financial scandals in the Church and in government. We cannot overlook the attraction of secularism and materialism and the double-edged power of the digital world. We cannot brush off the erosion of ethical values and the idolatry of relativism. We are aware of the antipathy and disdain against traditional institutions foremost of which is our Church. The effects of ecological abuse, terror and violence are too glaring to overlook.

Three Inspirations

Our biblical inspiration comes from **three actors** (plus one). The first is **Jesus** who was sent to bring the Good News to the poor. The second is the **crowd**, the “everyone” of humanity longing for salvation. The third is the “**apostles**” who guard the place of Jesus to make it easier for people to meet Him.

The three actors are important **together**. Without Jesus, the crowd and the apostles just pursue a political plot. Without the apostles to guard the Lord’s place, Jesus will just be a myth or ideology. Without the crowd, Jesus and the apostles will just be an exclusive self-absorbed sect.

Only the three are important and inseparable but there is a fourth “actor” that insists to enter—the opponent of the Lord. We must stand guard against the evil one who wants to separate the three or who want us to avoid the cross. “*For the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many*” (Mark 10:42). We must always remember that God wants all to be saved. Barriers need to be torn down and bridges of encounter must be built. “*In matters of faith, unity; in matters of opinion, liberty; in all things, charity.*”

Our Tools

Our first tool is **sensitivity**. We must become a Church that makes attentive and selfless listening its lifestyle. Sensitivity will gain for us a discerning heart to know the will of the Lord. It will win for us a deeper kind of perspective of persons and events, that we may go deeper than the eyes. We see with our souls.

Time is greater than space. We can work slowly and patiently not obsessed with immediate results. We move with tenacity and clarity of convictions without anxiety but rather trusting in the Lord who walks with us.

We cannot proceed to be a synodal Church without **conversion**. As Peter was instrumental in the conversion of the pagan Cornelius (Acts 10:21), Cornelius in turn was instrumental in converting Peter’s limited cultural and religious mindset into an attitude of universality.

In our previous plenary assembly in July 2021, the bishops have agreed to conclude the pre-synodal consultations on the Diocesan level and submit collated reports to the CBCP by February 11, 2022. Therefore, we will prepare for a three-day assembly on the national level on March 7-9, 2022 so that we can submit a national report to the Synod General Secretariat by April 2022.

We end with the inspired words of Pope Francis to young people: *My joyful hope is to see you keep running the race before you...Keep running, attracted by the face of Christ, whom we love so much, whom we adore in the Holy Eucharist and acknowledge in the flesh of our suffering brothers and sisters. May the Holy Spirit urge you on as you run this race! The Church needs your momentum, your intuitions, your faith!* (Christus Vivit, 298).

For the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines:


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