



Synod on Synodality Synthesis for Diocese of Little Rock

Introduction

In response to Pope Francis' call for the Synod on Synodality, Bishop Anthony B. Taylor initially consulted with the Presbyteral Council of the Diocese of Little Rock in October 2021. An overview of the proposed process was explained, and members of the council were asked to read the synodal documents overviewing the process. The people of God of the diocese were informed of the synodal process that began when Bishop Taylor celebrated the opening of the synod with a public Mass held at the Cathedral of St. Andrew Oct. 17, 2021. In November 2021, the Presbyteral Council met to further discuss the synod and to prayerfully discern their recommendations for who should lead the process for the diocese. After consultation with Bishop Taylor, the recommendation was made to ask the directors of Hispanic Ministry and Youth and Campus Ministry to take leading roles on behalf of the diocese. These recommendations were made based on access to the desired audiences to be "heard."

Throughout November and December, the diocesan synodal team, which included all directors of diocesan ministries, met to overview the process, the desired outcomes and to discuss the most efficient and effective plan to implement the synodal process in the diocese. Due to the rural nature of the diocese, the approach was multi-faceted to reach as wide an audience as possible. The plan implemented included several tiers of dialogue:

- Parish listening sessions organized by parish synodal teams
- Local one-on-one conversations with Catholics and non-Catholics
- Parish online synodal questionnaires distributed in bulletins, email lists and physical mail
- Online questionnaires designed to solicit individual responses, anonymous if desired. The bit.ly URL was promoted through social media, the diocesan newspaper, parish bulletins and websites and word-of-mouth
- Diocesan organizations/associations listening sessions
- Parish ministry leaders listening sessions with their constituent groups and reported directly back to the diocesan directors of ministries
- Catholic school principals, teachers and student listening sessions

Information sessions were held for all priests during the fall of 2021 continuing education as well as with the Presbyteral and Diocesan Pastoral Councils.

The diocese sent a synodal packet of resources to each parish to support the process. The packets were made available in Spanish, Vietnamese and English. Training sessions were

held to familiarize and instruct parish synodal teams on the purpose of the synod as well as how to facilitate listening sessions and organize the process on a parish level. Diocesan staff were available throughout the process to answer questions. Once these training sessions were completed, the synodal process began on a parochial level. Each pastor was asked to schedule as many small group sessions as possible to provide ample opportunities for parishioners to be included. We encouraged that no one is left behind and no voice goes without being heard.

As the parish sessions concluded, each parish synodal team was asked to prayerfully review the sessions to identify and articulate the key commonalities. We were especially interested in any “aha moments.” These were defined as particular milestones, turning points and spiritual dimensions of the journeying together.

Forty-three percent of diocesan parishes participated in the process. More than 200 individual responses were received via email as well as more than 30 letters from individuals. Each response was read by the diocesan team and observations regarding commonality of “hot button” issues were noted. The process remained open through Easter Sunday.

Synthesis of parish small group sessions

In keeping with the Spirit of the synodal goals, the Diocesan Synodal Team restructured the questions initially provided by the Vatican. It was noted that some of the terminologies was unfamiliar to the Catholics in the pews. So, with the liberty to adapt the questions according to the needs and desires of the parishes or pastors, our sessions were structured are around these questions:

- What is your experience of the Church; do you feel part of the Church?
- How can the Church make you feel more included?
- When and how have you experienced the movement of the Holy Spirit in your life and in the life of the Church?
- What brings you joy – in the Church, in your life?
- As Bishop Taylor and our Church leaders listen, what else is important for them to hear?

Parishes were requested to place emphasis on communion, the blessing of unity amid diversity, participation, the involvement of everyone in the process of deep, respectful listening to each other and mission, once we have shared a sense of direction with each other, that the Holy Spirit will lead us to share the love of God with the whole human family of practicing Catholics, those no longer practicing the faith and those who may feel excluded. Individuals were also encouraged to reach out to those individuals and family members they knew who were no longer practicing Catholics.

Diocesan Commonalities

Arkansas Catholics are proud of their religious heritage and grateful for the sacramental life of the Church. There was a resounding acknowledgment of this from around the diocese. They love the Church but even so recognize and desire that She continue to develop and grow as an institution that promotes Jesus’s love and justice to all people.

In prayerfully reading the individual and parish responses to the synodal process, major common threads were noted. Regardless of the size of the parish, the community in which the reports originated or the cultural makeup of the congregation, 11 major themes resonated.

