

Region V Synthesis – Synod for a Synodal Church

Region V includes the states of Alabama, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee in which there are 3 Archdioceses and 15 Dioceses. While there are some metropolitan areas, the majority of Region V is made up of rural areas and small towns with a very small percentage of Catholics: state-wide, Louisiana has the highest percentage of Catholics at 26 while Mississippi has the lowest at 4. The Catholic population is growing in some of the region, due in large part to immigrants and the families born to them, the largest percentage of immigrants are Hispanic/Latino. 14 of the 18 dioceses in our region are categorized as mission dioceses by Catholic Extension Society. In large portions of the region there is severe and widespread poverty, particularly in Appalachia and the Deep South.

Despite the small percentage of Catholics across the region, Catholic parishes and Catholic-sponsored services have a bigger impact than their numbers would suggest. They are perceived among the general public as places that serve anyone in need. Outreach and social services are described as ecumenical efforts in several diocesan reports given that Catholics are a minority. Religious communities are mentioned as tremendous assets by a few dioceses, but they also note concern for the future as the numbers of religious decline.

Of particular note in Region V is the rich tradition of African American Catholics. Six dioceses include significant sections describing the contributions of African Americans in their synod reports. African American participants described a strong Catholic tradition, particular challenges of passing on the faith, a desire for leadership opportunities, the need for maintaining their parishes, integrating formerly segregated parishes, and in some cases consolidating parishes. There was also lament expressed by those feeling left out and marginalized, some acknowledged diversity but not inclusion. There was a call for an increased recognition of institutional, systemic racism and the need to work for reconciliation. It was also the desire to see the Church taking on a greater role in the struggle for racial equality and reconciliation in society at large.

The majority of the dioceses of the region carried out local listening sessions, the largest number of these were parish-based but some held deanery-wide or regional listening opportunities as well. A few dioceses held Synod sessions only at the diocesan level. Most provided an online survey as a component to their listening sessions, but a couple dioceses used surveys as their primary means of Synod outreach. Several dioceses in the region reported the impact of significant natural disasters during the time of the diocesan phase of the Synod (severe flooding, hurricanes and tornados). These of course were obstacles, but were also described as opportunities for evangelization since the Catholic Church played a prominent role in recovery efforts and provided occasions for people to work together across denominations.

Several dioceses noted some apprehension and even opposition as they began their synodal listening – ranging from those who felt the process would be futile, to some who were afraid of what it would change, to clergy and parish staff who perceived it as an overwhelming task. Some dioceses did express a level of frustration or disappointment at the lack of general participation and enthusiasm, but many were surprised by a level of engagement and richness that surpassed their expectations. It was frequently noted how much agreement participants found when they listened to each other. Most dioceses admitted that there were some demographics that they were unable to reach despite their hopes for including them in the process. The experience by those who did participate was very positive; those who gathered appreciated the focus on prayer, reading Scripture, and listening to the Spirit which led to respectful dialogue and enhanced listening to each other. Most were grateful for

the opportunity to be heard and expressed a desire for more synodal listening. Some described how they had arrived with an agenda but came away inspired.

The following describes nine key themes that were prominent in Region V. In some ways they overlap and interrelate with each other.

YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS

Of all the themes in Region V's diocesan synthesis reports, the concern for the young people in the Church was practically universal. Perhaps the most frequent topic concerning young people was their lack of representation in the pews, practicing the faith, and in decisions made by the Church. One participant of the synod aptly summed up this concern as "we are completely out of touch with the younger generation... I fear that once the middle aged and older adults pass away, there will no longer be any youth that will continue the Catholic faith." Despite the frequency of this concern in parish life, few reports provided many suggestions from the perspective of youth, perhaps inferring, that the young were not heavily represented at the Synod listening sessions. To this point, one diocesan report included the demographic breakdown by age of synod participants: 18–23-year-olds occupied 1% of synod participants, 24-29-year-olds occupied 5% of participants, 29-39-year-olds occupied 8% of participants, to a total of around only 14% of young people whose voices were heard.

