

Introduction

The following document strives to combine and synthesize the synodal reports from Region IV. It is clear that there are a number of common threads that unite the (arch)dioceses of the region. The reports frequently expressed gratitude for their pastors and their priestly ministry, a need for improved catechesis and evangelization training, and a recognition that work must be done to turn the tide of young people leaving the Church. While the Church is united in many ways, there are also many causes for division and for people to feel marginalized. Many locations reported a deep appreciation for the Eucharist and reports indicated a sense of hope building out of this synodal process.

Region IV is made up of the following (arch)dioceses:

- - Diocese of Arlington
- - Archdiocese of Baltimore
- - Diocese of Richmond
- - Diocese of Saint Thomas in the U.S. Virgin Islands
- - Archdiocese for the Military Services, USA
- - Archdiocese of Washington (District of Columbia)
- - Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston
- - Diocese of Wilmington

In order to synthesize the synodal reports submitted by the (arch)dioceses of Region IV, the regional team looked to combine themes and look for common threads between the different experiences. To organize these efforts, themes were grouped into three categories: Communion, Discussion and Dialogue, and Participation and Mission. Each of these categories incorporated different elements from the Vatican's proposed thematic nuclei while also keeping in mind the fundamental question. While there was some variance on themes within the region, there was also an impressive number of consistent experiences. This consistency was not limited to the reported themes, but also to the overall sense that the crucial part of the synodal experience is not the written report or any action that it inspires, but rather the time taken to gather as a community in prayerful dialogue, looking for guidance from the Holy Spirit.

At the time of the writing of this document, seven of the (arch)dioceses of Region IV had submitted their synodal response. The Diocese of the United States Virgin Islands report was not available. Drawing data from the reporting dioceses it was clear that the Synod process was taken seriously by each (arch)diocese and there were positive levels of participation. Responses came from 502 entities and 17,121 individuals were reported as having participated.

Communion

Parish and diocesan responses routinely highlighted the welcoming nature of Catholic communities. One diocese expressed the following vision: "a desire for a Church of loving communion and radical hospitality characterized by compassion and mercy." Many parishes described themselves as warm and welcoming. In many ways, the sacraments, prayer groups and social gatherings provided meaningful connections and helped cultivate a culture of welcome.

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“Engaged and participating Catholics feel a sense of relationship and belonging.” Charitable outreach was regularly noted as a way for Catholics to make authentic connections with others and to develop a sense of purpose and belonging. Small parishes in rural areas

noted that their outreach allowed them to connect with others and overcome suspicion towards Catholics.

At the same time, there was a widespread recognition that hospitality could be improved, especially through outreach. One parish expressed clearly what was an evident reality for many others: “We are welcoming, inclusive, and uniquely diverse in terms of race, culture, income, and ages – to those that arrive on their own. We do not, however, reach out to those “on the margins” and there is no plan to identify the missing or to reach them.” Parishes recognized this struggle and in a particular way feel the need to reach out to lapsed Catholics. One parish noted a response from inactive Catholics that they are not personally greeted when arriving at church, and that it can be incredibly unclear how to join a parish. The critical role of hospitable outreach was emphasized in the report from the Archdiocese of Military Services, which noted that “due to the nature of military life, in which changes in assignment and deployments are common and moves are frequent, the stability offered by the faith community becomes all the more important.” Failures in hospitality are due to an extreme shortage of military chaplains, tensions with the installation command, and the challenge by those who already feel isolated to connect with others who feel the same way.

This struggle to build and maintain connections is exacerbated in the aftermath of the pandemic. There is a feeling that people have not returned to Mass or other parish events or gatherings. Parishes report that attendance remains lower than it was before the pandemic began. “Parishes are approaching the idea of livestreaming Mass differently, with some continuing the practice and others ending it altogether. Either choice leaves some parishioners unhappy and feeling marginalized.”

A major recurring theme was the importance of Eucharistic worship. “People spoke repeatedly of their love for the sacred liturgy and sacraments as the foundation of faith, as the preeminent way of encountering the Lord Jesus, his life of grace.” The influence of meaningful music, art and architecture were observed. Parishes reported that individuals and families have a preferred style of liturgy, and that they are willing to attend parishes outside of their geographic boundaries in order to find a style or community that fits their desires. There was a reported desire for more access to the Sacraments, adoration, and prayer. While some parishes reported a lost reverence for the Eucharist and a need for more teaching about both the Eucharist and Mass, others noted a strong belief in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Some expressed disappointment that sacraments were not generally made available at the height of the pandemic. Others highlighted their eagerness to continue worshipping according to the 1962 Missal. Hispanic respondents emphasized the importance of charismatic prayer groups, while lamenting the fact that many Hispanics do not participate in the sacraments because of cohabitation.

