

Address to the Archdiocesan Synodal Council

1st November 2025

Archbishop John Sherrington

Introduction

Dear sisters and brothers, peace be with you all,

I am delighted to address you on All Saints Day as your new Archbishop and welcome you all to this meeting of the Archdiocesan Synodal Council. I am deeply grateful to Archbishop Malcolm for the insight and risk in deciding to hold a diocesan synod and create the structures for working in a more synodal way. He was ahead of the times of the process and meetings of the Synod of Bishops on the meaning of synodality for the mission of the Church. I thank each one of you for your contribution to this process of renewal in the Archdiocese of Liverpool. Filled with the Holy Spirit, we can walk together with joy and gratitude. As Pope Leo said last weekend at the Jubilee for Synodal Teams,

‘The Synodal Process, as Pope Francis reminded us and on numerous occasions, is to help the Church fulfil its primary role in the world, which is to be missionary, to announce the Gospel, to give witness to the person of Jesus Christ in every part of the world, to the ends of the

earth, in words of the Gospel. Preaching, sharing, and living what Jesus Christ taught us.’¹

The final document ‘For A Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission’ (October 2024) reminds us that we must return constantly to the source of our faith who is Jesus Christ and his commandment ‘Go teach all nations’.² From this life-living encounter with the Risen Christ, and under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, we gather today to continue our diocesan journey of renewing the Church through the spirit of conversion to deepen the ways in which we build communion, widen participation and fulfil the mission of the Church to live and proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ in this Archdiocese.

Both the Archdiocesan synod and process leading to the synod in Rome have shown us that we rely on the power of the Holy Spirit who animates and inspires our prayer, our life, our discernment and decision-making. Today we learn how the Holy Spirit has been at work in the deaneries helping us to discern further the implementation and action of the pastoral plan.³

¹ <https://www.osvnews.com/pope-a-synodal-church-evangelizes-better-works-together-for-justice/>

² Every new step in the life of the Church is a return to the source. It is a renewed experience of the disciples’ encounter with the Risen One in the Upper Room on Easter evening. Like them, during this synodal Assembly, we, too, felt enfolded in His mercy and drawn to His beauty. We felt His presence in our midst as we lived conversation in the Spirit and listened to one another: the presence of He, who, in bestowing the Holy Spirit, continues to build among His people a unity that establishes harmony amidst differences [FD 1].

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1. Become a Church that accompanies people through life.
2. Become a Church that honours the vocation of the baptised.

Today I invite you to reflect on the green shoots which we have seen emerging over this last year. This was a question I asked the clergy when we met soon after my installation. I also wish to reflect on the final document of the synod in Rome and suggest how it complements our own journey here in Liverpool. It is not possible to be comprehensive and so the aspects I do not mention are not meant to suggest they are less important.

‘Conversations in the Spirit’

Both our synod and the synod in Rome have demonstrated the approach of holding ‘conversations in the spirit’ is fruitful but also hard work. It has been ‘experienced as a path of renewal that transforms individuals, groups and the Church’ [FD 45].

Engaging in conversations in the Spirit takes time and leads to conversion. Time is needed to discern well; time is needed to keep people on board; time is needed to allow others to join the journey; time is needed to make the right decisions step by step; and time is needed to heal the grief and lament which results from change. Time creates new opportunities as the Holy Spirit leads the Church in a process of dying and rising to new life.

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3. Become a Church where synodality is embedded.
 4. Become a Church that renews its organisational structures and administers its property to serve its mission.
 5. Become a Church where young people and young adults flourish.
 6. Become a Church that cares for its priests.

The seed must fall into the ground so that the green shoots emerge in the springtime. As we reflect on the structures of parishes and deaneries which are best for mission, this method is important and cannot be short-circuited for quick results.

The Call to Conversion

The theme of conversion permeates the Final Document. The opening chapter Part I is entitled, Called by the Holy Spirit to Conversion. The text reflects on Mary Magdalene's visit to the tomb early in the morning of Easter Sunday and her meeting with Christ. As she goes forth to tell others of Christ's resurrection, so we are sent out from our meeting with Christ. The Church witnesses to the resurrection and by baptism we become members of this Church of witnesses called to holiness to proclaim the gift of salvation in Christ.⁴

The structure then moves to chapter 21 of St John's Gospel reflecting on the great catch of fish. We find, Part II - The Conversion of Relationships, Part III - The Conversion of Processes, Part IV - The Conversion of Bonds. These conversions shape the Church to be sent out by Christ. Part V - 'So I

⁴ 'The identity of the People of God flows from Baptism... This identity is lived out as a call to holiness and a sending out in mission inviting all people to accept the gift of salvation. The missionary church springs from baptism, in which Christ clothes us with himself and enables us to be reborn in the Spirit as children of God. The whole of Christian existence has its source and horizon in the mystery of the Trinity, which brings forth in us the dynamism of faith, hope and love.' [FD 15]

send you’ Forming a People for Missionary Discipleship. The Pope invites us to read, pray and study this final document.

