



10.22.21

*From the Chancery and the Office of Faith Formation  
of the Diocese of Erie*

Dear Brothers and Sisters, fellow pilgrims on the way:

As you may be aware, Pope Francis has asked every diocese in the world to participate in preparations for the upcoming world Synod of Bishops to be held in Rome in 2023. The theme of that synod will be ***For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission***. We are writing to offer a general introduction to the entire synodal process, and in particular to let you know what our diocesan participation will look like, and what you might expect over the next six months regarding it.

### **A LITTLE BACKGROUND**

The word “synod” means “journeying together” and calls to mind how the People of God journey and assemble together as a people “on the way”. The “synodal process” to which many documents refer is at the heart of our tradition as Christians. In a nutshell, it refers to the way in which the Church - meaning the whole People of God - collectively discerns where the Holy Spirit is leading us on our pilgrim journey. In a truly synodal Church, we listen to innumerable individual voices from every segment of the human family, as well as to the Scriptures and to our tradition, to discern from it all the one voice of the Holy Spirit leading us together into the future in fidelity to the mission given to us by Christ. The act of listening is central to the synodal process, and so is the purpose: discerning the will of the Holy Spirit.

In 2023, Pope Francis will call together the World Synod of Bishops to examine how well the Universal Church is listening to the human family in discerning where the Spirit is leading us. In preparation, each diocese is to ask this same question of itself. This diocesan self-study constitutes the core of the diocesan preparatory phase. It begins now and will last six months.

### **THE ESSENCE OF THE DIOCESAN PHASE (covering the next six months)**

The Holy Father formally opened the world-wide process on October 10, and his remarks of the preceding day are very helpful. They can be found at [Moment of reflection for the beginning of the synodal journey \(9 October 2021\) | Francis \(vatican.va\)](https://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francis/messages/curial/2021/10/10-10-2021_01.html).

Here at home, Bishop Persico formally opened the diocesan synodal phase at Mass in the cathedral on Saturday evening, October 16, 2021. In his homily, Bishop Persico noted that, “As Catholics, we are asked to reflect upon how the Holy Spirit is speaking to us and how we are proclaiming the message of the Gospel in our day and age. We must call upon the Holy Spirit to be the guide and director of this effort.”

We are now officially in the diocesan phase. During these next six months, we hope to engage numerous groups including parishes, religious communities and their members, deacons, priests, university students, families of all types, single persons, youth and young adults, non-practicing Catholics, the elderly, those on the margins of society, etc. We hope to hear from active Catholics, inactive Catholics, other Christians, and non-Christians, since in the words of Vatican II’s constitution on the Church *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 1: “The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are also the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ.”

It is important to note that this period of listening will be focused. In its instructions for the diocesan preparatory phase, the Holy See has given us the central question we will be asking during these listening sessions: ***A synodal Church, in announcing the Gospel, “journeys together.” How is this “journeying together” happening today in our diocese? What steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow in our “journeying together”?*** We will be asking people to recall their experiences of faith; to identify the joys, difficulties, obstacles, wounds, or insights those experiences reveal; and to indicate what they think the Holy Spirit is asking of us all in light of those experiences.

Eventually, we will need to summarize everything in a ten page diocesan report to be sent to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops [USCCB]. The USCCB will then summarize the reports collected from all over the country. The USCCB will collaborate with the Canadian Bishops’ Conference to prepare a report for North America, which together with the other continental reports will form the basic material for the gathering in Rome in 2023.

## **HOW WE HOPE TO CARRY OUT THE DIOCESAN PHASE REGARDING PARISH PARTICIPATION**

The Faith Formation Office, assisted by the Chancery Office, is taking the lead in guiding us through the diocesan phase. In the next week or so, parishes will begin to receive materials encouraging participation in listening sessions which will be held sometime in early 2022. Parishes may choose to host a listening session or may wish to combine with other area parishes to sponsor a joint listening session. It will be necessary to identify individuals on the parish level who could facilitate small group discussions, and the diocese will provide training for them prior to the actual listening sessions themselves.

Ideally, every parishioner should eventually know where to find a listening session somewhere in the area in order to participate. Those people choosing to participate will be offered some preparation so that they understand the purpose of the listening sessions and the central question that will be asked.

## **HOW WE HOPE TO CARRY OUT THE DIOCESAN PHASE WITH OTHER GROUPS**

At the same time as the parish process is underway, we will also be contacting numerous non-parish based groups using the same process: identifying and training local facilitators, providing preparatory materials to make for a more fruitful discussion, and conducting the actual sessions.

## **CONCLUSION**

The process we are embarking upon in this diocesan synodal phase is very ambitious, and we are committed to carrying it out as well as we are able. It is exciting to be part of the Church's global initiative to discern the voice of the Holy Spirit for our times. We ask for your prayers that we all, from least to greatest, may listen with integrity, that the Spirit will stir the hearts of the faithful, and that together we can accurately discern the voice of the Spirit leading us boldly into a future full of hope (cf. Jer. 29:11).

In the Lord,

Msgr. Ed Lohse, Vicar General  
Father Chris Singer, Chancellor  
Deacon Steve Washek, Faith Formation Office Executive Director