**THE 2023 SYNOD OF BISHOPS**

**Address on Communion 5/6 February 2022**

Over this and the next two weekends we will be developing further what Fr William and Lawrence outlined last week in their introduction to the Synod of the whole church.

Last week they told us that the word Synod derives from a Greek term meaning ‘coming together’ and refers particularly to how members of the very early church came together, in a time of general hostility towards them, to develop their understanding of the teachings of Christ.

Pope Francis is inviting the church today to come together at a time of challenge in the life of the entire world to ask us all to listen and to hear what the Holy Spirit is saying to the church now.

The Second Vatican Council made it very clear that the church is *us* - not the hierarchy in Rome or the bishops but all of us here. We are what the Council described as the whole People of God - the whole community of the baptized. We are the church – the people to whom the pope wants to listen.

Pope Francis tells us he wants us to grow together in reflecting on the three inter-related areas, of Communion, Participation and Mission. Over these three weekends we are going to focus on each of those areas in turn to consider what they mean, what questions they may raise about the church today and how we may respond to those questions.

The key area of the three is Communion because everything in Christianity derives from the concept of ‘communion’.

We already understand much about that meaning of Communion. In the Apostles Creed we profess our belief in that ‘communion of saints.’ We know we are already members of that communion of saints and united with all others who share and profess the Christian faith. We share beliefs.

The Vatican Council, though, went more deeply into that meaning of communion.

The Council described the church, or the people of God, as being ‘ *a* *communion’* – ‘a communion between God and ourselves and a communion of ourselves with one another in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit’

This description derives directly from the Gospels and the letters of St Paul.

In St.John’s Gospel we hear that Jesus told his disciples:

***Abide in me, and I in you.***

***I am the vine; you are the branches.***

***Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit,***

***for apart from me you can do nothing****.*

Jesus was presenting far more than just an image to his disciples. He did not say ‘I am like a vine’ but ‘I am the vine’ .He is the Vine, the ‘whole’; but he tells us that we are the branches of the vine and are thereby an integral part of him. He was telling his disciples that they are in total union with him: they are part of him in a state of communion so deep, so profound, that it lies at the limit of our capacity to understand.

Saint Paul constantly repeated this truth. He tells his readers that we are ‘***in Christ*’** and he writes to the Corinthians: **“You are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”**

To the Ephesians he writes**: “He ...has made him, as the ruler of everything, the head of the church, which is his body”**

From this Communion with Christ, through him we are in communion with the Father and with the Holy Spirit. Each one of us is called to allow the Spirit to act in and through us, as and how we are able to respond.

Pope Francis is asking us now to reflect upon and to pray about what the Spirit wants of us, what he wants us to do, as individuals and collectively.

The Vatican Council described the church as ‘a communion of local churches, or dioceses, each of which is the Body of Christ in its own particular place’. Through the collective response of all these churches the pope will hear what the Holy Spirit is saying to the church as a whole.

The extra sheets in the Newsletter today explain that a little further and indicate ways in which we can respond in our parish which you may like to talk about over coffee after Mass.

In summary then, Pope Francis is asking us through the process of the synod – a new and challenging journey for us all - to reflect and pray and grow together in the key area of our communion, reflected in the Synod prayer when we ask:

*Let us find in you our unity so that we may journey together to eternal life.*

We pray for unity in the deep sense of communion of the synod. Any reflection on that will raise many questions for us: are we in communion as a church, as a parish, as a family, how, why not, how can we improve , what is really meant by unity – in the church, in the parish, in the world, how can I help unity grow, what is stopping greater unity?

Since I spoke about this last night I reflected further on it and found I could not think of a single issue, if I may use that word, of concern in the church today, indeed in the world today, which did not relate to the concept of communion.

Let us stand now to pray together the Synod prayer, printed on the Newsletter, asking especially that the Spirit deepens our sense of Communion and guides our respon

**Adsumus Sancte Spiritus:**

We stand before You, Holy Spirit,

as we gather together in Your name.

With You alone to guide us,

make Yourself at home in our hearts;

Teach us the way we must go

and how we are to pursue it.

We are weak and sinful;

do not let us promote disorder.

Do not let ignorance lead us down the wrong path

nor partiality influence our actions.

Let us find in You our unity

so that we may journey together to eternal life

and not stray from the way of truth

and what is right.

All this we ask of You,

who are at work in every place and time,

in the communion of the Father and the Son,

forever and ever.

Amen.