

The Shepherd Speaks

Walking together as a family of Believers

Communion – Participation – Mission

My dear Fathers, Brothers, Sisters and beloved faithful in Christ,



As we enter the month of September, I wish to pause and reflect on the journey we, as a Diocese, have undertaken together: **“Walking Together as a Family of Believers.”** This reflection is not merely a reminder of what we have already begun, but also an encouragement and inspiration to continue our journey with renewed commitment towards the implementation of the vision and pastoral priorities of our Diocesan Synod and Pastoral Plan.

My dear brothers and sisters, I continually thank God for each one of you. I am deeply grateful to our priests who remain in close communion with me, with filial affection, respect and a spirit of generous collaboration, serving the Diocese faithfully wherever they are sent, especially in our difficult and remote mission areas. I am grateful to them for their willingness to work with me and to contribute wholeheartedly to the realization of our shared vision of building a vibrant, united and missionary Diocese. I also thank our religious priests, brothers and sisters who show me such affection and generously offer themselves, often quietly and selflessly, for the service of God and His people in our Diocese. I am equally grateful for our catechists and pastoral animators who tirelessly nourish and strengthen the faith of our communities. I see parents faithfully handing on the gift of faith to their children; I see young people searching for Christ and seeking meaning and direction in their lives; and I see families striving to live the Gospel amidst the joys, struggles and challenges of daily life. **For all these blessings, we have every reason to lift our hearts in gratitude and say: Thanks be to God!**

At the same time, the Lord is inviting us to go a step further. He is inviting us not merely to belong to the Church, but to build the Church together. **This is at the heart of our Diocesan Pastoral Plan, “Walking Together as a Family of Believers.”** We have begun forming Family Units, Parish Pastoral Councils and Parish Finance Committees. We are encouraging greater participation of the laity, women and youth. We are seeking to strengthen our pastoral, spiritual and missionary life through various commissions.

But these are not merely programmes or structures. They are an invitation to conversion. They are an invitation to become the Church that the Lord desires us to be. We belong to one another. St. Paul gives us a beautiful image: *“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.”* (1 Corinthians 12:12)

The Church is the Body of Christ. We are not isolated individuals who happen to come together for Mass. Through Baptism, we have become members of one another. The hand needs the foot. The eye needs the ear. The strong need the weak, and the weak need the strong. In the same way, the priest needs the laity, the laity need the priest, families need the parish, the parish needs its families, young people need the guidance of the elders, and the Church needs the energy and creativity of its youth.

Every person has a place. Every person has a gift. Every person has a mission. Therefore, I would like to encourage all of us to move from “my parish” to “our parish,” from “my responsibility” to “our responsibility,” and from “what can the Church do for me?” to “what can I do for the Church?”. This change of heart is essential if we want our Pastoral Plan to bear fruit.

From spectators to participants: My dear brothers and sisters, the Church cannot be built by priests alone. Our priests have a beautiful and irreplaceable vocation. But the mission of the Church belongs to the whole People of God. This is why I place so much importance on our Family Units and Parish Pastoral Councils. I would like our Family Units to become genuine small Christian communities—places where families know one another, pray together, share their joys and sorrows, care for those in difficulty, visit the sick and elderly, and encourage one another in faith.

I would like our Parish Pastoral Councils to become genuine places of communion and discernment, where priests and lay faithful listen to one another, reflect together and work together for the good of the parish. Let us not allow these structures to become merely another set of meetings and registers. Let them become instruments of the Holy Spirit. **I appeal especially to our priests: trust your people and give them opportunities to serve.** And I appeal to our lay faithful: do not be afraid to take responsibility. Do not say, "This is the work of the priest." If the Lord has given you a gift, He has given it for the good of His Church.

From participation to mission: But there is another step. Our communion must lead to mission. Jesus tells us: *"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations."* (Matthew 28:19). We cannot remain inside our churches and wait for people to come to us. There are families around us who need encouragement. There are people who have stopped coming to Church. There are young people who are searching for meaning. There are elderly persons who feel forgotten. There are sick people who need someone to sit beside them. There are poor families who need our solidarity. There are children who need someone to teach them how to pray.