- Community/fellowship
- Youth and young adult faith formation
- Desire for the faith to be taught from the pulpit
- Need for Catholic support groups
- Need for priest presence, accountability, transparency, trust and communication
- Perception that the Church engages politically
- Rigidity of Church law, especially regarding divorce and annulment
- Judgment versus love
- LGBTQ issues
- Rural parishes feel abandoned
- Role of women

There were, of course, other themes which this report will cover in a less detailed manner later. For now, these 11 themes need to be expounded upon.

Community/Fellowship

Parishioners desire a greater sense of community and fellowship within their parish. People recognize that the Church exists for the sacramental life; however, there is a strong human need to feel included as a person as well as a desire to be more closely bonded with other parish members.

Most reported that their parish does not have community-wide celebrations or social events. There is a need for opportunities to get to know other parishioners on a deeper, more intimate level with the positive effects of feeling supported, welcomed, and included. The more an individual feels a part of something, the more buy-in that individual has. There seems to be a correlation between the parishes that offer these types of activities and how those parishes are perceived as more welcoming in general.

Stories were shared by those who felt the Church did not care in the least about them as individuals. Personal experiences were related to times of fighting a devastating illness or disease for months and never receiving a call or visit from the parish to inquire how these people were faring. Other instances were cited when family members just quit attending Mass and no one from the parish attempted to contact them to ask why or what could be done to bring them back to the parish. These are red flags that the parish is not a community.

Both Anglo and Hispanic/Latino communities within the same parish desire more community with each other. They recognize the language barrier but desire to share their cultures and traditions with each other. Each community has a heritage with rich cultural beauty and vibrancy, so they desire to be in a better union with each other.

Finally, there is a general impression that parishes do not welcome those who are the fringes of the community. Parish members who are separated, divorced, dealing with

gender issues and un-wed pregnancies are just some of those who do not feel welcomed in the Church.

Youth and Young Adult Faith Formation

There was concern regarding the exit of young adults out of the Church. Participants recognized the need to offer opportunities for youth and young adult faith formation. This includes not only formal catechesis but also occasions to share their faith with each other. Parishes in the diocese vary on the resources and types of ministries available to these age groups. Respondents indicated their desire to have continuity in the programs offered and the resources used. They would prefer more diocesan leadership and direction in these areas.

Additionally, most of this ministry is done by volunteers with little to no training. Often pastors seek anyone who is willing just to fill a vacancy. With youth, volunteers are oftentimes parents who discontinue volunteering when their children leave the ministry. It creates a cycle of always having to begin anew, especially if mentoring of new volunteers has not occurred. There was a loud voice on the need to put more funding into ministry by hiring professionals trained in ministry for this age group.

As for young adults, those groups are self-led by members of the group. Often, the leadership burns out without a succession plan. So, numbers dwindle until the ministry no longer exists. There is a desire for more intentional ministry to young adults. It was noted that offering high-quality and professional faith formation would stop the flow of these age groups leaving the Church. Additionally, faith formation that provides “an experience” of God is highly desired, i.e., retreats and days of recollection. These experiences lead to a deeper faith. They provide a connection between the head, knowing the information and the heart, understanding, and feeling the love of God.

Many of the faithful expressed frustration about the lack of diocesan retreat experiences for young adults and adults, especially in the English-speaking community. *Cursillo* was active for many years but is no longer being supported by the diocese. Although the Spanish-speaking community has young adult retreats, yet the need for professional faith formation continues to be a challenge, as are volunteers to lead this ministry on a parish level. The English-speaking community has no retreats.

Desire for the faith to be taught from the pulpit

Participants in the synodal process implored the Church to “teach the faith” in homilies at Sunday liturgies. They described knowing the faith as a child being taught at home by parents, at Catholic schools as well as parish religious education classes. Yet, over the years, they have forgotten certain aspects of the teaching. This combined with often, within the Church, conflicting opinions from the ordained have led to confusion about the true teachings.

Additionally, in an age when social and political correctness is manipulating the truth taught by the Church, Catholics are unsure what to believe. Their desire is for pastors to speak without inhibition regarding these social and political dilemmas.

It is evident that some Catholics misunderstand Catholic teaching on issues ranging from divorce to the Church's stance on sexuality. All these issues and more could be addressed more regularly in homilies.