Being Sent

The mission is always outward looking and focused on the proclamation of Christ. Reflecting on St Paul VI’s great missionary encyclical *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (*On Proclaiming the Gospel*) in 1975, Pope Francis said, ‘Evangelization is more than just simple doctrinal and moral transmission. It is, first and foremost, *witness* — one cannot evangelize without witness — witness of the personal encounter with Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word in which salvation is fulfilled... It is not transmitting an ideology or a “doctrine” on God, no. It is transmitting God who is living in me. This is witness... so that the proclamation of the Gospel may be fruitful.’⁵

Pope Francis in his encyclical *The Joy of the Gospel* speaks of three audiences to be addressed by our witness of love, witness of holiness and witness of service and empowerment of the poor.⁶

The first audience are those who are committed and desire to deepen their faith and life in Christ. We are called to widen the tent and draw others into fuller participation as baptised members of the Church, to build community and to be sent out. We must never underestimate the sacrifice which ‘the

⁵ Pope Francis, Audience, 22 March 2023

⁶ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), 14.

faithful’ make to keep faith alive in their families or alone. They need our encouragement, and we are invited to listen to them to help our wider mission.

The second audience are those who have walked away from their faith. They have walked down the road to Emmaus from Jerusalem with downcast hearts. In this Archdiocese there are many who have been baptised and, for many different reasons, have walked away. Some have been hurt by a priest or others; some have lost faith because of the events of life or the scandals of the Church; some have simply lost the interest and habit of Christian faith or participating in the life of the Church, some have sought meaning in other ways.⁷ The first aim of the synod pastoral plan desires that we become a Church who accompanies them in their pain or bewilderment and helps them to turn around and walk again to Jerusalem. Pope Francis in Brazil said, ‘We need a Church unafraid of going forth into their night. We need a Church capable of meeting them on their way. We need a Church capable of entering into their conversation.’ We are to be a Church that accompanies them from night to dawn, from sadness to joy in God’s own time.’

The third audience is a new generation who have no real idea of who Jesus Christ is. Among this group are young people who desire to be baptised or

⁷ Pope Francis, Meeting with Bishops, Brazil, 28 July 2013, 3. ‘Perhaps the Church appeared too weak, perhaps too distant from their needs, perhaps too poor to respond to their concerns, perhaps too cold, perhaps too caught up with itself, perhaps a prisoner of its own rigid formulas, perhaps the world seems to have made the Church a relic of the past, unfit for new questions; perhaps the Church could speak to people in their infancy but not to those come of age.’

renew the meaning of their baptism which never developed. I hear of the phenomenon of young people, especially men, who wish to discover the meaning of their baptism. They say, ‘please tell me about Jesus Christ’. This trend has been documented in a paper by the Bible Society, ‘The Quiet Revival’. The liturgy of the Easter Vigil and the number of baptisms and confirmations witnesses to this event. Recently I met seventy young adults deeply committed to their faith at the university chaplaincy at St. Philip Neri Church. There were many signs of hope present.

There are many green shoots in our midst. We need to be attentive to these green shoots and learn from them by accompaniment and listening. This takes time and energy but is critical for the future. In the Archdiocese, we have the Lourdes youth volunteers and leaders, over 400 this year; CAFOD Youth Leadership programmes, and Faith in Action. How do we capture and build on this energy? There are various national creative initiatives such as Anointing Fire Catholic Ministries (UK) - a movement within the Syro-Malabar Church, new interest in university Cath Socs, youth movements such as Youth 2000 and the ASCENT, charismatic movements such as CELEBRATE and New Dawn, Word on Fire and the attraction of Bishop Robert Barron’s talks, the recent WeBelieve event at Oscott in July when over 2000 gathered to celebrate the Jubilee of Hope, and other movements and conferences, particular liturgies or parishes, some of which are more traditional. There is a renewed interest in Adoration and confession among many young people following the witness of St Carlo Acutis and St. Pier Giorgio Frassati. Some of these new moments of

Catholic faith are discussed in the recent book *After Secularisation: The Present and Future of British Catholicism* by Stephen Bullivant, Hannah Vaughan-Spruce and Bernadette Durcan. We must be open to recognising these new shoots and help them to bear fruit. We may be surprised by what the Spirit is saying to us!

