



Pastoral Letter 2026

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SYNODAL PROCESS IN THE DIOCESE OF ANTWERP

What about the Synod on Synodality? What can we expect from it? How do we participate? These are questions I often hear. After all, this synod is different from all previous ones. It is an open process, not a closed meeting. An exercise by and for everyone in the Church, tailored to each community. An exercise that takes time, without wasting time. A shared exercise in decision-making as much as in decision-taking. How to renew our diocese into a synodal-missionary community? It is a challenge we are eager to take on, in and for our diocese.

FOR A SYNODAL CHURCH

A brief look back. Five years ago, on October 9, 2021, Pope Francis opened a synodal process for the entire Catholic Church. The first phase of the process (2021-2023) consisted of a worldwide consultation of the People of God, first in all dioceses, then in each country, and finally on each continent. In our diocese, too, we held several synodal discussions during the 2021-2022 pastoral year. We compiled our insights in a concise note and submitted it to the Belgian Bishops' Conference. This was followed by a synodal meeting at the European level in Prague. Next, the Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops in Rome compiled the most important experiences and insights from all continents in a comprehensive document entitled *"Enlarge the space for your tent."* The second phase of the process (2023 and 2024) consisted of two sessions of the Synod of Bishops in Rome. Together with representatives from all parts of the Church, bishops from around the world discussed all questions and proposals mentioned during the first phase of the process. At the end of the second session, the Synod of Bishops approved a Final Document (FD) entitled *"For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission."* Pope Francis declared this final document his own, making it part of the Church's teaching and giving it binding force. The third phase of the synodal process (2025-2028), the implementation phase, is now underway. For this third phase, the Synod Secretariat published a manual entitled *"Pathways for the Implementation Phase of the Synod"*

(PW). The main purpose of this phase is for all dioceses to develop new working methods and structures to give their communities a new synodal-missionary impetus. *"The implementation phase therefore aims to have a tangible impact on the life of the Church and on the functioning of its structures and institutions. If it were to be limited to the formulation of abstract hypotheses, it would not achieve its purpose and, above all, it would dissipate the enthusiasm and energy that the synodal process has generated so far"* (PW 1). Clear language, if you ask me. On January 28, 2026, all bishops received a friendly but urgent reminder from Rome, signed by four cardinals, to appoint a synodal team and to elaborate a diocesan plan for the implementation phase. It is an opportunity and a duty that I want to take seriously, together with our diocesan team.

The synod must end where it began: in each diocese or local church. There, church leaders and parishioners must join forces. They are best placed to listen, to understand, and to respond to the uniqueness of their particular situation. The diocesan bishop is therefore primarily responsible for implementing this third phase. The Pathways quotes the Final Document: *"It is his (the bishop's) responsibility to initiate it, officially indicate its duration, methods and objectives, accompany its progress and conclude it, validating its results. This will be an appropriate opportunity to exercise authority in a synodal way, in line with the statements of the Final Document (FD 69): «He who is ordained Bishop is not charged with prerogatives and tasks that he must perform alone. Rather, he receives the grace and the task of recognising, discerning and bringing together in unity the gifts that the Spirit pours out on individuals and communities, working with priests and Deacons in a way that reflects their common sacramental bond; they are co-responsible with him for ministerial service in the local Church»"* (PW 2.1).

The path from listening and exchanging ideas, along deliberating and deciding, to executing or implementing, is not easy. There are no solutions that meet everyone's habits or expectations. Every choice involves risks. Tensions are inevitable. On this point, Pathways is remarkably realistic and concrete: *"Implementation of the Final Document requires addressing and discerning these tensions as they arise in the circumstances in which each local Church exists. The path to advance is not to seek an impossible arrangement that eliminates tension in favour of one of the sides. Rather, in the here and now of each local Church, it will be necessary to discern which of the possible balances allows for a more dynamic service of the mission. It is likely that different decisions will be reached in different places. For this reason, in many areas, the Final Document opens up some spaces for local experimentation, for example regarding ministries (cf. FD, nos. 66, 76, 78), decision-making processes (cf. FD, no. 94), accountability and evaluation (cf. FD, no. 101), and participatory bodies (cf. FD, no. 104). The individual Churches are invited to make use of them"* (PW 3.1). We must not overlook the urgency of this challenge.