Need for Catholic support groups

Another theme of the synodal process was the need for Catholic support groups. There were anecdotal examples of this need. Issues arising from grief, illness/disease, divorce, parenting, LGBTQ struggles for both the individual as well as family members, mental health and memory loss were all frequently cited. Currently, there is no consistency in the support offered by parishes in these areas.

So many heartbreaking stories were related regarding the struggles that parishioners deal with and the feeling of utter abandonment by their parishes during these times. To go through mental, spiritual and physical suffering without the care of the Church is devastating and at times has led these individuals to leave the Church.

There is a great desire for diocesan oversight of available Catholic programs and resources to offer to parishes. Could the diocesan offices research what is available, bring this to Arkansas and train and organize deanery-wide support groups to assist those in times of crisis? The Church teaches the faith, teaches the Truth, but do we help people to walk in the Truth in difficult circumstances?

Priest presence, accountability, transparency, trust and communication

Respondents complimented our diocesan priests and were grateful for access to the sacraments. However, parishioners desire the greater presence of the priest in their own lives and the life of the parish. They recognize that the priest is often covering multiple parishes in a geographic area causing them to be spread very thin. But they mourn the lost opportunity to get to know their pastor on a more intimate level.

Stories were relayed about priests who were not performing their duties adequately or were not responsive to the needs of the parish. There is no process for parishioners to seek out when their parish priest has become problematic. Participants desire to be heard when issues arise with their pastor. This leads them to believe that there is no accountability or transparency when problems occur. In turn, this causes Catholics to lack trust in the Church and the clergy. People want a diocesan process in these cases.

Synodal groups commented on the lack of communication between their priests and parishioners. Often instead of explaining why certain decisions are made, it feels as though they are not allowed to question anything. Decisions without explanations seem unilateral and made without input from the congregation.

Catholics expressed this same feeling with the Universal Church. Hierarchy often does not explain why decisions are made. People desire more transparency. In general, there was a cynicism expressed even about this synodal process. A number of participants expect nothing to change in the Church as an outcome of the Synod on Synodality because of the rigidity of the Church hierarchy.

Perception that the Church engages politically

Comments were frequent regarding COVID regulations and mandates. People felt that the Catholic Church bowed to political pressure, especially over the past two years.

Disappointment was expressed that diocesan parishes were shuttered at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Catholics were unable to participate in the sacraments at a crucial time when they needed to rely on the faith to keep their spirituality and hope alive. Respondents admitted to falling away from the faith as a result. Parishes have not recovered from this shuttering; many Catholic parishioners are still missing from the pews. The Church's stance on the vaccine mandates was also disappointing to synodal participants. They felt the Church tried to shame them for making an individual choice on the vaccine. They were also disappointed with the Catholic school's mask mandate.

Additional commentary involved the Church's stance on undocumented immigration on the southern border of the United States. There is frustration that the Church does not uphold the immigration laws of the United States. Everyone recognized the rights of individuals to migrate but only in legal ways. Borders need to be protected.

Rigidity of Church law, especially regarding divorce and annulment

Many commented on the perception that Church's man-made law is rigid and has caused Catholics to leave the Church. These comments focused primarily on divorce, remarriage and the annulment process.

So many stories were related of people who for the sake of their personal well-being and/or the well-being of their children felt divorce was the only option. These were situations in which counseling and therapy had been part of the marriage to no avail. The annulment process had been sought with negative results, sometimes due to the rigidity of the process and its rules. Participants could not understand why their annulments had been denied, or why special consideration could not be given based on their individual circumstances.

A denied annulment leaves an individual in a difficult position. If he/she decides to remarry, that person cannot receive the sacraments. The only viable option is to remain single, sometimes for decades. Synod participants also see this as a reason why people are leaving the Church.

Judgment versus love

Participants in the synodal process also related that the Church can be so rigid that she is judgmental, not loving. If a person's state of life is not "in sync" with the Church, that a person feels like an exile and not welcomed. Examples of this were noted — divorce, gender issues and public education as opposed to parochial education if available.

The Church can feel bureaucratic, judgmental, hurtful and exclusive, especially when Church leaders rely solely on Church teaching without compassion, dialogue, and

understanding. The Church needs to show proper respect and etiquette when dealing with its members and to communicate with the love that comes from Christ.

