



**PASTORAL LETTER
OF THE
MOST REVEREND BERNARD LONGLEY
ARCHBISHOP OF BIRMINGHAM
FOR THE 29th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, 16/17 OCTOBER 2021**

The Son of Man himself did not come to be served but to serve.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The sudden onset of the pandemic in the early spring of last year and the impact it has made over the past eighteen months on every aspect of our life, here and across the world, have confronted us as never before in our lifetimes with the phenomenon of change. The Church, its day-to-day life and its ministry have not been spared the change which has transformed wider society. Yet the Church, in the way it has risen to the multiple challenges the pandemic has brought, has also become an agent of change.

In adapting speedily to the new circumstances, parish communities have been busy developing fresh approaches to keep their mission on track. We can be proud of the way that parishioners have adjusted, keeping our churches open so that priests and people could remain focused on parochial ministry. With our recent experience of change and readjustment across the Archdiocese, and with an eye to what is happening across the world, I am inviting you to consider changes that are imminent across the whole Catholic Church.

In mid-July I wrote to welcome-back to Church those whom the pandemic had made cautious about attending Mass in person. I took the opportunity of alerting you to ways in which I hoped the drafting of a diocesan mission statement and the setting of four practical pastoral priorities would make the renewal of our parish life and the apostolic outreach of the Archdiocese more focused and effective.

My last Pastoral Letter introduced you to the idea of a diocesan plan, indicating how it will get off the ground. I set out the four priorities of Evangelisation, Formation, Liturgy and Worship and Social Outreach, emphasising families and young people and the call to serve in a co-responsible manner. I invited you to participate actively in making this a reality, and to dream about how the parish community you know and love might work and witness today.

The synodal pathway is a call to discern what it means to be the Church – how we live and minister today. This begins with listening - listening to the faithful in our parishes, to those who exercise a ministry or fulfil some role in the day-to-day running of the parish, to those who attend Mass and support the parish's work and to people in wider society – often fellow Christians of other denominations or families whose children attend our Catholic schools and who live in our locality.

Our priests are invited to listen to their flock. We must allow the word of God and the teaching of the Church to influence and shape what we say. We must all pray, listen to the Holy Spirit and discern. The Spirit is the ultimate arbiter of any dreams, proposals or plans.

Pope Francis has acknowledged the need for change in the way that the Church lives and undertakes its mission. He has a vision for the universal Church of tomorrow. He wants us all to dream. The Second Vatican Council defined the Church as the pilgrim people of God, a community on a journey, and now the Holy Father has asked us to embrace the *synodal pathway* so that, travelling together as the priestly people of God, we can make that dream come true.

We can all respond to the Holy Father's invitation, secure in the knowledge that whatever shape it takes or whatever new profile emerges, the Lord "*will be with you all days, even to the close of the age*" [Mt. 28, 20]. What is novel, indeed startling, in the Pope's invitation is that he is speaking to the whole Church, to every baptized person and even to people whose lives have been as yet untouched by Christian faith.

In order to help all the baptized, lay men and women, consecrated Religious, priests, deacons and bishops, to understand more clearly what the *synodal pathway* involves, Pope Francis has identified three essential elements of the process: communion, participation and mission. In order to introduce you to the synodal pathway and to encourage your full involvement as the process unfolds at parish level, I want to explore the three central elements identified by the Holy Father.

Communion becomes possible when we recognise one another as children of God and brothers and sisters in Christ, belonging to a family which draws its life from the Holy Spirit, whose plans for us we discern through sustained, contemplative prayer. We are co-responsible for the Church's current wellbeing and its future, which can only prosper if we are committed here and now.

Participation depends upon an understanding of the Church's nature, its history, its tradition, its beliefs and its mission to the world of today. It is enriched by our desire to be involved and to offer the charisms, gifts, talents and abilities we have for the service of our Lord and of our society, putting the common good ahead of our personal views. *Participation* is conditional on embracing the Creed, receiving the sacraments and celebrating the Sunday eucharist – being at one with the heart and mind of the Church.

Mission depends upon the burning desire to spread the Good News for the sake of the good it will do to those who hear it and the enrichment it will bring to the quality of human life. It involves outreach to those who have never heard the Gospel and to those hurt or disappointed people who have parted company with us along the way. It equips us to speak in the public square about the things of God, wherever people are ready to listen.

This Sunday is a day of prayer for the Holy Spirit to come down upon the Church as it embraces the *synodal way*, launched last Sunday at St. Peter's by the Holy Father, and now taking root in the parishes of the Archdiocese. Initially it will be a time of reflection and prayer, a prolonged period for sharing our *joys, hopes* and *fears*, so that, listening to what the Holy Spirit is saying to the churches, we may articulate a vision of the Church which will make the kingdom of God a reality in our world.

The *synodal pathway* embraces our four diocesan priorities and it will work with them. Practical help will be on hand in the weeks ahead, with advice about how to become involved.

Thank you for being ready to discern how the Church can fulfil its mission in the profoundly changed world of today so that Christ can be at the centre of fashioning a better world for tomorrow.

Yours devotedly in Christ

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ Bernard Longley". The signature is written in a cursive style.

✠Bernard Longley
Archbishop of Birmingham

Given at Birmingham on the 14 October 2021 and appointed to be read in all Churches and Chapels of the Archdiocese on the 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time (16/17 October 2021).