I also read this urgency in the Final Document of the Synod: *"Implementing the processes of decision-making correctly and resolutely, and in a synodal style, will further the progress of the People of God in a participatory way, especially by utilising the institutional means provided for in Canon Law, in particular participatory bodies. Without concrete changes in the short term, the vision of a synodal Church will not be credible, and this will alienate those members of the People of God who have drawn strength and hope from the synodal journey. Local Churches need to find ways to implement these changes"* (FD 94). The initiative is now in the hands of local bishops and churches. It is their turn to act. They should avoid people perceiving the synodal process as superfluous or as an endless repetition of 'abstract hypotheses' without results. That risk is indeed not unlikely. What should be done can no longer be postponed *sine die*.

The Final Document urges *'implementing the processes of decision-making correctly and resolutely'* and asks for *'concrete changes in the short term'*. Local bishops and churches are responsible for this implementation. They must not continue looking around and deferring. In short: a rarely heard invitation to local courage and decisiveness. I would like to respond to this synodal invitation with our diocese, for the near and distant future.

TOGETHER DELIBERATE, DECIDE, AND IMPLEMENT

How can we better practice synodality? Because yes, we still have a lot to learn in that area. In our diocese, there is no shortage of councils and committees, quite the contrary. For many years now, we have an ordinary bishop's council, an extended bishop's council, a priest's council, a commission for the permanent diaconate, a commission for pastoral workers, a diocesan pastoral council, a team for the Vicariate of Antwerp and another one for the Vicariate of Kempen, as well as numerous other participatory bodies. However, due to a greatly reduced number of co-workers, many have to sit on several consultative bodies together. Moreover, these bodies often deliberate on the same questions or challenges. Their conclusions easily lack coherence or feasibility. Today, no one with a full agenda is asking for even more meetings, discussions, and consultations, often at the expense of time-consuming travelling. On the contrary, many co-workers would rather do more useful pastoral work than sit together again. Or they would rather read a good book than have to attend yet another meeting. I understand them perfectly well. Our culture of consultation has reached a certain point of saturation. I myself am familiar with that feeling. As a bishop, I spend proportionally too many hours in consultative bodies. At the same time, we must dare to face the need for courageous decisions to be made. There is a feeling that no more time can be wasted. What could that mean for our diocese?

First of all, I would like to raise the question of whether our current councils and commissions could function or conjoin in a different way, with less time wasted and better results. During the last two meetings of the Synod of Bishops in Rome, all participants sat at round tables, both ordained and non-ordained faithful, men and women, bishops and lay persons, older and younger people, representing all five continents. The Pope himself also sat at one of these round tables. Can this model inspire us? I think so, albeit with a warning. Indeed, we must not put the cart before the horse. First, we should discern what we want to mean with and for people, and only then can we deliberate on how to achieve that purpose. *"Meaning for survival,"* as they say in psychology. Only those who know "why" they do or say something can take meaningful steps forward, endure difficult times, or withstand opposition. Many of our diocesan councils and committees are preparing for new elections in the course of 2026, in view of their new composition. Over the coming months, we will first consider a new consultation model, and only then organise new elections.

Such a renewed approach would respond to what the Final Document means by: *"In the synodal church, the entire community, in the free and rich diversity of its members, is called to pray, listen, analyze, dialogue, discern, and advise, so that pastoral decisions are made more in accordance with God's will (ITC, no. 68), in service to the mission. The broadest possible participation of the entire People of God in decision-making processes is the most effective way to strengthen a synodal church. Synodality defines the modus vivendi et operandi of the church.*

Therefore, the practice of synodality is indispensable for its mission: discerning, reaching consensus, and making decisions through the workings of the various synodal structures and institutions” (FD 87). The Final Document addresses plentiful important questions that are appropriate for synodal exercises at a diocesan level, such as the reorganization of existing consultative bodies (FD 11) or participatory bodies (FD 103-107), a broadening of the shared responsibility of all the baptized in the people of God (FD 36.90), a ‘relational conversion’ to strengthen authentic and meaningful relationships in the church community (FD 50), the reduction of inequalities between men and women in the Church (FD 54), the creation of new ecclesial ministries (FD 66.75.76), the promotion of greater transparency, accountability, and evaluation in the life of the Church (FD 95-102), the further development of the Church as ‘a welcoming home’ or ‘a school of community for all God's children’ (FD 115), the new definition of a parish (FD 117), the formation of ‘missionary disciples’ (FD 142.144) or the further development of ‘safeguarding processes’ (FD 150). These are important themes for the future of the Church, themes that are worthy indeed of a solid exercise in synodality.