Participants also observed how even among young people who were raised in the faith- whether through their family or Catholic education, they are showing up to Mass less and less. Some participants suggested that this might be because of the culture and technological world. In fact, it was a frequent suggestion that the Church should have greater involvement in the technological and digital worlds to reach more young people.

While many in the synodal listening sessions talked about the youth and young adults leaving their parishes, many of the young adult participants expressed a desire for more traditional aspects to their liturgies and other areas of parish life- perhaps hinting that the young adults that remain in the Church have migrated away from certain parishes to those whose liturgies better reflect their wants and needs. They express this in terms of a desire for truth, beauty and goodness.

The reports from the young people who did participate in the Synod included several who expressed their desire for more traditional forms of music and liturgy. Several specifically requested access to the Tridentine Mass and showing displeasure towards Pope Francis's limitation of it. Some of the young people expressed that they felt the Church was "watering down" its catechesis and were disappointed in the hierarchy not holding firm to Catholic teaching.

On the other hand, there were also young people, some of whom participated in the Synod through their Catholic schools, who felt that the Mass is too ritualistic and they were not inspired by it or by the sacraments. Many high school participants described the Mass as "too old fashioned". They were especially critical of homilies were too frequently unrelatable to their experience and sometimes even condescending.

Young people did express that they wanted to be engaged in church activities and ministries but cited how it seemed that parishes made it difficult for them to get involved while failing to provide ample amounts of events that are fun and relatable to them. Of the young participants, there was a common agreement that the Church needed to be more inclusive to all populations, whether that be migrants, the LGBTQ community, or immigrants and refugees. Some felt that there was a lot of hypocrisy in the Church towards the LGBTQ community, children born out of wedlock, the use of birth control, people with addictions, and abortion.

Often in the reports, young people spoke about wanting to voice their opinions on what the Church needed to change but felt pressured, scrutinized, or ignored for doing so. Some dioceses suggested that the Church offer the youth more participation in the decisions that affect their lives, create youth-oriented events, involve youth in liturgical celebrations, and allow for youth involvement in leadership positions within ministries. Another suggestion for better engagement of the youth included training and paying youth directors who work alongside a community of people who work to help the young find their place in the church and feel welcome.

CO-RESPONSIBLE LEADERSHIP

A common theme running through the reports of Region V is a need for a what could be called co-responsible leadership in the Church. This includes a call for priests to be pastoral and avoid clericalism, for servant leadership among all those leading ministries, and an increase in lay leadership with an emphasis on including women, and expanding ordained ministry, all with an eye toward increased engagement in the Church.

There is an underlying emphasis on the importance of the role that priests play and their influence on people's faith lives. Many reports expressed people's deep gratitude for priests, recognizing that there are many wonderful, kind priests that have a visible presence in their faith communities; they are anchors for the people they accompany. However, there is also frequent mention of priests not relating well with their parishioners, not listening to or not being connected to their people, and lacking in humility and holiness. The sexual abuse crisis and the pain of past cover-ups continues to impact people's experience of the Church and their lack of trust in the current establishment. There is a call for even greater transparency, restorative action and more involvement of lay people in the investigation of impropriety.

Some of the suggestions for addressing the need for better leadership include: formation for seminarians and those already ordained to better understand human and pastoral needs, cultural sensitivity and awareness, greater emphasis on social justice, sharing resources with the needy, balancing the adherence to the dogmatic teachings of the faith with care for the emotional needs of their parishioners, how to include the laity in decision-making and learning to speak the truth with empathy, creativity, and compassion.

There is an expressed need to increase the involvement of the laity in the administration and decision-making of the Church. One report states: "Pastors must recognize their role in fostering this common priesthood, assisting others to participate in discernment of their charisms, all to truly collaborate between the ordained and lay faithful." There is a desire from lay people to be listened to, to reestablish lay councils and advisory teams, to see the laity as partners with the clergy and to increase transparency, particularly regarding finances. This is accompanied by a call for a more

diverse leadership to include more women, ethnicities and cultural groups in decision-making bodies and leadership positions.

