

A message from Bishop Iffert

November 7, 2021

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

For about five weeks now, I have been journeying with you in the Diocese of Covington. It has been an absolute joy!

I have been praying with you, presiding at Mass, and I have just begun to confirm our young people. Parish or school visits are an important part of most days. November began with cemetery blessings and contemplating the names of those who died and were buried in the last 12 months. I have visited the sick at the hospital, attended and hosted gala fundraisers, visited the Parish Kitchen and St. Vincent De Paul, and sang around the “burning bush” at a youth retreat. I have cheered for our young people at soccer and football games. I have begun visiting and introducing myself to our retired priests and celebrated jubilees with our religious sisters. I have sampled brats, metts, the goetta reuben, and Holy Donuts at parish picnics.

Most significantly, I have been hearing your stories and the stories of our diocese. Stories about priests and sisters of ages past and the influence they exerted on you. Stories about your blessings and your losses; your families; your high school days; your grandparents’ wedding day.

You have shared stories about why you are so rightfully joyed to be Catholic and stories about how the Church and its people have sometimes harmed you. Some of you have identified issues that you currently struggle with. Others have shared ministries that you hope to strengthen or start. A few have already asked me to change something. Some have challenged me. A handful have expressed disappointment. Many have offered encouragement when the day got long.

That’s all part of being Church together too. It is all good. It is exactly what I had in mind when I said at my first introduction to the diocese that I wanted to listen, to get to know you, and to be invited to be part of your life. It’s the way I can get to know our local Church and her genius. It’s the only way I can begin to develop a vision for future action together.

This is the same impulse that seems to underlie Pope Francis’ establishment of the current synod of the universal Church called For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission. The Greek word that comes to us as “synod” literally means “on the same path.”

The Pope is emphasizing for us that every person in the life of the Church, has some gift and insight to contribute to how the Church functions at every level. We are in the same boat — the Bark of Peter — “journeying together.” He is inviting us to pray with one another; listen to one another; and together do the hard work of discerning where the Holy Spirit is leading the Church. All in a spirit of kindness, hospitality, and charity that is only possible because we are all striving to put on Christ.

The synod begins with an extended period of consultation at the diocesan level, focused on how we are doing as we journey together. The goal is to generate the broadest and most meaningful consultation possible from the Church’s pastors, deacons, consecrated religious, and lay faithful. It is to include those of us who are at Mass every Sunday, but also those who are no longer here, the poor, those on the

margins, and even Christians from other faith traditions. We will assemble that input to forward to the national and multinational level of consultation. Finally, a group of bishops and observers will meet October 2023 to discuss the lessons that can be learned from this consultation. Presumably, the Holy Father will then write a letter to the Church to help us set a direction for future synods and our ongoing journey together as Church.

Pope Francis has said that the purpose of this synod is not to develop new policies or procedures, but “to plant dreams, draw forth prophecies and visions, allow hope to flourish, inspire trust, bind up wounds, weave together relationships, awaken a dawn of hope, learn from one another and create a bright resourcefulness that will enlighten minds, warm hearts, give strength to our hands.” By strengthening our ability to listen to one another and journey together, it is expected that the Church will strengthen the bonds of communion that unite us, increase participation in worship and the ongoing life of the Church, and equip the Diocese of Covington and the Church universal to carry on Jesus’ mission.

We are getting a bit of a late start on this process in the Diocese of Covington, because of my recent arrival and the resources that were devoted to my consecration and installation this past year. Our process will be implemented between now and April 2022. It will involve training discussion leaders, facilitating small group discussions, consultations with Catholic groups and associations, opportunities to submit individual comments, and more. Every parish is to participate and to strive for prayerful and understanding dialogue that includes the broadest possible array of voices.

For myself, I believe this local consultation is an excellent way for me to come to know our local Church more fully in a short period of time. I hope that it will build relationships that will serve the Church well for years to come. I would be happy if we could begin to build bridges and develop skills for listening and becoming a little quicker to empathize with our brothers and sisters, and slower to criticize or label.

I invite you to pray for the success of the synod and our local consultation. On our website, covdio.org/synod/, is a prayer calling on the Holy Spirit to inspire us during the synod process. Print it out and pray for our Church regularly during this consultation. Look for opportunities to participate in this local phase of the synod process. Invite those whose voices are too rarely heard to take part. Finally, reject the temptation to be jaded or cynical. Remain, as best you can, in a prayerful, respectful space with regard to the process and those who may have a vision that differs from one’s own.

For myself, I am loving getting to know you. This is another way for me to hear from you and to learn what you value and hope for the future. May this consultation help us journey together on the path God sets before us and make us more completely devoted to the mission of Jesus.

Yours in Christ,

Most Rev. John C. Iffert

Bishop of Covington