



For a synodal Church
communion | participation | mission

SYNTHESIS OF THE
Synod on Synodality
Consultations
in Region VII

UNITED STATES CONFERENCE
OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS

REGION VII SYNOD REPORT

17 JULY 2022

GENERAL CONTEXT

The synodal consultations across the sixteen dioceses in Region VII included a wide range of participants who represented different *age groups* (although predominantly older), *levels of church participation* (although predominantly active), *cultural backgrounds* (although predominantly non-Hispanic white), and even different *religious traditions* (although obviously predominantly Roman Catholic). Respondents reflected the diversity of urban, suburban, and rural contexts. The percentage of respondents relative to overall Catholic population was somewhat low, seemingly in the 5% range.

The formats for the consultations varied widely. Some dioceses, for example, had moved through their own synodal process in recent years and they elected to recycle their earlier results with some updates. Other dioceses encouraged a mix of in-person meetings (parishes), gatherings of consultative bodies, and on-line survey instruments. Some few dioceses were very intentional and deliberate in setting meetings in the context of prayer. These prayerful experiences and exchanges generally resulted in positive results that identified sources of gratitude and joy as well as sources of future challenge. In other dioceses, absent the context of prayer, the results tended to identify complaints and negative assessments of church life coupled with suggestions for structural and institutional change.

The deficit of prayer was symptomatic—not in all instances but many—of other deficits in the entire process. For example, explicit reference to Jesus Christ at the center of faith was often absent. Similarly, there was little mention of the work of the Holy Spirit. Biblical language and references were scarce. A sense of gratitude for the legacy of faith which earlier generations had bequeathed was frequently missing. Finally, largely absent—although not entirely—was a sense of the Church's and believers' mission in and to the world. These deficits are obviously troubling for those who care for the Church. At the same time, in a more positive direction, they outline formational issues to be addressed by the Church at large in the future. The same could be said of the overall synodal vision proposed by Pope Francis.

The movements envisioned by Pope Francis for the synod on synodality were generally not verified. The process that the Holy Father outlined was to include prayer-encounter, dialogue (honest speaking and deep listening), and then detecting and discerning from that dialogue where the Spirit might be prompting the Church. Although the Holy Father's direction was not often followed in all its dimensions, there were still encouraging elements. Many local churches began to move toward the direction that he has proposed, and it is very possible to see fruitful growth over time in this direction.

SEVERAL IMPORTANT CONTEXTS FOR THE CONSULTATION

The synodal consultation obviously did not take place in a vacuum but in a given historical moment with its particular circumstances. Several contexts had significant bearing on the results of the consultation.

The Experience of COVID

In almost every consultation, the experience of church life in the pandemic had significant consequences. The rupture from ordinary routines of gathering and worshipping together caused sadness and distress. At the same time, that absence heightened a sense of how important the experience of Church and, more particularly, Eucharist is for the life of faith. Although there was no direct suggestion to pursue this, it seems truly opportune to engage significant theological reflection on experience of Covid for the life of the Church.

The Experience of Parish Reconfigurations

A significant number of dioceses in Region VII have undertaken processes to reconfigure parish life. This has resulted in parish closures, amalgamations, and more general reconfigurations of resources. Of course, this experience had a bearing on the respondents in the consultations. There was a wide range of emotion from disappointment to anger to a sense of the inevitability of the new arrangements. Feelings, however, were not uniformly negative. In some instances, a new sense of hope and rebirth emerged from the changes. There was, in some instances, a great sense of satisfaction that communities could come together in a common and rooted faith. In general, this experience of parish reconfiguration was a foreshadowing of the synodal path with its graces and challenges, with its successes and missteps. Again, it would be very worthwhile to engage a process of theological reflection on the experience of parish reconfiguration and its lessons for the way of synodality.

The Misconduct Scandals in the Church

Recent news coverage of the misconduct scandals in the Church has not matched the intensity and frequency of past reporting. Still, the awareness of the scandals is very much in the consciousness of people of God. Even more than anger, people express feelings of hurt and disappointment. They couple their feelings with a hope that we can move into the future in a new way that provides for the safety of children and the healing of victims. A synodal path requires a sense of trust and reliability, precisely the very elements severely damaged by clerical misconduct and its mismanagement by Church leaders. Here, too, theological reflection on how the scandals have had an impact on the Church's journey together would very much be in order.

MAJOR THEMES THAT EMERGE FROM THE SYNODAL CONSULTATION

There are many themes that emerged across the consultations of Region VII. Nine seemed particularly noteworthy. Although the strict process for the synodal way was not often followed with its elements of prayer, encounter, dialogue, and discernment, these themes suggest movements and promptings of the Holy Spirit for the life of the Church.

The top three themes (Eucharist, evangelization, a next generation) clearly had a priority. The other six themes were also important but ranking and weighting them precisely would be more difficult.

Eucharist

As believers reflected on their journey of faith together, no matter where they landed on a “liberal” to “conservative” spectrum, they unhesitatingly affirmed the centrality of the Eucharist in their life of faith. For them, the Eucharist provided that immediate and sustaining contact with Jesus Christ that gave them life and hope.