However, this synodal exercise does not mean that we are still at square one, quite the contrary. Many strategic issues have been studied in detail, discussed, and even implemented over the past decades. There is broad and clear consensus within our ecclesial community on numerous topics. In the first phase of the synodal process (2021-2022), our diocese organized a series of synodal meetings. From these discussions, we selected the three most common themes and submitted them to the Bishops' Conference as our contribution to the global synodal process. As a bishop, I cannot make-believe that these three themes do not continue to request our primary attention. I cannot set them aside in favour of themes from other countries or continents. The credibility of the Church in our region is anchored in the way we want to deal with the concerns of our own people. Of course, everyone knows that we are not walking alone in this, and that not everything can be done at once. Every project requires a step-by-step plan. People will understand that we cannot take the final step now. What they will not understand however, is that we would be unwilling or afraid to take a next step further. Too many issues have been left unresolved for far too long. Moreover, a bishop cannot wait and see where the ecclesial wind is coming from. He must take responsibility, here and now, without easy excuses. In short, I do not consider the three themes of our diocesan consultation (2021-2021) to be out-dated or overruled by the global synodal process. They are still at the top of our agenda.

MEN AND WOMEN IN THE CHURCH

The question of equal opportunities for men and women in the Church is not unique to the West or to Western Europe alone. On the contrary, the synodal process itself has shown how this question is on the agenda worldwide. Everywhere in the world, women are asking for a full and equal share in the life of the Church. What can this mean for our diocese?

Firstly, we will continue to focus on the shared responsibility of women in all pastoral and administrative tasks, and at all levels of church life. Our diocese has already had many positive experiences in this regard. Women take responsibility in parishes and pastoral units, in educational

work, in numerous policy-making bodies, and even in the bishop's council. We will resolutely continue along this path, in synodal consultation with all those involved. A difficult issue remains the question of making the sacrament of ordination accessible to women, starting with ordination to the diaconate. It is painful to note that a special commission, established by Pope Francis, again gave a negative opinion on this matter at the end of 2025. People don't understand this standstill or blockade. I see two main reasons for their lack of understanding. On the one hand, because the arguments used are theologically weak and anthropologically outdated. They have lost their persuasive power. They seem contrary to what the Spirit is saying to the churches today. In my opinion, this negative reception is irreversible. On the other hand, because no adequate alternative is being offered, while everyone knows and recognizes the important tasks that women perform, both in liturgical and sacramental life and in the administrative leadership of the Church. The alternative to ordination cannot simply be 'non-ordination'. The fact that the sacrament of ordination has traditionally consisted of three ordinations (deacon, priest, bishop) indicates that since the earliest times it has been susceptible to multiple articulations and flexible connections. Unlike the other sacraments, there is room for diversity within the sacrament of ordination. Stating that there is no place at all for women in the matrix of this complex sacrament, seems a judgment made prematurely. If it is true that women do not have a right to the ordained ministry, just as men do not, the ordained ministry has a right to women. How should we proceed?

What could be a provisional intermediate step, even though it is still outside the sacrament of ordination? For our diocese, I will take further steps in the development of an ecclesial ministry that is equally accessible to men and women, and that gives them an equal share in both the pastoral and administrative service of the Church. Terminologically, we can best speak of the ministry of 'pastor', as is customary in Dutch language. The Final Document provides for the possibility that bishops may work on new 'formally established ministries': *"these are conferred by a Bishop once in a lifetime through a specific rite and after appropriate discernment and formation of the candidates. These ministries cannot be reduced to a simple mandate or assignment of tasks. The conferral of ministry is a sacramental that shapes the person and redefines his or her way of participating in the life and mission of the Church"*. (FD 75) The word '*a sacramental*' is important: not a sacrament, but an effective sign closely related to a sacrament (cf. the abbatial blessing of an abbot or an abbess). This involves an appropriate liturgical act or celebration, with its own ritual or symbolism. Through this celebration, the bishop makes someone to partake in the threefold or integral mission of the Church: the mission to teach, based on Christ's role as prophet; the mission to sanctify, based on Christ's role as priest; and the mission to lead or govern, based on Christ's role as king. Certainly, not all pastoral workers need or ask for such a liturgical rite. Lay people, men and women, can fully participate in the Church's mission by virtue of their baptism and confirmation, without additional ceremonies. However, for some, such a liturgical enactment is important, in recognition of both their personal vocation and their pastoral ministry.

