ARCHBISHOP'S HOUSE,
WESTMINSTER, LONDON, SW1P 1QJ

Pastoral Letter for the Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time
16/17 September 2023

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Jesus Christ,

Coming to church today all of us will have made the Sign of the Cross, at least once. We did so at the opening words of the Mass. Many will also have done so on entering the church, using the holy water as a reminder of our baptism. This is our first prayer.

The Sign of the Cross is our hallmark, or, if you prefer, our foundation. It tells us who we are and how we understand our lives. We see our life to be founded and rooted in God, Creator, Father; we walk in the pathway marked out for us by Jesus, the eternal Son of the Father; we have within us the company and power of the Holy Spirit, the eternal love which flows between Father and Son and surges into our lives by God's gift. This is who we are, not just individually but together, as the community of the Church.

It is not easy to put this fundamental reality into practice. There is a yearning within the human spirit for precisely the mercy, forgiveness, truth and love which flow abundantly from the mystery of God. Our mission, through baptism, is to make visible this saving truth, each day, in every circumstance, fulfilled or failed by what we say and do.

In the last two years, Pope Francis has been calling us to be renewed in this mission. He wants us to rediscover our life in the Church as a communion of life with God and with one another, opened up for us through the Sacraments, those outward signs of inward grace. Furthermore, he wants us to be a sacrament for the whole world, the outward sign that leads people to the inward grace of faith in Jesus Christ, known and lived within the communion of the Church.

The method chosen by Pope Francis for this reawakening is his insistence that we learn to listen more closely to one another; that we are ready to work out, prayerfully, what we need to do to fulfil this mission; that we seek to enhance our service of others, acknowledging that every single person is endowed with gifts and abilities for this work. All this goes by way of the Synodal pathway the Pope has established for us all.

Over the last two years, there have been various concerted expressions of this Synodal journey, in our parishes, in the Diocese as a whole, and at the level of the Church in every continent. Now all this comes together, in October, in a Synod of Bishops, in Rome, to assess the journey thus far and to fashion clearly the next steps to be taken. These findings can then be reviewed by us all, before a further Synod of Bishops that takes place in October 2024.

We are privileged that Bishop Nicholas Hudson has been chosen by Pope Francis to be a member of this Synodal Assembly. The Pope has also chosen a significant number of lay men and women, priests and religious, from each continent, to be members alongside those bishops chosen by Bishops'

Conferences around the world. Theirs will be a demanding task and I ask you to pray for them all. Their method will be the same as the one the Pope has put before us all: prayerful listening of the heart, careful discernment of all that is put before them, faithfulness to the teaching of the Church, explored and presented with great love. Their work will be shaped, as is ours, by praise of the Father, fidelity to the Son, seeking the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

We can be clear, then, that this Synod meeting is not an ecclesiastical UN Assembly, nor a Church parliament or convention, nor a referendum on the teaching of the Church. In the words of Pope Francis, it is to be 'a grace-filled event, a process of healing guided by the Holy Spirit', a setting out on a journey 'with the Lord always coming to meet us' (Pope Francis, 10 October 2021).

The overall aim of the October meeting has been clearly set out: how can we become a listening Church, one that is profoundly open to all, humble and seeking forgiveness - as we have been reminded in today's readings? Can we be a Church of encounter and dialogue which seeks to hold together, often in tension, fidelity to the truth expressed in her teaching and a compassionate love for every person? How can we be a Church of deep respect for all that is truly human, seeking to bring the gifts and talents of every person into the mission given by Christ? How can we be a Church which is constantly restless because we are incomplete, yet a sign and instrument of the union of all with God? The Synod must consider what processes, initiatives, and structures can help us in becoming a truly missionary Church.

It is not difficult to see that the agenda of the forthcoming Synod of Bishops is an agenda for us all: for each of us individually, for families, for every church association and group, for parishes, for the Diocese. The Synod is a journey we share. For this reason, I invite you today to be part of this historic process, not simply through following the reports that come from Rome, but in the thoughts and resolutions of your own hearts. How can we be more attentive to each other? How can we listen with our hearts to the distress and the joy of those around us? How can we make our community more welcoming? How can we find ways of enabling the talents and abilities of everyone to become part of our outreach, of that invitation to come to know the Lord?

Every moment and every place is, for us, a time and location for mission: the supermarket, the casual meeting, the places of leisure and of work, the family circle. By this I do not mean that we are always talking about the things of faith, but that we are constantly attentive to the many ways in which the good Lord might be prompting a person, and us ourselves, to take a step nearer to him. How can we then accompany that person to take the next step, with sensitivity and humility, grateful for our own friendship with the Lord, the gift of faith that we have received?

May the coming month of October be a time of grace for our Church, both in the great gathering in Rome and in the circles of our lives here at home. May October, the month of the Holy Rosary, see us take up our rosary beads each day, asking our Blessed Mother to strengthen and guide us in this journey of faith.

I ask you this in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Yours devotedly,

+ Vincent Nichols

✠ Cardinal Vincent Nichols
Archbishop of Westminster