This form of journeying together, which the Pope calls “synodality,” is a way for the Church to hear the voice of God and to carry out more fervently the mission that Jesus gave to us, to make disciples of all nations. –Bishop John Folda

**Synod of Bishops on Synodality**

Last month, an important event was launched in the Church. Pope Francis inaugurated a Synod of Bishops in Rome that will convene in two years’ time after a period of preparation around the world. But first, what is a Synod of Bishops? It is a gathering of bishops and other representatives that come together every three years or so to discuss the doctrinal and pastoral needs of the Church. Previous synods have dealt with issues like evangelization, catechesis, the role of the laity, the formation of priests, family life, marriage, and many others. The word “synod” loosely means to “walk together,” or to “journey together.”

But then, why launch a synod now that won’t meet for another two years? That’s where we come in.

Pope Francis wants the entire Church to play a part in this synodal process, and he offers three key themes for us to reflect on. First is communion. God gathers us together as many peoples throughout the world united in one faith, and he makes a covenant of love with us. It is Jesus himself who reconciles us to the Father and unites us with each other in the Holy Spirit. Together we are inspired by the Word of God and the teaching of the Church, and we’re united in grace through Baptism, the Eucharist, and all the sacraments. The communion that is offered to us happens through our relationship with Jesus and his Body, the Church.

The next theme is participation. Like all the popes of recent times, Pope Francis is calling all the members of the People of God—lay, religious, and clergy—to play a part in the life and mission of the Church. Together we pray and listen to the Holy Spirit, allowing him to guide the Church on its forward path. Together we listen and collaborate to serve others and meet the needs of all God’s people. All the faithful are called to be servants through the gifts they have received from God, and to follow the example of Jesus himself. Everyone has a part to play in the life of the Church and the work of salvation.

And the final theme is mission. The Church exists to evangelize. We can never just be centered on ourselves. Our mission, whether we are laity, consecrated religious, or clergy, is to witness to the love of God in the midst of the whole human family. The Church by its nature is missionary, and our mission is to reach out not only to those who are already in the fold, but also to those who are on the margins, those who have not yet come to know the love and mercy of Jesus in their lives. We are to be a leaven at the service of the coming of God’s Kingdom.

When Jesus calls us into communion, into relationship with himself, he invites us to participate actively in the life of his family, the Church. And from that communion he sends us out as his witnesses into the world, as his ambassadors and as servants to others. That begins from the moment we are baptized and continues throughout our lives here on earth. The Holy Father wants us to take an active part in this synodal process, and so there will be opportunities for all the faithful of our diocese and for each of our parishes to contribute their input on the way forward for the Church. This form of journeying together, which the Pope calls “synodality,” is a way for the Church to hear the voice of God and to carry out more fervently the mission that Jesus gave to us, to make disciples of all nations. When your parish offers these opportunities, I hope you will take part, so that our experience as a diocese can be passed along to the Holy Father and the Synod of Bishops that will meet with him in two years. And let us pray that this time of preparation will be fruitful for us and for the Church.

This concept of synodality isn’t entirely new, and has already existed in various ways in the Church. I think, for example, of the parish pastoral councils, finance councils, and many other groups that offer counsel and cooperate with the pastor in the leadership of his parish. The representatives on the diocesan pastoral council give their counsel to the bishop on the needs and future plans for the diocese. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has its own National Advisory Council, a gathering of lay Catholics from across the country who advise the bishops on the issues that come before them at their annual meetings. You might remember too that several years ago Pope Francis asked for input from the
faithful for the Synod on the Family. We received hundreds of comments from around the diocese which we sent on to Rome.

Contrary to some media-generated notions, the Synod of Bishops is not a parliament or legislature that changes Church doctrine. And it is not the same as a diocesan synod, which deals in a similar way with the more local needs of the local church. I will say more about that another time. The bishops who will gather around the Holy Father in 2023 will look at the needs of the Church in light of divine revelation as found in Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition. Along with the faithful around the world, they will discern the promptings of the Holy Spirit as they look to the ongoing mission that Jesus gave to his Church. This synod will inevitably be followed by others that will continue this work of proclaiming the Gospel and interpreting the working of the Holy Spirit in our times. Pope Francis invites us all to be part of this Synod, so that we may journey together with Christ in a spirit of communion, participation, and mission.