Even as they affirmed the absolute priority and centrality of the Eucharist, respondents also called for deeper understanding, a more substantial Eucharistic formation, and a more widely accessible catechesis about this great sacrament and mystery of faith. It seems that what they grasp intuitively about the Eucharist, they desire to know more explicitly.

The participants in the consultation also wanted to advance the quality of Eucharistic celebrations. They offered some directions that include uplifting music, preaching that speaks to their experience, a spirit of reverence and conformity to the rubrics in the celebration of the rites, and—for a few—a wider use of the Roman Missal of 1962. Frequently, participants noted the value of Eucharistic adoration as a personal spiritual practice and as a way of cultivating a deeper sense of the Lord’s presence in our lives.

Evangelization

Although the language of evangelization and even a precise sense of its meaning remain unclear for many of the synodal participants, large numbers of them saw evangelization as essential for the Church’s journey forward. As with the Eucharist, so too with evangelization, respondents had an intuitive sense of the importance of proclaiming Jesus Christ within the Church and from the Church to the entire world. The exact shape of evangelization remained unclear or general. At the same time, they voiced a desire to remedy that, for example, by acquiring greater knowledge of evangelization through the study of the Bible. There was also a keen desire to find mutually supportive foundations for evangelization outreach through others in the Church community. Respondents seem to say that we need to stay together as we offer our faith to the world. This seemed to be especially important in a secularized culture which is not only indifferent to religion but sometimes overtly hostile to faith.

The desire to evangelize, even without knowing a sure way of doing it, seems rooted in a particular sentiment voiced by many people. They spoke of the joy of faith, its blessed assurance,

and its capacity to carry them through life's tumults. Having this sense of faith and their relationship with Jesus Christ then makes believers want to share the gift with others, especially those closest to them, for example, in their family. Many people are ready to be formed as evangelizers, but they need help in this formational process. That help might include learning the different forms that evangelization can take, basic how-to guides of communicating the Good News, and perhaps even illustrative scripts for people who feel uneasy in expressing their faith.

The Next Generation

Almost universally, respondents voiced very serious concerns about the younger generation that follows them. This includes adolescents, young adults, and young families. Respondents feared that this next generation is distanced from the faith that means so much to them. The younger generation is not hostile to faith and Church, but overall, it drifts away from religious participation and remains unengaged by the beliefs and practices that have meant so much to those who have gone before them. Parents and grandparents are at a loss in trying to figure out what they can do or what the Church can do or offer, so that these young people can be integrated into a life of faith in the community of the Church.

Respondents expressed their concerns in very strong terms. And, in fact, sociological studies indicate large numbers of young Catholic people disengage from the Church and the practice of faith. That is not, however, the entire story. The synodal reports also indicate that young people participated in the process. There are young people, especially in the context of campus ministry, who remain connected to Church life and for whom faith matters very much. They may be significantly fewer in number than those who are disengaged, but they are still an important presence in the Church. The group of those who remain may provide a key for outreach to their peers who have drifted away.

The overall direction for caring for the next generation is not exactly clear. It is a task, responsibility, and a challenge for the Church to hear the Spirit's promptings and make the proper discernments for this important younger population.

Inclusion and Welcome

As the Church journeys together, many participants in the consultation affirmed the need for the Church to be inclusive and welcoming. In a certain sense, the reports relayed a deeply held Catholic sensibility, that is, the Church must extend a universal embrace. An open community allows for a welcome to be extended to everyone, no matter their background or even their state of soul. Like the Gospel itself and the practice of Jesus, this inclusive and welcoming approach to everyone stands in some tension with the call to an undivided and demanding commitment to follow the Lord. It was evident among the respondents that this universal embrace ought not to mean the dilution of doctrine and closely held values. There will be more on this tension below.

For the Church in the United States, the call to inclusion and welcome takes special shape. A continuing immigrant population, especially of Hispanics and Asians, poses a challenge and opportunity for the Church to open wide its doors. The continuing struggle with racism that has besmirched our nation has also challenged the Church. In so many ways, the call to inclusion and welcome is a clear prompting of the Holy Spirit for Catholics to be true to their name and be universal in their embrace of all people.

Expanded Participation

Many participants across Region VII envisioned a Church journeying together as a Church that would expand the participation of the faithful, especially in ministries. For some, the mission and ministry of the Church seemed to be too exclusively tied to priests. People voiced a yearning to share in the ministry and mission in their own way, indeed, in a collaborative way with clergy. Some wanted to extend ordination to the diaconate and priesthood to women, while others pressed for married priests. Beyond those specific indications, a much more pervasive movement seemed to be at work. The people of God signaled that they are ready and willing to assume their responsibility for service in the Church and in the world—whether or not that involved ordination.

This desire for expanded participation indicates that a synodal Church must be ready to discern the gifts that are at work within it, gifts distributed as the Spirit wills throughout the whole Body of Christ.