Sometimes we think that evangelization requires great programmes and extraordinary talents. But evangelization can begin very simply. A visit can evangelize. A listening heart can evangelize. A word of encouragement can evangelize. A family prayer can evangelize. An act of forgiveness can evangelize. A helping hand can evangelize. Mission begins wherever Christian love becomes visible. I dream of a Diocese where every Family Unit becomes a little missionary community, where every parish becomes a centre of prayer and outreach, and where every Catholic feels personally responsible for bringing at least one more person closer to Christ.

Our young people are not merely the future. I wish to make a special appeal to our young people. You are not simply the future of the Church. You are the Church today. The Church needs your enthusiasm, your courage, your questions, your creativity and your generosity. Do not remain on the margins of parish life. Come forward. Take responsibility. Participate in prayer,

catechesis, liturgy, social service, evangelization and digital ministry. Use your talents for Christ. The world is full of voices competing for your attention. The Church wants to help you hear the voice of Jesus, who says: "Come, follow me." And I want our Diocese to be a place where every young person can discover that following Christ is not a burden but a beautiful adventure. In order to facilitate our youth ministry, I will soon publish the Youth Directory with concrete guidelines for the youth ministry in our diocese.

A special place for our women: I also wish to express my gratitude to the women of our Diocese. Much of the faith of our families is carried quietly by mothers, grandmothers, sisters and daughters. Often without recognition, they pray, teach, accompany, sacrifice and hold families together. I want to see the gifts and wisdom of our women increasingly welcomed in the pastoral life of our Diocese. The Church becomes richer when every gift is recognized and every voice is heard. Walking together means listening. We cannot walk together if we do not listen to one another. First, we must listen to the Word of God. Then we must listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit. And we must learn to listen to one another—especially to those whose voices are often not heard.

Walking together does not mean that we will always agree on everything. It means that, even when we have different opinions, we remain brothers and sisters. Let us therefore avoid unnecessary divisions, groupism, jealousy and criticism. Let us not allow small differences to become greater than our love for Christ. We have one Lord, one faith, one Baptism and one Church. What unites us is always greater than what divides us.

Our Pastoral Plan must become a way of life. It is not a document to be kept on a shelf. A Pastoral Plan succeeds not when all the activities are completed on paper, but when people encounter Christ, families become stronger, communities become united and the Church becomes more missionary.

As we begin this month, I ask each one of you to carry one question in your heart: "Lord, what are You asking me to do for Your Church?" Perhaps the Lord is asking you to become part of a Family Unit. Perhaps He is asking you to accept a responsibility in your parish. Perhaps He is asking you to visit

someone who is lonely. Perhaps He is asking you to forgive someone. Perhaps He is asking you to give some of your time or talent. Perhaps He is asking you to become more involved in the faith formation of your children.

Whatever it may be, do not think that your contribution is too small. The Lord does not ask us whether we have much. He asks whether we are willing to offer what we have. Five loaves and two fish may seem insignificant. But when they are placed in the hands of Jesus, they become enough to feed a multitude.

As your Bishop, I carry a dream in my heart. I dream of a Diocese where no Catholic feels forgotten, where every family feels that it belongs, where our parishes are alive, where our young people are enthusiastic disciples of Jesus, where women are respected and their gifts are fully appreciated, where priests and lay faithful work together with trust, where every Family Unit becomes a little community of faith and finally a Diocese where every parish becomes missionary. Above all, I dream of a Diocese where, when people encounter us, they can say: "See how they love one another." That is the Church I believe the Lord is asking us to become. Let us walk together.

My dear brothers and sisters, we have a long journey ahead of us. We may not have everything we need. We may face difficulties. We may sometimes make mistakes. But we do not walk alone. Christ walks with us. And when Christ walks with us, we have nothing to fear.

I entrust this journey of our Diocese to Mary, Mother of the Church and our Mother. She walked with Jesus from Bethlehem to Calvary and beyond. She teaches us to listen, to trust, to say "Yes" to God and to serve with humility. May she accompany every family of our Diocese. May she accompany every priest and religious. May she accompany our children and young people. May she accompany our sick, elderly and poor. And may she help us to become what we are called to be: One family of believers, walking together, serving together and proclaiming Christ together.

Invoking God's blessings,
✠ JOHANNES GORANTLA OCD
Bishop of Kurnool