Many respondents made a point to express deep appreciation for the ministry and presence of their priests. “Our priests and deacons have always been attentive to parishioner needs,” one report noted, especially hearing confessions and visiting the sick. Clergy themselves gave positive

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feedback on their own experience of ministry. One diocese noted that many “smaller, rural parishes, served by international priests, expressed their thanks for the presence of their pastors and the understanding that without their priestly ministry, their parish would likely close.” Some remarked on the importance of the Sunday homily. “It was noted that homilies are a crucial source of encouragement, direction, empowerment, and hope for people to bring into their daily lives. Good homiletic skills keep people in a parish, while poor homiletic skills, or divisive topics, drive people away.” To this end, vocations should be encouraged, especially from Hispanic faithful.

In general, respondents from bilingual or multicultural communities celebrated the multicultural nature of their parishes and dioceses, while observing that much more must be done to build unity. They noted the inevitable separation which comes with distinct liturgies, classes or activities based on language barriers. For example, one parish with a large Hispanic community noted “overall our community here is active, and there is a lot of good will between the English-speaking and Spanish-speaking communities, and a desire to be even more united.” One diocese indicated that “Hispanic, Vietnamese and Korean participants especially highlighted the joy of being received into their parish communities,” and also, acknowledging cultural and linguistic differences, “advocated more efforts to bring people from diverse backgrounds together.”

When asked who is marginalized, participants provided a vast array of responses. One parish, noting that everybody involved perceived themselves to be isolated in some way, concluded that “all of our parishioners are in some way on the margin.” The perceived marginalization of several groups was raised repeatedly in diocesan reports:

-Women. It was observed that women lack leadership roles and authority in Church structures. Some participants objected that the numerous gifts which women bring to the faith are not acknowledged or celebrated. One parish insisted that “the opinions of women should be treated as important as those of men and their roles should be expanded.” This was exacerbated in the pandemic, as roles for laity in the liturgy were restricted or eliminated, and ministries coordinated by women were often suspended. In a few cases, a vocal minority endorsed ongoing dialogue on the possibility of the ordination of women, either to the diaconate or the priesthood.

-Divorced (and remarried). Several reports recommended the streamlining of the annulment process. One parish report described the process as “traumatic, painful and overly long.” Responses also highlighted issues of access of divorced Catholics to the sacraments, and messages of marriage and family life which can leave single or divorced Catholics feeling excluded.

-LGBTQ+ individuals. Numerous parish reports noted the increase of parishioners experiencing same-sex attraction or evolving gender identification, and an even greater increase in parishioners struggling to know how to respond to friends or relatives with such experiences. A minority of participants called for doctrinal or dogmatic changes, but in most cases, participants begged for guidance regarding how to respond with love and charity within the framework of Church teaching. One report recognized that “the truth can be spoken both boldly and with charity.” One parish expressed an urgent need for guidance as they begged, “we believe we are approaching a real crisis in how to minister to the LGBTQ+ community, some of whom are members of our own families. We need help, support, and clarity.” It is worth mentioning that few parishes or dioceses noted any significant participation in the synodal process by those identifying as LGBTQ+.

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-Those with special needs. The Church needs a more proactive engagement of those living with disabilities or special needs. The Archdiocese of Washington observed that it “has the largest Deaf and hearing-impaired Catholic community in the U.S., but this community experiences a lack of inclusion because there are currently no active Archdiocesan priests who are fluent in American Sign Language.”

-Some respondents reported that many faithful Catholics—those striving to live and express the faith in a traditional way—were increasingly marginalized. Several parishes cited recent limitations placed on the celebration of the Traditional Latin Mass, especially through *Traditionis Custodes*. Often, the tension between “traditional/conservative” Catholics and “liberal/progressive” Catholics became evident in the synodal process itself, with one parish submitting a report that showcased the conflicting sides and the lack of unity between them.