Forming People for Missionary Discipleship

The second theme of the synod is to become a Church that honours the vocation of the baptised. As the Final Document says, ‘Shared synodal formation for all the baptised constitutes the horizon within which to understand and practice the specific formation for individual ministries and vocations’ [FD 147]. The synodal vision returns to the understanding of Vatican II about the participation of all the baptised in the life of the Church and works out of a vision of co-responsibility of ordained and lay people together.

There are many ways for formation to take place. The first response to baptism is prayer. I suggest that we need to help people to learn to pray in both old and new ways; e.g. the rosary, adoration, lectio divina, the divine office of the Church, meditation and contemplation. Many people because of family and work commitments do not have time to attend long courses. We need to be creative with opportunities to facilitate learning to prayer, whether in meeting or online. For the baptised a basic course in understanding the vision of discipleship and the vision of a synodal church

on mission is necessary. Many people have referred to the fruits of the course ‘Servants of the Word’. This is an ongoing task and needs new resources. There is also need for further formation and investment for specific tasks and callings in the Church. FD 80 ‘The formation required ... needs to explore theological, biblical and spiritual foundations. All the baptised need this formation in witness, holiness and service, which emphasises co-responsibility’ [FD 80].

Synodality works out of a vision of co-responsibility of ordained and lay people. ‘The lay faithful, both men and women, should be given greater opportunities for participation in Church discernment processes and greater access to positions of responsibility in dioceses and ecclesiastical institutions’ [FD 77]. I am pleased to work with lay Trustees, lay persons on the Archbishop’s Advisory Body and this Council, and lay and clerical canon lawyers. Our Catholic schools and education service are led mainly by lay people, women and men. Again ‘Formation is needed in order to engage in decision-making processes grounded in ecclesial discernment and which reflect a culture of transparency, accountability and evaluation’ [FD 80]. Financial transparency and good administration contribute positively to the climate for evangelisation; and vice-versa. People want a Church which is safe for children and vulnerable adults and is accountable.

I recognise the work of the Deanery Synodal Councils and look forward to the development of more participatory bodies such as Parish Pastoral Councils, Parish Leadership teams or vision teams as appropriate, to

facilitate the life of parishes, their families, and contribute to the deanery synodal council. There is the danger of a gap between the ground and the DSC. Today parishes are often ‘existential territories’ to which people are attached by relationships, families, and emotional bonds, rather than necessarily serving the people of a locality. We need to reflect on what attracts people there, the liturgy, the welcome, the inclusion, the priest, the homily and learn from this. I find Pope Francis’ description in *Evangelii Gaudium* very inspiring,

‘The parish is the presence of the Church in a given territory, an environment for hearing God’s word, for growth in the Christian life, for dialogue, proclamation, charitable outreach, worship and celebration.^[27] In all its activities the parish encourages and trains its members to be evangelizers.^[28] It is a community of communities, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey, and a centre of constant missionary outreach.’ [EG 28]

This is a wonderful vision to which we aspire and needs the community to master the “art of accompaniment”.

The perspective of the poor

It is most significant that Pope Leo in first Apostolic Exhortation has focused on love for the poor, which has also been central in the Final Document. *Dilexi te: On Love for the Poor* reminds us that ‘Love for the

Lord, then, is one with love for the poor'. He writes, 'This is not a matter of mere human kindness but a revelation: contact with those who are lowly and powerless is a fundamental way of encountering the Lord of the history' [5]. Love for the poor – whatever the form of their poverty may take – is the evangelical hallmark of a Church faithful to the heart of God.' [103]. There are many forms of poverty, 'the poverty of those who lack material means of subsistence, the poverty of those who are socially marginalized and lack the means to give voice to their dignity and abilities, moral and spiritual poverty, cultural poverty, the poverty of those who find themselves in a condition of personal or social weakness or fragility, the poverty of those who have no rights, no space, no freedom.' In this Archdiocese, much good work is done by Nugent and others, but the invitation of the Pope is that our synodal pathway for mission should include and reaches the poorest and weakest in the community. How do we listen to the poor? How do we serve the poor, how do we empower the poor, how are we present in the poorest communities? This is a vital part of our conversion.

The growth of the green shoots is the work of Christ the Sower whom we assist. Reaping the harvest is a mystery to fulfilled in God's time. Let us continue to sow the seeds to be the leaven of the kingdom in the world.

May the saints pray for us, lead us to become holy and be fruitful in love.

+John