

5th November 2023

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

I returned home this week from Rome where, as you know, the First Session on the theme of Synod took place throughout the month of October. I want to say a big “thanks” to you for your prayers that accompanied the Synod. I heard of prayers being offered daily or weekly in parishes, religious orders and prayer groups, as well as personal prayers, across the Diocese.

The Synod was an amazing event with 365 members from across the world, representing many different cultures, languages and Church traditions. It was a moment to learn much about the Church in regions of the world that are very different to ours. The one faith that unites us is lived out in circumstances that vary greatly – in countries where there are wars going on, in regions where Catholics are a persecuted minority, in places where there are extreme social challenges. It was pointed out, for instance, that in Asia alone there are 2000 cultures with 1000 languages.

There would be much to share and I hope I might get an occasion to do so in the coming weeks and months. It was moving, for instance, to meet bishops from various countries in Asia, Africa, Australia as well as North and South America who spoke of the huge contribution of Irish missionaries to the Church in their countries.

I got an opportunity to greet the Pope and convey the best wishes and assurance of prayers on the part of the people of the Diocese of Limerick. The Pope attended many of the general sessions of our Synod and we also celebrated a wonderful ecumenical vigil with him, as well as various moments of prayer for migrants and for peace, remembering those living in war torn areas. We heard from people living in those countries at war and their testimony was moving.

This year’s gathering in Rome is only part one of the Synod because the Synod will meet again next October to conclude its work. I have put together a summary based on a report from Vatican News of the main points that emerged. You will find copies available on your way out of Mass today or on our diocesan website. The Report offers reflections and proposals on topics such as the role of women and the laity, the ministry of bishops, priesthood and the diaconate, the importance of the poor and migrants, digital mission, ecumenism, and abuse.

What remains from the gathering is the relationships and friendships that were established and built up. We were sitting at round tables in groups of 11 at each table – lay, religious, clergy, bishops and Cardinals. While we were focussed on the themes to be discussed we also enjoyed each other’s company. I found myself, for instance, at a table with a bishop from South African on the day of the match with an inevitable banter that others enjoyed. As I say, what emerged this year is setting the foundation for next year’s gathering.

One moving moment during the Synod was when we were told of how, when asked what the Church should be about, the homeless of Rome answered: “Love” understood as “respect, acceptance, and recognition”. It was good for us all to hear again this central point of the Church’s mission. In his homily at the Mass to conclude the Synod, Pope Francis reminded us we are “....a worshipping church and a church of service, washing the feet of wounded humanity, accompanying those who are frail, weak and cast aside, going out lovingly to encounter the poor”.

In the coming weeks, as a worshipping and serving Church we remember our loved ones who have died. Our prayers for them are an expression of love, the love that unites heaven and earth. Our

Christian faith tells us that, in death, love does not come to an end. The Church in heaven, the Church in purgatory and the Church on earth (and that's all of us) continue to journey with each other.

Synod is about journeying together. We are indeed, as a Diocese, on a journey, all of us. As a Diocese we too can look forward with hope to the next steps God wants us to take. We have much to be grateful for. There are some 150,000 baptised Catholics in our diocese with 15,600 weekly mass goers. There are 102 primary schools under Catholic patronage and last year some 4,300 children celebrated either Communion for the First time or Confirmation. 2,500 volunteers are helping out in various ways across the 60 parishes and 16 pastoral units of the Diocese served by 88 diocesan priests and 9 priests from abroad. 365 marriages were celebrated in churches here last year. Some 263 young people were involved in our youth programmes this year with 107 school retreats taking place.

With renewed thanks for your prayers for the Synod.

Bishop Brendan Leahy