Discussion and Dialogue

Participants overwhelmingly agreed that media, and social media in particular, is helpful, but also presents many challenges. Respondents appreciated the capacity for technology to help maintain connections at the height of the pandemic. “In a significant way, COVID allowed homebound and disabled parishioners to participate more in the life of the parish through online meetings.” Most respondents felt that the Church (variously expressed as parish, diocese or Universal Church) had a good social media presence but could still improve. One diocese emphasized “the need to better use various means of communication to emphasize the good News of Jesus Christ and the good works of his Church.” Reports noted the great variety of outstanding Catholic media and digital resources, but they also lamented the challenge of identifying responsible Catholic media. Among the concerns expressed with media, it was observed that the most prominent perspectives are often the most divisive or sensationalist. Media is likely to report on hot-button issues, not the consistent ministry regularly provided by Catholic parishes and organizations. Our use of media increasingly serves to reinforce our preconceived notions or preferred ideology. Respondents consistently indicated that technology cannot, and should not, replace in-person contact and encounters. Specifically, parishes are wondering if live-streaming Mass is positive, because it helps the homebound to remain connected to their own parishes, or negative, because it enables access to Mass without in-person participation.

Respondents generally agreed on the importance of ecumenical outreach, and parish reports frequently listed ways parishes engage with their Christian neighbors. These collaborative enterprises almost always involved charitable outreach or implementation of principles of social justice. However, participants overwhelmingly agreed that more ecumenical outreach can and should be a priority. Dioceses in this region had a decidedly mixed experience in engaging their ecumenical or interfaith partners in the synodal process.

Respondents were saddened by polarization, conflict and division in the Church. “Seemingly perpetual division, political religious, and social, among others, reflects that we do not share in the unity to which Jesus calls us. As a spiritual institution guided by the Holy Spirit that claims to profess the truth, the Church ought to do a better job of witnessing to the harmony for which humanity has been made.” Respondents expressed grave disappointment on public disagreements among prominent clergy, which leads to a great loss of credibility. Participants at one parish

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wondered, “if bishops and priests are not in communion with one another, how can we expect Catholic faithful to be in communion with one another?” Political divisiveness easily seeps into the Church, and colors nearly any conversation about moral teachings, liturgical style, or pandemic/vaccine responses. Some respondents expressed a concern that the Church’s opposition to abortion has been overemphasized at the expense of attention to other issues, and listed a host of issues, like racism and gun violence, which warrant greater attention. However, others affirmed the emphasis on promoting the legal protection of the unborn.

One diocesan report specifically condemned ongoing clericalism as a source of division. It referenced parishioners who felt that “the biggest stumbling block is clericalism, priests and deacons who consider themselves better than the laity and do not listen to lay concerns.” In a few cases, reports called for structural changes to have more lay (especially female) involvement in decision-making processes. It was also suggested that the definition of clericalism could extend to parish staff members, who might use their authority to press their own agendas.

Regarding decision-making, several (arch)diocesan reports reflected a frustration in the lack of transparency and accountability as well as a lack of knowledge regarding how decisions are made. One insight was that the feeling of marginalization could stem from the fact that many people are unaware that they can participate in the decision-making process on a parish or diocesan level.

This lack of knowledge was identified in several different ways:

-Parish Structures. It was observed that many people were not aware of canonical structures the parish utilized. They lacked knowledge about parish and finance councils and how they are used to gauge pastoral needs. Other parishes were well aware of these structures but did not find them particularly helpful, efficient, or transparent.

-Diocesan Structures. The average lay-person was even less aware of Diocesan structures that exist to help the local ordinary in his decision making. These structures allow the bishop to understand the life of the local church and allow him to hear feedback and recommendations from his staff, presbyterate, and the laity.

-State Conferences. These advocacy conferences support the Catholic Church on a state level as the Church forges relationships with state and local legislators. They are another opportunity to participate and have one’s voice heard; however, they are often overlooked or underutilized.

-Decision Making Processes. There is some discrepancy among parishes and dioceses in how the laity felt about final decisions resting in the hands of pastors or bishops. Some locations noted that this was understood and appreciated but that more transparency would be appreciated. Other reports reflected disappointment or frustration that decision-making rests almost exclusively in the hands of clergy. One report recalled that “many lay people have secular backgrounds and expertise in financial matters, communications or technology and are willing to assist parish clergy and staff in these administrative tasks so that decisions can be made that benefit the entire community.” Some reports proposed increased lay oversight in selection or assignment of bishops and pastors.

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The most frequent refrain regarding dialogue was widespread appreciation for the synodal process. In one diocese, “many people stated that they were grateful for the chance to consider publicly how the People of God and those on the margins are ‘journeying together’ and spoke of their hope for continued opportunities for synodal engagement.” Several reports indicated an eagerness for more synodal encounters, either locally, or on behalf of the universal Church. Numerous respondents indicated their fervent hope (at times tempered with the recognition that “listening sometimes does not lead to action or change”) that their voices would be heard at various levels in the Church, and that Church leaders would respond accordingly.

