

Pastoral Letter for the First Sunday of Advent

(Please read and/or make available at all Masses during the weekend of the 27/28th November 2021)

My dear People,

On this, the First Sunday of Advent, we embark on a journey together with the Universal Church. Every diocese throughout the world has been invited by Pope Francis to walk the Synodal Pathway. The journey begins now and will conclude in Rome in 2023.

The Holy Father invites us to enter this Synodal Journey, moving towards greater Communion, Participation and Mission within the Church. These three themes reflect both our calling and ultimately our destination as Catholic Christians.

We begin in Advent, a season of listening, reflected in the most perfect example Our Blessed Mother, Mary. Listening was central to the Annunciation. First, God speaks to Mary; she loves God and she listens to him with an open heart and a willingness to participate in His plan. Later, at the Visitation, Mary cares for and listens to her cousin, Elizabeth. Our Lady shows us what it means to be fully attentive to God and to neighbour.

Now it is our turn. We are being asked to pray together, to talk with, and listen to each other, and to share our dreams for a future Church that is enhanced by communion, participation and mission.

The Holy Father has made it clear that each diocese ought to tailor the pathway to their unique, local situation and with this in mind I would like to encourage you to undertake this task within your Parish Partnerships. These were established as part of our Stewards of the Gospel process, which led, three years ago in the Advent of 2018 to the publication of our Vision Document: *Shaping Our Future*.

As a diocese, we now have some experience of collective discernment of the will of the Holy Spirit, as the common theme of listening together runs between the Stewards of the Gospel process and the Synodal Pathway. Pope Francis puts it beautifully, saying, “Our journeying together is what most effectively enacts and manifests the nature of the Church as the pilgrim and missionary People of God”. My hope is that the Synodal pathway will help us to discern and implement our own vision and manifest our missionary nature.

Now I urge you to come together in your parish partnership; to pray and to dream of the future of our church, to listen with care and respect to one another, allowing the Holy Spirit to guide your conversations.

Everyone should be included in this prayerful listening and discernment and there will be notices in your parish bulletin or on social media with further information.

As we journey together in our pilgrimage to the house of God our Father, I invite you to use the Synod Prayer which will be available in print form and also on diocesan and parish websites. Attributed to St Isidore of Seville (560-636), it has been traditionally used at Councils and Synods for hundreds of years. This version has been designed specifically for the Church's Synodal Pathway. Please pray it, inviting the Holy Spirit into your busy lives and homes and know that I will be praying for you also.

Yours in Christ and Mary,

+Alan Williams, sm
Bishop of Brentwood