

**“LET US GO WITH YOU,  
*for we have heard that*  
GOD IS WITH YOU.”**

*(Zechariah 8:23)*



**PASTORAL LETTER**

**August 2021**

**BISHOP PAUL HINDER OFM CAP.**

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To all the faithful in the two Vicariates of Arabia  
about the forthcoming Synod with the topic

**“For a synodal Church:  
Communion, Participation and Mission”**

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Dear brothers and sisters in Christ!

1. Peace be with you! On 9 – 10 October 2021, Pope Francis will officially inaugurate the path towards the Synod 2023 with the topic *“For a synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission”*. A week later, the process of the Synod will be opened in all the dioceses around the world. After consultation with the priests in the countries of the Vicariate of Northern Arabia, I have decided that the formal opening ceremony will be held in common for the two Apostolic Vicariates of Arabia on Friday, 15 October 2021 at St Joseph’s Cathedral in Abu Dhabi. The program and the participants will be communicated in due course, depending also on the covid-19 regulations.

With this letter, I wish to explain the meaning of this Synod and invite you to actively participate in it. Let us remind ourselves of the words of Saint Paul to the Ephesians: *“you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the holy ones and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the capstone”* (Eph 2:19-20).

## JOURNEYING TOGETHER OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD

2. What does the word *synod* mean? It is originally a Greek word composed of *syn* (with or together with) and *odos* (path or

way). A Synod, therefore, is *journeying together along the same path*. Since the beginning of the Church, synods have been convoked on various levels (diocesan, provincial, regional, patriarchal, or universal) to discern, in the light of the word of God and listening to the Holy Spirit, when doctrinal, liturgical, canonical and pastoral questions that arose from time to time had to be resolved.

Traditionally, a synod signifies the coming together of a group of bishops from different regions of the world, representing the people of God of their dioceses. However, Pope Francis wants the forthcoming synod to be celebrated not just in the Vatican, but in each local Church all over the world. The synodal journey will follow a three-year itinerary divided into three phases: diocesan, continental and universal, with each phase to be the fruit of a *journeying together* of the whole people of God. It will thus be “not just an event, but also a process that involves in synergy the People of God, the College of Bishops and the Bishop of Rome, each according to their proper function” (cf. Address by Cardinal Mario Grech to the Holy Father in the Consistory for the creation of new cardinals, November 28, 2020).

## LISTENING TOGETHER TO THE HOLY SPIRIT

3. The Holy Father has decided to start the synodal process with the consultation at the level of the local Churches. The Pope wishes to bring the specific experiences of the local Churches throughout the world into the Synod which is scheduled to be held

in Rome in 2023. Commemorating the 50th anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops, Pope Francis explained in his address on 17 October 2015 the meaning of a synodal Church with the following words:

*A synodal Church is a Church which listens, which realizes that listening “is more than simply hearing”. It is mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn. The faithful people, the college of bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the “Spirit of truth” (Jn 14:17), in order to know what he “says to the Churches” (Rev 2:7).*

*The Synod of Bishops is the point of convergence of this listening process conducted at every level of the Church’s life. The Synod process begins by listening to the people of God, which “shares also in Christ’s prophetic office”, according to a principle dear to the Church of the first millennium: “Quod omnes tangit ab omnibus tractari debet” (What is the concern of all should be treated by all). The Synod process then continues by listening to the pastors. Through the Synod Fathers, the bishops act as authentic guardians, interpreters and witnesses of the faith of the whole Church, which they need to discern carefully from the changing currents of public opinion.*

## DISCERNING TOGETHER WITH ALL THE BAPTIZED (THE GIFT OF "SENSUS FIDEI")

4. The Church is the Body of Christ, the People of God,

and the Temple of the Holy Spirit. The grace of baptism makes a person part of the body of Christ and therefore, responsible for its life and mission. The Second Vatican Council says that the whole body of the faithful, who have the anointing from the holy one (1 John 2:20, 27) cannot err in matters of belief. This characteristic is known as the supernatural sense of the faith (*sensus fidei*) of the whole people of God, who also have an instinctive ability to discern the new ways that the Lord is revealing to the Church.

As the Body of Christ, the Church is a divine and spiritual reality. At the same time, the Church's existence on earth and its members indicates its human dimension. To understand the Church in its holistic dimension, we need to consider both the human and spiritual dimensions of the Church. If we confine our understanding of the Church solely to its worldly structures, we risk reducing the Church to a purely human social group and the synod to a parliament.

5. Synodality, on the other hand, is both a human and a spiritual process, "involves mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn. Synodality refers to "the very essence of the Church, her constitutive reality, and is thus oriented towards evangelization. It is an ecclesial way of being and a prophetic example for today's world." Through the synodal process, the Holy Father Pope Francis intends that the Church listens to the promptings of the Holy Spirit resounding among the faithful located in different parts of the world. The Synod is not so much a place to push one's own idea or agenda, neither involving

people in decision making, nor it is a “representation or quota system” but involving all the baptized in discerning God’s will and listening to the Holy Spirit to look for a path ahead for the church in the third millennium. Every Catholic, therefore, is invited to participate in the discernment of what “the Spirit says to the churches” (Revelation 2:7) in the context of the modern world and its challenges. Participating in the synodal process is thus a means of collaboration and dialogue on the new ways of existence of the Church and its evangelising mission in the world.

