



October 2021

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

On October 10, Pope Francis inaugurated in the Universal Church a two-year synodal process leading us toward the Synod of the People of God scheduled to take place in October 2023. The following Sunday, this synodal process was inaugurated at our cathedral church as I invoked the aid of God the Holy Spirit to guide us toward a deeper fidelity to the Gospel of Jesus Christ as we walk together in the communion of the Church.

"Synod" comes from two Greek words that mean "together on the way." We have to admit that the words "synod", "synodal", and "synodality" are not familiar to us in the ordinary experience of the Church today. Yet, they find their foundations in the ancient Church itself. Synods have been held locally and universally throughout the history of the Church. It was Pope Paul VI who established a permanent structure, an office, in Rome for the Synod of Bishops. And, through that office, the popes in the last sixty years have used that structure to consult the bishops throughout the world about various concerns facing the Church.

Pope Francis is hoping that this process of "journeying together" might be expanded to include all the baptized members of the Church. At its core, this synodal process is an exercise in listening, not only to each other in the Church, but most especially to the voice of the Lord speaking to us through the Sacred Scriptures, the grace of the Sacraments, and the movement of the Holy Spirit in our hearts.

For those who follow Catholic news, you might look at the word "synod" with some skepticism because of what is happening in the Catholic Church in Germany. The reports about the synodal path chosen by the German bishops has been controversial and, by what is reported, even dangerous. Pope Francis, in his address to the local Diocese of Rome, explained clearly that a synodal path is not about "gathering opinions" but "listening to the Holy Spirit." He goes on to say that this is not a survey that is employed to change the Church's doctrines or disciplines according to popular opinions, but to call the Church to ongoing conversion and deeper communion with each other and with God.

It is with this in mind that we embark on the synodal process for the Diocese of Harrisburg, gathering together in prayerful listening to the voice of the Lord. Throughout the coming months, each parish will be engaged through their pastoral councils and other Catholic organizations to "journey together" as we seek to follow the Gospel faithfully. We will ask questions about our personal experience of the Church and how the Church lives its mission to proclaim Christ in our parishes and our diocese. Our goal is not to achieve consensus in thought or to arrive at specific action points for change, but to be transformed by the process itself and adopt a new style of "synodality ... that qualifies the life and mission of the Church, expressing her nature as the People of God journeying together and gathering in assembly, summoned by the Lord Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit to proclaim the Gospel. Synodality ought to be expressed in the Church's ordinary way of living and working (International Theological Commission, Synodality in the life and mission of the Church)."

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Guided by the Holy Spirit, may the Lord lead us closer to communion with the Blessed Trinity and with each other in the Church as we "journey together" toward our eternal home.

Sincerely in Christ,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "R. Ronald W. Gainer".

Most Reverend Ronald W. Gainer
Bishop of Harrisburg