Clarity and Fidelity in Matters of Faith and Morals

Frequently, respondents in the consultation process raised a concern about clarity and fidelity in matters of faith and morals. No one said that the Church had been unfaithful to the apostolic faith entrusted to her. They did voice concern that, at times, there seemed to be some ambiguity about faith and the moral life. Some of this emerged in questions concerning sexuality, particularly concerning those who identify as LGBTQ+. This same kind of ambiguity seemed to be in play in life issues, specifically abortion and its interface with political processes and politicians. The ambiguity extends into the questions surrounding divorce and civil re-marriage.

Although respondents did not explicitly identify how this sense of ambiguity has unfolded, it seems that it has to do with apparent “mixed messages” from the hierarchy, including both the Pope and the bishops. On the one hand, doctrine has not changed or been altered. At the same time, there have been renewed attempts to apply the teachings in a way that accommodates the conditions and circumstances of the people involved, that is, a modality of pastoral application that per force involves some flexibility. How to bring people along in a pastoral and formational way while maintaining a strict and unambiguous adherence to the traditions of faith is a complex task. In fact, a synodal Church walking together needs to take up this tension and challenge.

Greater Outreach

Many respondents sensed a need for the Church to engage in greater outreach. In the words of Pope Francis, the Church is summoned to go to the peripheries. This outreach is tied to evangelization, of course, but also to service in its various forms and to simple presence. In a particular way, the poor, the disenfranchised, the marginalized, and all those who hover at the boundaries of our society deserve and need our attention and outreach.

Related to this movement of greater outreach is the question of communications: what means shall we use to reach out to others? In our digital age and with our social media, we cannot ignore a significant tool to reach others. A journeying Church is also a Church that cares for the way that it can effectively communicate both internally and externally. This communication concern links to the challenge of evangelization as well as reaching the next generation whose world is largely an electronic one. These themes, then, are all inter-related.

Ecclesial Unity

Catholics in the United States live in a society that is polarized and divided. This situation, it seems, has made many of them sensitive to questions surrounding the unity of the Church. Respondents to the synodal consultation often voiced their concern that the Church would hold fast to unity and not succumb to the divisiveness of the surrounding culture. This unity, of course, is a work in progress. It means adherence to the core elements of faith in Jesus Christ and the mission he entrusted to the Church. Differences of approach are bound to arise in the Church, but these must be the subject of continuing dialogue and discernment, so that the Church's unity may be fostered.

Related to the theme of ecclesial unity is the fostering of genuine community life in the Church. Unity encompasses not only doctrinal and disciplinary consistency, but it also means "affective communion," that people in the Church are genuinely connected with and care for each other. This is the stuff of intentional or deliberate community and many respondents spoke of the need to foster this kind of community in the Church. It takes deliberate effort and an ongoing conversion of heart to foster this communion. Members of the Church need to let go of their own prejudices and self-concerns and be open to others in faith.

Priests, Vocations, and Formation

Although respondents in the consultation wanted to expand participation in the mission and ministry of the Church beyond those who are ordained (see above), there remained an abiding concern for ordained priests who are essential for the life of the Church, for fostering and

sustaining vocations to priestly ministry, and for a more adequate ongoing formation of those already ordained.

People see the essential importance of priests for the life of the Church. At the same time, they do not subscribe to a “clericalist” model or understanding of the Church. Priests are proclaimers of the Word, those who lead the community’s celebrations of sacraments, especially the Eucharistic liturgy, and those who build and hold communities together. Respondents clearly noted the need for more priests and, therefore, expanded efforts to develop vocations to ordained ministry. They also called for a better and more adequate ongoing formation of those already ordained. In a particular way, they want their priests to be better formed as preachers who can help their people to receive God’s word and make practical applications of that holy word in the course of their daily lives. People recognized that sufficient numbers of well-formed priests are essential for the Church of God to continue on the path of synodality.

CONCLUSION

The reports from Region VII certainly identified complaints, disappointments, regrets, and some measure of sadness about the state of the Church and our journey together. At the same time and even more impressively, people bore witness to their joy and gratitude in belonging to a people of faith in Jesus Christ held together by the grace of the Holy Spirit. They also experienced a sense of promise and hope in the future that God offers them as gift.

The consultations that included group encounters and dialogue and survey instruments yielded a positive sense of being together on the journey—another way of saying synodality. Overwhelmingly people were convinced of the power of God’s grace to lead them forward on the road together. Yet this way of being and journeying together, respondents noted, was also fragile, tested, and challenged, for while respondents were grateful for the opportunity to participate, there was a sense that more needs to be done in giving voice to those who have little voice in the Church. The real experience of people with all their challenges of trying to live out their call to discipleship should be valued by the Church.

In the end, the consultations verified a fundamental teaching of the Second Vatican Council concerning the people of God:

It has pleased God...to make men [and women] holy and save them not merely as individuals without any mutual bonds, but by making them into a single people, a people which acknowledges Him in truth and serves Him in holiness.

Dogmatic Constitution on the Church [Lumen gentium], n. 9