There is a general recognition that there are too few priests and that they are overwhelmed with administrative duties. Many reports included a call to let the laity or permanent deacons take charge of day-to-day administration so the priests can embrace more pastoral work and to make better use of their education to form lay people and deacons to assist with pastoral care. As one report says: “The laity need to be personally invited, encouraged, empowered and formed to share their gifts in ministry positions within the Church and, more importantly, for their role in living out their faith in their communities and families on a daily basis.” Another solution for the priest shortage offered in most reports was to allow for married men to enter the priesthood.

The role of women is mentioned consistently in the reports. Women on parish staff said they felt underappreciated, underpaid, not supported in seeking formation, worked long hours, and lacked good role models for self-care. Many Synod participants, particularly young people, questioned why women could not be priests and deacons. One person said: “There are many gifted women who would have inspiring words to share from the pulpit.” Many reports include those asking for women to be included in the permanent diaconate and a minority asking for women to be ordained to the priesthood.

WORSHIP

With regards to the theme of worship in Region V, there seems to be a clear divide between Catholics who want the Church to restore a more traditional style of worship and those who want their priest and liturgy to be more relational and relatable. We have already noted the expressed preference for traditional liturgy coming from young participants, but it is also expressed by others. The beauty of the liturgy and adherence to Church teaching were expressed as values by these participants. “Allowing for the Latin Mass is important, but not without educating people about the importance of unity, tradition, and a respect for Vatican II- many people are deeply hurt by the Pope’s actions to stop the Latin Mass while not holding accountable the priests who change the liturgy by adding words to the vernacular mass” said one participant.

There was frequent expression of the concern that the homilies, music, and the celebration of Mass were uninspiring and boring; this was common among a variety of liturgical preferences. People expressed a desire both for homilies that relate to their everyday lives and for preaching that explain Church teaching clearly. Many believed that homilies need to be more catechetical in nature to help form parishioners’ thinking on controversial issues. The need for improving the quality of liturgical music was also widespread; across the generational divide people frequently thought their parishes did not have robust music programs. Some also lamented the clericalism that allowed the priests in their parishes to determine too much of the Mass according to their own preferences and operate the parish in their own style. People noted that the personality of the priest and the quality of homilies were a major factor in their enjoyment of the Mass. Many thought that priests need to be more pastoral and less rigid to improve the experience of Mass for the people. Others who noted the importance of the sacraments, lamented the lack of availability of confession or for Eucharistic adoration.

Like the hypocrisy noted above, and as will be seen in the discussion of marriage and sexual morality below, there was also concern among those who have been divorced and remarried feeling like they are held to a higher standard while people who have committed other sins continue to receive communion.

MARRIAGE/SEXUAL MORALITY

Throughout the reports from Region V there is an emphasis on the importance of family life, the need to support the domestic church and the key role that parents, grandparents and other family members play in one's faith journey. There is a call to offer more accompaniment of families of all kinds, meeting them in their lived experience, and to build community and meaningful relationships across generations. A key element to this support is a call for better marriage preparation, one report citing a desire to have mentor couples assigned to each couple preparing for marriage to discuss their concerns about married life as well as to help welcome and integrate them into the parish community.

Some common challenges to family life are mentioned repeatedly across the region: distractions of modern-day culture, secularism, busyness, a pace of life that leaves little room for reflection, and a lack of childcare. Sports are named as both a challenge in terms of time devoted to them and an opportunity in terms of outreach. Some specific requests from families are: help in finding a spiritual balance to face life's challenges, childcare during parish events or providing a list of trusted babysitters in the parish, family-focused events, intergenerational learning, encouragement to pray together as a family as well as outreach to populations that may feel marginalized like single parents and those who have been widowed.

Every report in the region mentions two groups specifically: the divorced and remarried and the LGBTQ community and their family members. Both realities are described as incredibly complex. People expressed that they or people they knew had stopped coming to church because they themselves or someone they loved were not welcome. Many shared their pain of feeling unwelcome, shamed and targeted; family members finding little or no support. Some felt invisible and others expressed great concern about higher rates of suicide among LGBTQ young people. The clarion call is for a Church that is more welcoming, compassionate, respectful, merciful, sensitive, less judgmental and hypocritical. Some reports cite participants' hurt at not being able to receive communion, many struggled with exclusion from sacraments based on sexuality, politics, and marital status (divorced) and expressed a perception that some sins seem to be held to different standards. Similar comments are reported about denial of communion and censorship seeming arbitrary, particularly when it comes to support for abortion and those in public service.

