**Launch of the Synodal Pathway in the Diocese of Killala.**

**October 17th, 2021 – Newman Institute**

**Reflection of Bishop John Fleming.**

Synods work in Ireland. Exactly nine hundred years ago, our ancestors found themselves in much the same situation as we find ourselves in today. The old, monastic church, which worked well for centuries, had ceased to serve the spiritual needs of the people. A few enlightened minds, especially in places like Armagh and Cashel, decided that a new model of Church was needed. Eventually, after much indifference and opposition, three synods then took place. The first in 1101 in Cashel, Co Tipperary. The second, ten years later, at Rathbreasail in 1111 and the third, forty years later, in Kells, Co Meath. Over a period of fifty years a new Church appeared, twenty-six dioceses were established, parishes were founded and new religious orders were introduced from abroad. And much of what happened then is with us still today. Those three synods changed everything. That’s the plus. The minus is that they met with great opposition on the ground. The old order was reluctant to face reality and it took years to make the change. But despite opposition, the Holy Spirit gradually won out and a new era of the Church in Ireland was born.

As the Church in every diocese throughout the world launches the Synodal Pathway today, we do so with a much more favourable wind than a millennium ago. We still have the Holy Spirit with us but we also have a Pope, the successor of St Peter, who is leading and guiding us to a new, invigorated Church for tomorrow. Opposition we will have. Time it will take. Patience, understanding and flexibility will be needed but I am confident that, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, a new, invigorated Church will emerge. What it will look like we cannot and should not say; it will be God’s work and his Church.

The Pope has named a few of the challenges which we can expect to meet on our synodal journey. In his forthright manner he has described some of them; indifference (‘we live in a world that is unfortunately afflicted by the virus of indifference’) complacency, (self-centred and elitist complacency, bereft of true love. This finds expression in a variety of ways.. an obsession with law.. a punctilious concern for liturgy, doctrine and prestige… an excessive concern with programs of self-help and personal fulfilment).  elitism and clericalism, (‘where clergy and laity are unable to meet’), (‘where the priest is more a landlord than a pastor’), the saying ‘we have always done it that way’, which he says (is ‘poison for the life of the Church’), self-assertion. (‘Strip yourselves of your pre-constituted ideas, your dreams of greatness, your self-assertion, in order to put God and people at the centre of your daily concerns,”) to name but a few.

The image which the Pope puts before us for the synodal pathway is that of Jesus walking with us, listening to us and then discerning the pathway with us. He says; ‘The Gospels frequently show us Jesus “on a journey”; he walks alongside people and listens to the questions and concerns lurking in their hearts.  He shows us that God is not found in neat and orderly places, distant from reality, but walks ever at our side.  He meets us where we are, on the often-rocky roads of life.’ Then the Pope went on to say last weekend; ‘Today, as we begin this synodal process, let us begin by asking ourselves – all of us, Pope, bishops, priests, religious and laity – whether we, the Christian community, embody this “style” of God, who travels the paths of history and shares in the life of humanity.  Are we prepared for the adventure of this journey?  Or are we fearful of the unknown, preferring to take refuge in the usual excuses: “It’s useless” or “We’ve always done it this way”? That’s the Pope asking the challenging questions and facing the real issues.

The synodal pathway will not be a motorway, getting us quickly from one point to another. At times the speed limit will be 80. At others the potholes will upset and disturb us, reducing our speed to a crawl but I am confident that, with goodwill, patience, openness and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we will journey together towards what Martin Luther King famously called ‘the Promised Land’.

Let me conclude with the prayer which Pope Francis said last weekend.

Come, Holy Spirit!  You inspire new tongues and place words of life on our lips: keep us from becoming a “museum Church”, beautiful but mute, with much past and little future.  Come among us, so that in this synodal experience we will not lose our enthusiasm, dilute the power of prophecy, or descend into useless and unproductive discussions.  Come, Spirit of love, open our hearts to hear your voice!  Come, Holy Spirit of holiness, renew the holy and faithful People of God!  Come, Creator Spirit, renew the face of the earth!  Amen.