LGBTQ

Many in the Church are impacted by gender issues within their families, friendships and/or personally. The Church offers little to no assistance to deal with these issues. There is no mechanism for counseling and no support group with whom to share these experiences. The language used by the Catechism is off-putting. To read that these desires are “disordered” causes a person experiencing these feelings/attractions as well as their family members to believe that the Church teaches that they are persona non grata. This is not the language of love.

Rural parishes feel abandoned

People in rural parishes appreciate their access to the sacraments and that their parish doors have not been closed. However, they feel that the diocese has abandoned them. These parishes have had foreign priests as pastors for the past 20 years or more. These parishes asked that the diocese consider a rotation that would allow rural parishes to have a diocesan priest assigned periodically.

These parishes tend to be an older population and often the extern priest’s accent makes homilies extremely difficult to understand. Also, these priests are not culturally proficient and often extremely patronizing in their decision-making and how they manage the day-to-day operations of the parish.

In these parishes, younger members are leaving because the liturgy is not dynamic and few resources outside of Mass are offered to bolster community life and/or personal spirituality. As there is no other option, they migrate to protestant churches in their area.

They also expressed that extern priests often are reluctant to actively engage in the life of the community because of cultural and language issues. Parishioners want their pastors to be involved, attend community functions, and be available to them.

Role of women

Catholics are concerned that the role of women is not adequately recognized. Synodal groups reported a desire for women to be allowed to pursue the diaconate. Additionally, there was concern that young women do not have role models in the Church. With the lack of vocations to religious life, most parishes do not have female leadership role models.

Three separate listening sessions were held with women religious from various congregations. They are concerned that priests receive no formation on how to work effectively with religious in their parishes. Often, when religious are asked to work in a parish, there is no pastoral plan available to them. There seems to be slow progress in accepting women in roles of leadership in the Church. Church leadership needs to tap the experience of women religious who work especially in parishes.

Finally, there needs to be more diocesan support for women's religious vocations and work. There is a perception that there is more support for priestly vocations than for women religious vocations.

Additional themes

The objective of submitting this report is to highlight the most frequently mentioned themes voiced by the people of God. However, the report would be incomplete without listing other thoughts expressed by many Catholics in the diocese.

There is a strong contingent of faithful Catholics desiring more opportunities to worship at the Tridentine Mass. Many of these expressed their dismay at the Vatican's instruction to limit Tridentine communities. There is confusion over this decision and a desire for an explanation as to why this decision was made.

Many Catholics expressed frustration over the shortage of priests and want the Church to consider allowing married priests. The diocese does have a history of allowing married men who convert from another faith tradition to become priests. In conjunction to this, Catholics suggested allowing female religious to perform certain liturgical rites when priests or ordained deacons are not available such as exposing and reposing the Blessed Sacrament for adoration or providing reflections at Word and Communion services, especially in parishes in which the ordained do not speak the language of the people.

There is still distrust due to clericalism. Catholics blame the sexual abuse scandal on men protecting their brother priests. They are not confident that the current leadership has done enough to eradicate clericalism at all levels. They desire more transparency in the Church and better communication. A certain degree of Catholics expressed cynicism toward the synodal process itself, especially if Church leadership doesn't "like what it hears." There was also concern expressed among Black Catholics. Many have grown up feeling like second-class citizens within the Church. There is little to no outreach to their parishes, and they feel ignored. Black Catholics desire a better engagement by the bishop with their parish communities.

Synopsis

The synodal process has been healthy for the life of the Church in our diocese. In many cases, the people of God gave witness to their love of the faith, the parish and their priests. They expressed their love for the sacramental life of the Church.

However, in certain instances, the process has reopened people's wounds. So, the true fruits of the Spirit will only be evident in a sufficient response by the local parishes, the diocese and the Universal Church.

Each pastor read his parish's synodal report(s). Priests have indicated to the Diocesan Synodal Committee that they plan to use the common threads that arose to visualize a pastoral plan for their parishes. They recognize that the parish is a living entity affecting

the lives of the congregants and for the parish to thrive, in some instances, positive change is necessary.

The bishop will also review the major themes of the synodal process to determine how the diocese can better serve the people of God. And, with the approval of the bishop and staff, we will discuss ways in which pastoral planning can be adjusted to better assist the people of God in Arkansas. As Church, we all pray for the discernment of the Holy Father Pope Francis as he studies the results of the synod.

Respectfully submitted by the Diocesan Synodal Team May 16, 2022.