Participants across all dioceses of the region expressed a variety of thoughts and sentiments about how to respond to these complex issues. Some felt the Church should do more to condemn things not aligned with Christian values, to remain firm and unequivocal in expressing the truths and fundamentals of faith, and stop demonizing those who stand firm in their faith. The majority of reports emphasized the need for the Church to deepen her understanding, better explain her teachings on the topic of sexuality, help the faithful to respond appropriately, provide experiences of God's love and mercy, and equip parents for intentional conversations about sexuality and gender, especially given the cultural and political landscape in the United States. Theology of the Body was mentioned as an asset to the Church's teachings. Others felt the Church was out of touch with the modern world and a small minority called for a radical reinterpretation of these issues.

In the case of divorce, all reports cite the annulment process as a hindrance. Some of the perceptions are that it is painful, punitive not restorative, intrusive, and insists that one re-live everything and talk badly about their former spouse. Some participants called into question how a Tribunal of humans can decide such a matter and said that the concept of nullity is not well-defined. There was a call for a process that is more reasonable, fine-tuned with the help of the laity, not a quagmire of paperwork, not too lengthy nor too difficult. A minority report lauded the work of their tribunal and told of healing that took place during the annulment process.

FAITH FORMATION AND EDUCATION

Another prominent theme in Region V's collection of reports was the belief that the average parishioner does not know his/her faith well. While some dioceses did not have an overall struggle providing educational opportunities (both through Catholic schooling and other means of faith formation), almost all dioceses seemed to agree that there is insufficient participation in these opportunities. Several diocesan reports included requests for more catechetical programming, but they also cried out for a general change of culture that would make learning the faith inter-generational rather than be limited to those of school age. In some places, participants saw that Catholic schools were the primary locus of catechesis with students receiving the sacraments through school services and not at their parishes. There was also a group of participants who found Catholic education economically out of reach and opportunities for Catholic formation lacking. Some also believed that there needed to be more vocational discernment opportunities for those in high school.

As has been expressed, there are those who believe that catechesis is being watered down and many expressed that there is a lack in consistency in the Church among leaders, institutions, teachers, and the clerical hierarchy on the truths of the Faith and moral life as well as the apparent hypocrisy about what sins carry more weight. Still there were a number of participants who wanted to learn more and believed that if the other faithful in the region participated in consistent and clear catechesis, there would be greater confidence in having religious conversations with other people, a strengthening of Catholic identity, and a greater communion among those in the Church.

However, some were concerned that there were not enough opportunities to ask questions in a nonjudgmental setting to learn about the faith. There is a disconnect between those who were raised Catholic versus those who weren't raised Catholic; those raised in the Catholic Church consider it normative and are often unaware of the teachings of other churches. Alongside this there was also a sentiment that often when the Church explains what it believes, it only describes the "what" of the teaching, and not "why" the Church believes it. Again, the suggestion arose that homilies should be more catechetical in nature and provide ways for the faithful to live their Catholic faith in a more practical way.

Overall, there is a recognized need for fuller catechesis and understanding of the faith. For some that means a stricter adherence to normative teachings, for others it involves application of those teachings with mercy, compassion and an openness to all.

COMMUNITY

The people of Region V have a deep love of their Catholic faith. They long to be together in community, to celebrate sacraments, to grow in faith and holiness. There were concerns about outreach, social justice issues and how to embrace those on the margins. Rebuilding a sense of Catholic community was especially significant considering the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions it imposed and the multiple natural disasters in the region which have destroyed houses of worship.

Across the region people worried about polarization and divisiveness in families, parishes, communities and the world. Much of the friction hinged on politics. Questions were raised about how the Church could become more compassionate and welcoming, a place of healing. Many felt the Church should not engage in political discourse while a number expressed the opposite belief that it was the duty of the Church to preserve truth and morality by speaking up about political issues. The definition of these terms seemed very much up to individual interpretation.