Although not a sacrament, a 'sacramental' of pastor could go a long way toward meeting the demand for more equal participation of men and women in the ministry of the Church, as well as honouring the vocation that women recognize in themselves. This does not mean that the ordination of women herewith is swept aside, on the contrary. That question will remain a 'thorn in the flesh' for the Church (cf. 2 Cor. 12:7-10). In the meantime, I intend taking meaningful steps

forward in this regard. I look upon our ministry of ‘pastor’ as a stepping stone for further developments in both ministerial theology and practice. We will work on this in the short term.

In addition, urgent changes are needed in canon law. After all, it cannot continue that virtually the entire pastoral organization of a diocese is based on an exception clause in the Code of Canon Law (CIC, can. 517§2). This exception clause, which allows lay people to be appointed as pastoral leaders in the event of a shortage of priests, under the guidance of a priest who has the power and authority of a canonical pastor, has become almost the norm in our region. However, this priest-pastor can hardly provide pastoral care as required by the Code of Canon Law. His pastoral territory has grown far too large for this. Moreover, this responsibility reduces him to a distant administrator or supervisor, which is not in keeping with our theology and spirituality of priesthood, that is based on pastoral nearness. It doesn’t make our priests happier and is not conducive to pastoral vocations. Here too reigns a treacherous silence, by shortage of better alternatives.

ORDINATION TO THE PRIESTHOOD

In every synodal discussion among faithful, the question arises of ordaining married men in addition to unmarried men for the priesthood. The consensus on this question is almost total, in all slices of the People of God, especially among the most faithful and devout. This consensus is not new, by the way; it has existed for many years. The question is no longer whether the Church can ordain married men as priests, but when it will do so, and who will do it. Any delay comes across as an excuse. Several recent developments have further strengthened this consensus. I will mention three of them.

Firstly, there is a historical shortage of local priests in many dioceses. The number of unmarried men who want to become priests has fallen to just above zero. Fortunately, most dioceses can call on foreign priests to fill this gap to some extent. Our diocese is very grateful that a large group of foreign priests are filling the shortage in our diocese. They also enrich our church life with a healthy dose of universality and catholicity. However, they cannot meet all our needs. They come to help us, not to replace us. Moreover, it would not be fair to place the burden of our shortages on their shoulders. They too are keen to see more local confreres, even married confreres, to work with them.

Furthermore, almost all dioceses work nowadays with a number of married Catholic priests, to everyone's joy and appreciation. Some of these priests, as in our diocese, belong to an Eastern Catholic Church (from Romania, Ukraine, Belarus, or the Middle East, among others). They are married and fathers of (young) families. Some were trained at our interdiocesan seminary in Leuven, together with the other seminarians. They celebrate the sacraments in both their rite and our rite. Gradually, most married Eastern Catholic priests worldwide are living in the West, not in the East. Other married priests are converts; they were bishops, priests, or ministers in other Christian traditions, converted to Catholicism, and were able to receive Catholic priestly ordination as married converts. No one can explain any longer why the ordination of married men is possible for Eastern Catholic seminarians or for Catholic converts, but not for native Catholic vocations.

