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**Rt Rev. Joseph Toal** STB KC\*HS  
**Bishop of Motherwell**

28th September 2021

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In last Sunday's reading from the Book of Numbers, we heard of the dispute around the credentials of Eldad and Medan as prophets. In giving his approval for their role as prophets, Moses concluded: "If only the whole people of the Lord were prophets, and the Lord gave his Spirit to them all". The desire of Moses has been fulfilled in Christ as we all share in his prophetic ministry through our baptism and confirmation. Through these great sacraments we all receive the Holy Spirit and are anointed with holy chrism in Christ, the Priest, Prophet, and King. There is an outstanding reminder here of who we are as members of Christ's Body and the grace given to us to play our own essential part in the Mission of the Church. We are all equally blessed and made able to participate in and contribute to the Church's Life in our time. These thoughts are particularly apt at present as Pope Francis has invited us all to participate in the next Synod of Bishops, due to take place in Rome in 2023.

The theme of the Synod is "For a synodal Church: Participation, Communion, and Mission". Bishops and other delegates representing the Universal Church will meet in Rome but, before that, Pope Francis has invited the whole People of God to participate. He has asked, indeed strongly insisted, that each Diocese set up a process in which all the baptised can meet in prayer, listening, and discerning to hear what the Holy Spirit is saying to the Church (cf. Revelations 3:22) at this moment in history. An important invitation has been given and as the Diocese of Motherwell we must try to respond.

The fundamental point we are to reflect is on the Church as "synodal", "journeying together" in announcing the Gospel, and to respond to the questions: "How is this 'journeying together' happening today in our particular Church in Motherwell?" and "What steps does the Holy Spirit invite us to take in order to grow in our 'journeying together'?"

It is hoped that our responses can lead to a time of vigour and transformation as we strive to rekindle the impetus and enthusiasm of the Second Vatican Council. In listening to the People of God, the Holy Father, together with the Bishops, is seeking a renewed way of living and working as Church.

The communion, participation, and mission of all the baptised in the life of the Church is rooted in the Holy Trinity. It is through baptism in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit that "the entire body of the faithful, anointed as they are by the Holy One, cannot err in matters of belief. They manifest this special property by means of the whole peoples' supernatural discernment in matters of faith when, from the Bishops down to the last of the faithful, they show universal agreement in matters of faith and morals. That discernment in matters of faith is aroused and sustained by the Spirit of truth. It is exercised under the guidance of the sacred teaching authority." (Lumen Gentium 12) .

Pope Francis' teaching reflects the statement of the Council: "As part of his mysterious love for humanity, God furnishes the totality of the faithful with an instinct of faith - *sensus fidei* - which helps them discern what is truly of God." (The Joy of the Gospel 119). In his call to synodality Pope Francis

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builds upon the teaching of the Second Vatican Council and recent Popes. Pope St John Paul sought “to stir and promote a deeper awareness among all the faithful of the gift and responsibility they share, both as a group and individuals, in the communion and mission of the Church”.(Christifideles Laici 2)

Pope Benedict XVI developed and refined this further in his teaching on co-responsibility: “Co-responsibility demands a change in mindset, especially concerning the role of lay people in the Church. They should not be regarded as ‘collaborators’ of the clergy, but rather as people who are really ‘co-responsible’ for the Church’s being and acting”. (Message to the International Forum of Christian Action on 10th August 2012).`

This “change in mindset” is the conversion which Pope Francis calls all of us to undergo, both personally and as an institution; indeed he calls for an “ecclesial conversion”. The history of the Church he says “has always been marked by departures, shifts, changes. The path, of course, ...is an invitation to discover the movement of the heart which, paradoxically, needs to depart in order to remain, to change in order to be faithful”. (Address to the Roman Curia 2019).

The opportunity to explore what it means to be a synodal church, to deepen our communion and participation in the life and mission of the Church, is a gift from God and also a responsibility opened before us by Pope Francis. My hope and prayer is that we all will respond with commitment and enthusiasm to what is being asked of us so that we can go in “full accord and of one mind” sharing the “same mind that was in Christ Jesus”. (cf. Philippians 2;5)

To mark the beginning of our participation in the Synod I will celebrate Mass in Our Lady of Good Aid Cathedral, Motherwell, on Sunday 17th October at 3pm. Pope Francis has requested that such a Mass be celebrated on this day in cathedrals and I warmly invite priests, deacons, and lay people from across the Diocese to participate. The Mass will open a 6 month period of consultation between October and April, during which all parishes will engage in responding to the fundamental question posed above as we come together in prayer, listening and discernment. The Diocese will provide materials and support to help facilitate the process. Please consult the diocesan website - <https://www.rcdom.org.uk/> - for regular updates.

As we approach this important time for the Church everywhere, but particularly in our Diocese, let us invoke the guidance of the Holy Spirit as expressed in the Synodal Prayer:

We stand before You, Holy Spirit,  
as we gather together in your name.  
With You alone to guide us,  
make Yourself at home in our hearts;  
Teach us the way we must go and how we are to pursue it.

**+ Joseph Toal**