## ENGAGING IN THE SYNODAL PROCESS

6. As a Church of migrants amidst a Muslim society, comprising the faithful of different nationalities and traditions, our witness stands unique and important within the universal Church. How do we involve all our faithful in the synodal process? How can we engage in the synodal process of the Church in our two vicariates which comprise of parishes and communities in seven different countries with a noteworthy diversity among faithful, who share the status of migrants? We are a local Church that shows in a particular way the character of pilgrimage and catholicity. Pilgrimage, because we do not have citizenship in these countries of our residence and therefore are living here without guarantee of permanence for a lifetime; catholicity, because most of our parishes comprise of the faithful from many language groups and traditions, similar to what the Acts of the Apostles report about the variety of peoples present at the first Pentecost.



7. We know that the pandemic is still an obstacle for free gathering and travelling. However, we shall try to do our best to gather your concerns and proposals regarding our being as the *people of God* living in *communion*, with the *participation* of everyone, implementing our *mission* as disciples of Jesus Christ. I wish that we live this time of deepening our faith and the relationship among us in a spirit indicated in the scripture that I have chosen as a theme for this letter: “*Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you*” (Zechariah 8:23). This means that we need to live what we are called, to be “*people of God*”.

## THE SYNODAL PROCESS AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

8. While we are awaiting the appointment of new bishops for the Peninsula, we must start the journey towards the synod already now. According to the intention of Pope Francis, the synodal process begins at the local level. For this purpose, the best will be to engage in a kind of parochial synod. Each parish with its individual faithful and different communities is invited to reflect: How do we live our *communion*? What about our *participation* in the animation and the life of the parish? Are we aware that Christ entrusted everyone with a *mission*, however modest it may be? I have in mind that each parish should open the floor to the voices of the faithful in a way that they can bring up their concerns regarding a sustainable reform of our way to live the gospel of the Lord in the communion of the Church. I invite everyone to use the communication tools at their disposal to be part of our spiritual journey. I am fully aware

that this has to be done according to the specific situations in the different countries and in respect to the size and structure of each parish.

9. There are several other fields as well that deserve our attention. It suffices to look at the encyclical letters and other documents of Pope Francis to become aware that still much remains to be done. There are several questions such as sacramental life during and after the pandemic; faith-formation of children, youth and adults; different ministries in the Church and the application in our vicariates; relations between priests and the lay faithful; pastoral care of families and the challenges of Christian marriage in the migrant church; care for the poor and needy in our midst and elsewhere; interreligious relationships; active participation of all the faithful in the parishes; use of the electronic media for internal communication and the promotion of the gospel; our responsibility towards the financial needs for the services of the Church, and so on. Although we cannot realize everything at once, it is always better to start in a modest way than to rest inactive and to remain observers without personal involvement.

10. According to the synodal process, coordinators will be designated for each Vicariate in due course, who along with the bishop will gather the fruits of the local process. The collection of the inputs from the parishes, groups and individual faithful will be done by the end of this year. The consultation with the people of God will conclude with a pre-synodal meeting, which will conclude the local process in the Vicariates. Thereafter, the results will be

brought to the level of the Bishops Conference of our region, which will gather the inputs from the different local churches and bring it to the knowledge of the General Secretariat for the Synod of Bishops in Rome, that will prepare the various drafts of the working document (*Instrumentum Laboris*), which will form the basis for the discussions, discernment, and deliberation at the Synod 2023.

## "WE HAVE HEARD THAT GOD IS WITH YOU"

11. How shall we enter the new chapter in the Church's life? The psalmist says, "Your word O Lord is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path" (Ps 119:105). St. Francis of Assisi, when he wanted to find a rule for his new way of life, sought guidance from the Book of the Gospels – it was in the light of the words of Christ that he understood what the Lord was looking for, both in his life and that of his followers. Let us then turn to the word of God and seek the new way in the light of His Word.

*Heartfelt prayer* is and will always be the foundation of all that we think and do. St Teresa of Avila says, "*Begin every good thing by coming on your knees to the Lord.*" Humble, trustful, and earnest prayer with one accord was the source of courage and strength for the first Christian communities; they joined constantly in prayer before commencing all major undertakings and whenever faced with oppositions and setbacks.

The Lord Jesus reminds us, "*You can do nothing without me*" (Jn 15:5),

and that it is by remaining humble and docile to the voice of His Spirit that we will be blessed to be the “People of God” spoken of by the Prophet Zechariah, to whom all the nations were attracted. I invite all of you to keep the synodal process in your daily prayers. Let us pray earnestly for our Church and its synodal path, especially during the Holy Mass. We are aware that “*unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labour in vain. Unless the LORD guards the city, in vain does the guard keep watch*” (Ps 127:1). May our Lady of Arabia intercede for all of us.

*Abu Dhabi, August 15, 2021*

*Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary*

+ Paul Hinder, OFM Cap.

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