A significant communal impact to every diocese in our region was the loss of estranged or disaffiliated Catholics. Several dioceses used creative outreach strategies as a part of their Synod listening sessions. One diocese used a surrogate listener model, others developed cards or bulletin inserts with questions that could be taken home and shared. One intentionally did this around the holidays to encourage conversations with gathered loved ones. Important learnings shared from these experiences could nourish the evolution of becoming a more welcoming Church.

Immigration and more specifically the needs of immigrants were discussed at many listening sessions. Dioceses in Region V acknowledged the need for deeper cultural understanding, more diversity in parish life: in faith formation, liturgical celebrations and social experiences. Language barriers were mentioned frequently as obstacles although most dioceses felt they were making strides with multilingual masses and clergy.

In “casting their dreams” one diocese listed racial reconciliation as their primary objective. The vibrant Black Catholic parishioners of the south had much to say about discrimination, expressions of liturgy, music as well as the need to promote African American leadership and vocations. The Hispanic Catholics of Region V also expressed these desires and shared how the experience of the Encuentro and now the Synod could help *everyone* to grow in holiness by listening to and building up the Body of Christ.

One parishioner stated, “Diversity is one of our greatest treasures we have to find opportunities to hear the voice of the Holy Spirit in those who offer a different perspective.” Another said, “It is the Church’s mission to ‘welcome all’ we must find ways to reach the quiet yet growing cultural groups.”

An important noticing across the region was the lament about marginalized groups in our communities such as the poor, the imprisoned, the disabled, those with mental health issues, the addicted, divorced, single and the elderly. There was a consensus that while individual parishes and even some dioceses were addressing the needs of those on the margins, there is a great deal more work that needs to be done.

COMMUNICATION

Region V felt communication was vital. Nearly every diocese mentioned the need for honesty, and transparency particularly around Church teachings on Vatican II, abortion, divorce and homosexuality. One parishioner offered this wisdom, “It is impossible to listen and judge at the same time.” The listening phase of the Synod was an ideal opportunity to provide a framework for the faithful on how to prayerfully, respectfully and through discernment, listen to each other and the Holy Spirit. Even those who were skeptical about Synod, found the dialogue to be profound and fruitful. Many were surprised, “We really do have so much in common.” A diocese mused, “We need regular, on-going synodal conversations at every level: family, parish and community.”

As noted above, there was a call across our region for accountability around the clergy sexual abuse scandals. Several dioceses shared that people were angry at the perceived lack of integrity on the part of priests and bishops. Synod participants expressed frustration over “hidden governance” in the Church some connecting this to issues of clericalism. Frequently it was simply “bad communication” or lack of information such as when priest assignments are changed without notice. There were concerns about inconsistencies between priests and bishops, sharing different messages particularly about Church teachings and thereby creating confusion.

Communication was also crucial with non-English speaking Catholics. Nearly every diocese was grappling with ways to bridge language and culture challenges, with the great desire for more multi-lingual priests, deacons and parish/diocesan leaders. The need for translated materials such as bulletins, catechetical materials and worship aids was also a challenge.

There was a repeated hope across Region V to find ways to use advances in technology and social media to reach out to youth, young adults and those who feel disregarded. There was recognition that great strides had been made during the Covid-19 pandemic to increase digital outreach and ministry. Several dioceses wondered if there could be more centralized calendars of classes and events and possibly even sharing of resources and programming. The smaller, rural parishes across the region expressed a need for financial and faith formation support as they struggled with limited staff and materials. One parishioner stated, “We are begging for diocesan and parish investment in Catholic education at every level: trained, paid teachers.”

It should be noted that there was tension between “give people a voice” and “the only voice we need is God’s”. The practice of discernment as a part of the synodal listening process could offer a both/and solution to communication challenges.

One diocese stated, “A true spirit of synodality in our church will require a willingness from the clergy and laity for deep listening, humility and vulnerability before others.”

SOCIAL JUSTICE- CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

Not surprisingly, since our social teaching is routinely described as our church’s best kept secret, there were very few explicit mentions of Catholic social doctrine or even the issues of justice in the region. (One notable exception even listed a quasi-Bill of Rights!). However, when we consider the

component themes of Catholic social teaching and the issues addressed, these concerns did surface regularly throughout the region.