Finally, there is a cluster of experiences related to the psychosocial health of priests and the transparency of their lifestyle. Christians love their priests, but often remain silent about their lifestyle, whether out of respect for their ordination or not. The issue of sexual abuse continues to weigh heavily. Clerical subcultures and lifestyles have had their day. There was more hidden behind the walls than people were allowed to see or hear. Along the way, many valuable priests or priest candidates dropped out. Trust in the Church and its ministers has been severely diminished as a result. How do we rebuild that trust? Only through authenticity, recognizability, and transparency, close to the people and their daily lives. People long for priests who, as ‘fishers of men’ or ‘good shepherds’, whether married or not, live in the middle of their village or neighbourhood, serve with and for the people, and are ready to go to the periphery like missionaries. The ‘new relationships’ that the Church urgently needs and which are mentioned in the Final Document (cf. FD 50-52) fit perfectly into this context.

It is an illusion to think that a serious synodal-missionary process in the West still has a chance without also ordaining married men as priests. The Final Document of the synod considers it the task of the bishop to support and bring together all the gifts of the Spirit (FD 69-71). In addition, it underlines the need for a broadly supported ‘ecclesial discernment’ when it comes to the mission of the Church: *“this is discernment that can be qualified as “ecclesial,” since it is the People of God that undertake it in view of mission. The Spirit, whom the Father sends in Jesus’ name and who teaches everything (cf. Jn 14:26), guides believers in every age “into all the truth” (Jn 16:13). Through the Spirit’s presence and enduring action, the “tradition which comes from the apostles progresses in the Church” (DV 8). Calling on the Spirit’s light, the People of God, who participate in the prophetic function of Christ (cf. LG 12), “works to discern the true signs of God’s presence and purpose in the events, needs and desires which it shares with the rest of modern humanity” (GS 11). This discernment draws on all the gifts of wisdom that the Lord bestows upon the Church and on the sensus fidei bestowed upon all the Baptised by the Spirit. In this Spirit, the life of a missionary and synodal Church must be re-envisioned and reorientated”* (FD 81). It would be a blessing for the Church if we could also apply this ‘ecclesial discernment’ to the kind of priest a community needs, or to whom the community would see as a suitable candidate for the priesthood. The fact that almost no domestic candidates are coming forward for ordination, seems to me undoubtedly related to the absence of synodal discernment in classical vocation ministry. When I visit parishes or pastoral unities, I regularly meet people whom the community would consider to be a good priest. Just as I myself know several co-workers who would be well suited as candidates for ordination.

For these reasons, I will make every effort to ordain married men as priests for our diocese by 2028. I will approach them personally and ensure that by then they have the necessary theological training and pastoral experience, comparable to that of other priest candidates. This preparation will be transparent but discreet, away from the media spotlight. The next two years will also serve to ensure the necessary communication and arrangements, both with the Belgian Bishops' Conference and with the Vatican, as we can learn from each other's experiences and insights. For many a bishop, the ordination of married men has become a matter of conscience. At that level, too, transparency, accountability, and evaluation are important for the credibility of the Church (cf. FD 95-102).

LANGUAGE OF THE GOOD NEWS

In our diocesan synodal exchanges (2021-2022), the third most important theme, alongside the equality of men and women and the broadening of ecclesial ministries, was the language of the Church. Certainly, the language of our liturgy and preaching is taken from the Bible and Christian tradition. Like medicine, sports, the internet, or politics, the Church uses its own vocabulary. Moreover, the Church should ensure that certain words do not disappear from our vocabulary, words such as grace, mercy, incarnation, forgiveness, redemption, sacrifice, resurrection, faithfulness, cross, joy, resurrection, or fulfilment. Although we do not use these words every day, they give meaning to the most important events in our lives. Such words are both tough and fragile. They can die from lack of oxygen, just as trees can die from acid rain, or fish can die in toxic water. In short: there is a language to which the Church is bound, out of loyalty to Jesus Christ whose message she proclaims. She is born out of this language and exists to spread it further. However, this mission raises a cluster of questions and challenges, as they emerged in our synodal exchanges.

First of all, there is a growing need of initiation in order to understand and use the 'language of the Gospel' or the 'language of Christianity'. After all, many Christian wordings hardly resonate anymore. They evoke little emotion, nor do they awaken new insights. The language of Christianity is no longer a mother tongue, acquired with mother's milk. It is not a first language, but a second or third language. It is a language to be learned through practice and repetition, through reading and talking. Newcomers to the Christian faith in particular need such formation or guidance. Where can they find it? And above all: who can or will help them with this? 'Storytellers wanted', 'Translators wanted', 'Reading mothers wanted': these are signs to hang above the door of every Church!