Participation and Mission

Many of the (arch)dioceses within our region reported that one of the most pressing trends had to do with evangelization, catechesis and formation. In particular, the conviction was that the faithful are in need of better faith formation so that they can fully live their lives as missionary disciples. This formation cannot just be academic but rather should facilitate a personal encounter with Jesus. The need for formation was not just something that clergy and parish staff identified but rather a need that those in the pews could speak out and ask for. Many people in the Church long to serve in new ways but feel a sense of inadequacy, as they do not have the confidence or the skills to share their faith in public. One archdiocese reported that “journeying together occurs in the community when each person’s gifts are fostered for the benefit of the entire People of God.” When people do not feel like they know their faith or cannot identify their gifts, then we are unable to truly journey together. It was also stated multiple times that the need for a disciplined prayer life is of utmost importance. People are seeking opportunities for prayer and need them in their day-to-day life, but they need both affirmation and formation.

Within the expressed need for better practical formation on how to evangelize, was an underlying acknowledgment that one way the Church does evangelize well is through serving the poor. Social outreach enables the lay faithful to live out the Gospel call and to serve as witnesses of Christ’s love in the community. Not only was it a good moment for evangelization, but a source of pride for many. One positive impact of the COVID pandemic was that it led to parishes emphasizing their commitment to caring for the poor through their food pantries and partnerships with Catholic Charities.

A third common theme noted the departure of youth and young adults from the parish community and the feeling of dismay on the part of many parents as their young adult children leave the faith. This is another area where people acknowledged that faith formation must be improved, as many young people depart after receiving the sacrament of Confirmation. One diocese reported: “A lack of authenticity can keep young people away, it gives the image that, ‘No one there believes what they say’, but authentic reverence keeps the young people coming.” Additionally, the breakdown of the family makes it harder for parish catechists to collaborate with parents in passing on the faith. It was also reported that while many parishes do see youth and young adults in the pews, parish leadership does not know how to engage or challenge them to participate and lead. Meanwhile, participants consistently reported a concern that their children or family no longer practice the faith and a desire to address this sad reality.

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A final common theme was how the Church has lost the trust of the faithful due to the sex abuse scandal and how it has been handled by the leadership of the Church. One diocese stated: “It has deeply hindered the ability of the Church to provide a convincing witness to the rest of the world.” The mistrust is focused on both the bishops of the church as well as USCCB leadership who are seen as being politically motivated rather than ministerially focused. Through the synod process it was clear that the faithful desire greater transparency. Not just in regard to the scandal, but across the board when it comes to decisions that are made and how parishes and dioceses function. While there is some desire for processes to be changed, the larger stated desire is for processes to be known and publicized so that it is clear what is happening and why.

Archdiocese for the Military Services, USA

The Archdiocese for the Military Services serves an unique population with a distinct situation raising some particular pastoral issues, which merit special attention. While these trends were not named directly in other (arch)diocesan reports they are important to mention as they identify many of the issues with which Catholics are struggling. It was reported that many people have a deep longing for a sense of community and stability in a culture defined by transience. This longing can lead to difficulty in developing personal relationships, feelings of isolation and loneliness and even spiritual desolation. Those in uniform are often animated by a keen desire to contribute to a cause greater than themselves. It was noted how challenging it was to live out the call to holiness in a culture that can be defined by dark or immoral undercurrents and that there was a real lack of spiritual support to deal with these challenges. Those in uniform deal with specific moral dilemmas of being directed to execute orders which may violate their consciences. While these issues are of particular importance to the military community, it is important to point out that these challenges and feelings of isolation are also frequently reported among youth and young adults, many of whom are searching for ways that they can contribute to something bigger than themselves.

Conclusion

After reviewing the available reports, it is clear that there are many common threads emerging from Region IV. It is clear that the faithful desire to be inclusive and welcoming so that individuals may contribute to the life of the parish by sharing their gifts. Better catechesis, formation, and evangelization training are necessities if the Church is going to empower people to live as missionary disciples. The laity want to know their faith better and know how to share it, especially in light of the many young people that are leaving the Church. There is much work to be done, but there is also hope that the Church can be a place of community that draws individuals and families into deeper relationship with Christ.

A final similarity between (arch)diocesan reports, was the common refrain that parishes hoped to continue to build off this time of synodality. On a local level, parishes want this time of dialogue and prayer to build into action where they are able to address concerns and show that the Church listened to what was shared. Many locations already have plans in place for how to do this or have incorporated the synod process into ongoing parish endeavors. Many of our region’s dioceses shared that they intend to use the synodal feedback as a discernment tool for the future.