The right to life and the dignity of the human person are foundational to the social teaching of the Church, in several dioceses there were discussions about the fundamental right to be born and what it means for the church to be fully pro-life. There was also much discussion about how the life and justice issues themselves can be polarizing and how the divisions on these topics seem to follow partisan political lines. Several dioceses talked about the need to improve their efforts at integrating the Spanish-speaking into full participation in parish life and in a few places there was mention of the need for the parishes and their members to be stronger advocates for immigration reform. Cultural diversity and the importance of valuing all cultural expressions was surfaced in many diocesan reports. In many places cultural diversity was included under the topic of hospitality, and became a justice issue when it led to reflection on who was being excluded. LGBTQ populations along with racial and ethnic minorities were mentioned nearly everywhere in the region. Some dioceses explicitly mentioned the marginalization of African Americans. One mentioned the isolation of those with mental illness and physical disabilities. Very few dioceses even mentioned their need to be more engaged in care for creation and in educating about climate change, despite its timeliness and the priority this issue is for young people whose absence from Church life is largely lamented.

Issues regarding the role of women, while often presented in relationship to clericalism in the synodal listening sessions, are also seen as matters of justice for many in the Church.

There was frequent mention of service and works of charity throughout the region, all of them listed as positive contributions of the Catholic faith to the larger community. Catholic Charities was often mentioned as presenting the Church's mission of service in a positive light for the larger community. In rebuilding after natural disasters, the Church's network and resources provided the leading role in many locations.

ECUMENISM

While the relatively small proportion of Catholics in the overall population is common to most of the dioceses of our region, the issue of ecumenism was repeatedly mentioned but not given much specific attention in the majority of the diocesan reports. One diocese mentioned the importance of having good relationships and working with other churches and faith traditions in order to overcome the dominance of secularism in our society. Several places mentioned that ecumenical activity was lacking or had declined in recent years in their dioceses, but it was presented almost more as an observation than a concern. Some dioceses were intentional about engaging non-Catholics in the synodal process, and one diocese of them separately tracked the responses of non-Catholic synod participants. Another diocese noted with angst that many young Catholics are found in non-denominational churches, where they find more engaging programs and often are not aware of the absence of the Eucharist and other sacraments. Several dioceses noted that they engage with non-Catholic churches in advocating for the sanctity of life and other social issues, as well as in programs of direct service like food pantries and serving meals.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the participants in the listening sessions held throughout Region V were grateful for the opportunity to be listened to, sometimes even expressing surprise that their views mattered. In every place, there were vocal individuals who were eager to advocate for a specific position or perspective, but overall it did not seem difficult for participants to be active listeners and to allow for the expression of minority viewpoints. Among the dioceses who submitted their reports in time for inclusion in this synthesis (16 out of 18 dioceses) considerable work went into the preparation of those reports. All reported some difficulty in condensing their experiences into the limited space allowed, but understood that these reports will be further refined as they make their way to the universal synod in Rome.

It was frequently reported that the participants would welcome more opportunities to be listened to and to hear the expressions of others' views on the faith and the life of the Church. It was thought that this might contribute in a significant way to overcoming the polarization that is felt everywhere. Some noted how few opportunities are offered for true listening in a culture where we routinely speak past each other.

It was expressed in several places that the Church could do a better job of sharing best practices, within dioceses and among dioceses, especially those with similar demographics and circumstances. The basis of the synodal conversations will be used in different ways by the various dioceses, but a number of them mentioned that these reports will be very valuable in pastoral planning. A frequent hope was expressed that the reports be used on the local level right away, even before regional, national and global reports are available.

The Holy Father speaks of synodality as a way of being Church; for this new way to be fruitful, more faith formation will be needed and an understanding of the teachings of Vatican II would be essential. The present Eucharistic Revival in the US Church was also mentioned as providing opportunities for addressing many of the concerns raised in these listening sessions.

The Church in Region V is eager to proclaim the Kingdom of God, to create a more inclusive experience of Church that is faithful to the tradition and clear in its proclamation. It should be welcoming, attractive to the young, diverse in culture and representation and responsive to the needs of the world around us.