No matter how necessary technical terms or standard words may be, they cannot fill all our conversations. Imagine if people only spoke using medical, juridical or technical expressions! They would quickly be considered a nerd. And above all, they would have nothing to say about many (most) areas of life. The same goes for the language of the Gospel or the language of Christianity. It is not intended for standard or formal conversations. It is meant to translate and to tell in everyday stories, with poetry and imagery, with parables and symbols, with words from the past and present, with songs and hymns. The one Word constantly generates many words. Most faithful struggle today with the same question: how can I talk about Christian faith with my children and grandchildren, with my neighbours or colleagues, with those preparing for confirmation or marriage, with those who are sick or facing death?

In addition, 'the word' or 'the message' is nowadays spread or heard through many new media or channels. The days when people had to physically come together to hear or see each other are gone forever. Modern means of communication are taking off, especially on the digital continent. For older generations—to which I count myself—this development is difficult to keep up with. Younger generations daily look and listen to each other, send messages to each other, find conversation partners or make friends through these new media. They even develop a new language and vocabulary for it. Without a password, you cannot access it. What opportunities does that new continent offer to the 'language of the Gospel'? Many Christians have experience

with these new media. They are at home in them. They exchange insights and experiences with each other, often in an international context. A new kind of synodal-missionary network is emerging, even a new kind of Christian community, through which the Good News can extend its way and reach new settings.

Christians cannot voice their ‘word’ without considering their ‘works’. *‘The word became flesh and dwelt among us’* (John 1:14): this is how the evangelist John begins his Gospel. Works do say more than words. They even speak without speech, simply because people go for them and stand by them. Perhaps requires the proclamation of the Gospel today more ‘silent doers’ than ‘loud speakers’. The meaning of symbolic gestures reaches further than words can say. Where can Christians make a meaningful difference, and for whom can they make that difference, with or without words? ‘They simply did it’ is so much stronger than ‘they sharply said it’. It strikes me how many TV series, novels, or films go looking for meaningful witnesses. There are plenty of examples. People acquainted with the Gospel recognize its stature in many emblematic figures or characters. This recognition is a way of evangelisation. It brings the Gospel closer to human life, giving it tangible and feasible substance. Implicit perhaps, but no less clear for that. Voicing the language of the Gospel begins and ends with translating words into action. In the coming years, we will give appropriate synodal attention to this connection between our words and deeds.

NEWCOMERS TO THE CHURCH

‘Synodal’ and ‘missionary’: the Final Document combines these two terms several times. For example, in the sentence *‘In a missionary synodal Church, under the leadership of their pastors, communities will be able to send people out in mission and support those they have sent. Communities will, therefore, see themselves as primarily devoted to the service of a mission that the faithful carry out within society, in family and working life’* (FD 59), or in the sentence we quoted above: *“This discernment draws on all the gifts of wisdom that the Lord bestows upon the Church and on the sensus fidei bestowed upon all the baptized by the Spirit. In this Spirit, the life of a missionary and synodal Church must be re-envisioned and reoriented”* (FD 81). Synodal exercises are not intended to confirm the *status quo*. They serve the missionary calling of the Church and the generation of new Christians.

New Christians? Are there any? Yes, more than we might think. Every year, thousands of parents have their children baptized. In addition, the number of baptism and confirmation candidates among young adults and adults is steadily growing. These candidates come from different backgrounds, with quite varied life stories. They usually do not come from traditional Christian institutions or movements. They have discovered or rediscovered Christianity on the internet, in conversations with friends or colleagues, or through casual circumstances. In addition, many Catholic faithful of foreign origin continue to join our communities. All these ‘newcomers’ are a gift to our local church. And they challenge us. How do we welcome, initiate, and accompany them? In which community can they find a new home or make new friends? What can we learn from them?

During their annual three-day consultation on January 12-14, 2026, in Averbode, the Belgian bishops decided to set up a national synodal-missionary exercise around these manifold

'newcomers'. This interdiocesan exercise will start in the forthcoming months. There will be 'round tables' to listen to each other and to learn from each other, in order to discern together which path these 'newcomers' can take with us, and we with them.

