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26th September 2023

PASTORAL LETTER FROM BISHOP TOAL

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

As the Assembly in Rome for the Synod on Synodality: Communion, Participation, and Mission, approaches this coming weekend, the Church everywhere prays for those present and asks the Holy Spirit to guide and bless their work on our behalf.

In the Synodal journey to date, much has been said about listening, and Jesus himself often encourages attentive listening – ‘Saying this he cried *“Listen anyone who has ears to hear”* (Lk.8:8)’. In his preaching he invited people to listen to God, firstly in the tradition of the Jewish people, then to his own words as the Son of God, and then also to the words of those he sends out to speak in his name. He recognises that listening is not easy as we are inclined to want to assert our own opinions and persuade others that we are right and that they should follow what we want.

An important lesson I have understood better in recent times is to listen attentively to people whose physical and mental health is declining. I was struck by the sense that words, and the ability to hear them, become more precious as people grow frailer and what they manage to say less distinct. Jesus himself dying on the Cross is an example of this - how precious his words from that pulpit of great suffering and approaching death have become for us. Think for a moment of his words to Mary and John – *“Woman, this is your Son”* and *“This is your Mother”* (Jn. 19:25-26). Mary and John heard these words because they were faithful to the end and had chosen to stand below the Cross. We would surmise that they were hyper-attentive to each gasp for breath and each word Jesus managed to get out. We have received their precious testimony and can hear the Lord speaking to each one of us as he gives us Mary as Our Mother also.

I read words recently from Pope Francis reflecting on meekness, and he emphasised that we are more likely to be aware of the Lord himself and his words to us when we are meek before him, and somewhat vulnerable. When we are inclined to be assertive and self-assured, we are less likely to hear Jesus. He invites us therefore to be humble of heart and ever attentive, so that we can bear witness to others in a humble, respectful, and understanding manner.

Sometimes the Synodal process has been presented as a new way of being Church. I have wondered about this terminology as it can be seen as radically different from what has gone before. An alternate could be to talk of a renewed vision of what the Church is. In that sense we are being called to rediscover an important part of the Church’s nature and way of interacting and communicating which may have been dormant for some time.

When we read the Acts of the Apostles, sometimes we focus too quickly on the Day of Pentecost and the extraordinary manifestation of the Holy Spirit and the resulting boldness of the Apostles as they preached their faith in the crucified and risen Lord and baptised those who believed. However, the great descent of the Holy Spirit was preceded by nine days of intensive prayer in the wake of the Lord's Ascension into Heaven. This period of reflection and prayer was shared by the community of believers in Jerusalem – “the Apostles (including Matthias), and a number of women, including Mary, the Mother of Jesus, and his brothers.” (Acts 1:16). It sounds synodal, in that all the faithful had space to participate and for their voices heard both in the prayer, and in the conversation and discussion which must have happened through these nine days. The result was that they experienced the transforming presence of the Holy Spirit, which confirmed the twelve Apostles in their particular ministry of preaching in Jesus's name, but also the whole original community who remembered the Lord with such love and devotion and chose to live the Christian life to the full, as described throughout the Acts of the Apostle.

On many occasions when important decisions were required, the praying of the community for the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and indeed their fasting, was an essential part of the process of discernment of the right path to choose. This discernment by the apostolic community would have been a feature of the Council of Jerusalem also. In being attentive therefore to the lived experience of the Church in Jerusalem in these early days, we can gain a renewed sense of the Church's nature, in which the participation and contribution of the “lay members” accompanied the apostles and was an essential part of the apostolic discernment and leadership.

Looking at the terms presented in the preparation for the Synod – Communion, Participation, and Mission – there is reassurance that, through the lens of these words, we are living and operating as the Church, the People of God, in the way we have always done and will continue to do so. We are a Communion of People, which has grown through the ages, and is spread across the whole world, which believes and celebrates the Faith we have received from the Lord and his followers from apostolic times. It has been passed down to us through Holy Scripture and our Sacred Tradition, guided and protected by the enduring presence of the Holy Spirit and the Apostolic Succession.

The participation of believers in this communion comes through our Baptism and the subsequent reception of the other Sacraments. We are continually encouraged to participate as fully as we can in the Church's life and worship, through the grace and mercy of God and with the support and encouragement of our fellow believers. The participation in the celebration of the Holy Eucharist is the high point of Christian worship, and the greatest gift left by the Lord for his followers. Through the Eucharist we are made aware of his abiding presence within and among us, and his constant invitation to receive his love and then share it with others.

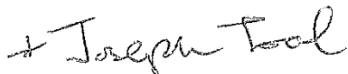
Some questions arise though about participation, and throughout the Church's history it has been debated as to what limits be placed upon full participation in the Eucharist, both in being present at the celebration of the sacred mysteries, and then more particularly in being able to receive the Lord's Body and Blood. The Church has consistently favoured caution in not allowing those who are not in full communion with the Church, either in Catholic Faith or in their living of the Christian Moral Life, from receiving Holy Communion. Through the ages it has been a debated point, and remains so in the present day. In seeking discernment through the synodal path of praying, listening, and sharing, those participating in the Synod will take a close look at the theological truths and moral principles involved and their pastoral application in the lives of the faithful. We trust that, in adopting a renewed synodal approach, the Synod members will enhance pastoral understanding while preserving the teachings given to us by the Lord.

Through Baptism, Confirmation and the Holy Eucharist, we become members of the Body of Christ, participating in his Priesthood. In this we offer our lives in Christ to the Father and receive the call to participate in the Mission he has given the Church on earth. All believers receive the call from the Lord to be joyful witnesses to Christ, at each stage in life and in every place. Whoever we are, the Lord asks us to give our lives in love to him and to show that love in our words and actions. This colossal on-going witness to the Lord is the living heart of the Church, and it is the task of the Ordained Ministers to prepare and exhort all the baptised to play their fullest part in the Great Mission of witnessing to Christ to the end of the ages.

We carry a sense of awe and gratitude as we call to mind the rich tapestry of the Church's mission and growth since apostolic times. It is particularly fitting, and uplifting, that we recognise and uphold the outstanding example of the saints. This takes us back to Mary and St John at the foot of the Cross and the succession of faithful and loving witnesses to the Lord through the ages, who now share in the fullness of the Trinity's life in Heaven. We seek their intercession and pray that the Church in our day will be most attentive to the words of the Lord as we strive to do God's will today. We commend the work of the Synod particularly to the intercession of Mary and the Apostles, and invite your prayers throughout October, in your parishes and communities, for those attending the Synod, particularly for Bishop Brian McGee, our delegate from Scotland.

With my prayers and good wishes,

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ Joseph Toal". The signature is written in a cursive style with a cross at the beginning.

+ Joseph Toal