TOWARDS NEW PARISHES

What about our parishes and local communities as we know them today? Every parish visit leaves me with mixed feelings. On the one hand, I have sincere appreciation for the faithful who continue gathering and working together, courageously and loyally, despite their advanced age, often at the cost of great effort. On the other hand, I have a feeling of helplessness, because their circle is getting smaller and smaller and their future increasingly uncertain. For this reason, our parishes have already been united in pastoral unities, led by a single pastoral team. However, these pastoral unities are not having an easy time either. Too few pastoral agents have to provide services in too many places. Young co-workers go astray in a multitude of expectations and quickly lose their initial enthusiasm. They suffer from a feeling of 'pastoral loneliness'. Young families or newcomers often feel little connection to the local community; their relationships are spread across a wider region. In short, our parishes and pastoral unities are not at their final transformation, on the contrary.

The Final Document recognizes this need and calls for 'a new understanding of the parish': *"The parish community that gathers in the celebration of the Eucharist is a privileged place of relationships, welcome, discernment and mission. Changes in how we experience and live our relationship with locality require us to reconsider how parishes are configured. What characterizes the parish is that it is a community that is not self-selecting. People gather there from different generations, professions, geographical origins and social classes and status. Responding to the new needs of mission requires opening up to new forms of pastoral action that take into account the mobility of people and the 'existential territory' in which their lives unfold"* (FD 117). And no, a parish or pastoral unity should no longer want to do everything that was done in the past. We can focus on the core: *"By placing a special emphasis on Christian initiation and offering accompaniment and formation, the parish community will be able to support people in the different stages of life in fulfilling their mission in society"* (FD 117). Such sentences seem to have been written particularly for our diocese. They can provide direction for the transformations that still await our parishes.

How to proceed? Eventually, our existing parishes will merge into new parishes with full canonical and civil status, roughly the size of our present pastoral unities. That is the horizon. That is the direction we are heading in. However, we are not there yet, for a number of pastoral and administrative reasons. As an intermediate step, our bishop's council has decided that by 2030, each pastoral unity should dispose of a common house, something like a 'mission station' to which all pastoral agents will be connected and from which they will carry out their mission. As a matter of fact, our missionaries have proven that 'mission stations' can work. Our priests from abroad grew up with them and were shaped by them. This transition will be an important exercise in synodal decision-making and decision-taking. In each pastoral unity, we will engage in dialogue, at round tables, to allow convinced and searching faithful to listen to each other, to connect workers of the 'first' and of the 'last' hour with one another, to allow older and younger people to

learn from each other, to ensure the involvement of men and women, to familiarise Christians from one village with those from another, to bring faithful from here and from abroad closer together, to build bridges between church and society. This synodal exercise will not happen overnight. It will require creativity and patience, as well as guidance and support, over several years. Our vicariates, diocesan services, and pastoral co-workers will prepare for it. We have a timeline in mind. In a synodal way, a diocesan policy team will set the course by 2028. Then implementation can begin in all pastoral unities, also in a synodal way. The aim is that all pastoral unities by 2030 will dispose of their own community house or 'mission post'. It is a project I believe in and that I want to endorse, during my final years as bishop of this diocese

IN CONCLUSION

The Assumption of Our Lady is the patron saint's feast day of the diocese of Antwerp. In the cathedral, the statue of Our Lady of Antwerp occupies a place of honour. I would therefore like to conclude this text with a slight paraphrase of the Final Document of the Synod: *"We entrust the results of this Synod to the Virgin Mary, who bears the splendid title of 'Our Lady of Antwerp', she who shows and guides the way. May she, Mother of the Church, who in the Upper Room helped the newly formed community of disciples to open themselves to the novelty of Pentecost, teach us to be a People of disciples and missionaries walking together, to be a synodal Church"* (FD 155). Our Lady's example brings me to a maxim usually attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, whose 800th anniversary of death (October 3, 1226) we celebrate this year: *'Cominciate col fare ciò che è necessario, poi ciò che è possibile, e all'improvviso vi sorprenderete a fare l'impossibile'* or *'Start by doing what is necessary, then do what is possible, and suddenly you will find yourself doing the impossible'*.

+ Johan Bonny
March 19, 2026, Feast of St. Joseph

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