



Synthesis Report of the Synodal Dialogue Sessions

from

Journey to the Synod 2023

on the theme:

For a Synodal Church: *Communion, Participation, and Mission*



Catholic Diocese of Birmingham in Alabama

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Introduction

It has been nearly a year since the launch of the “Journey to the Synod,” the local phase in the Diocese of Birmingham of the worldwide 2021-2023 Synod. Pope Francis’s call to Catholics around the world to join in a process of prayer, discernment, and open-hearted conversation to identify pastoral needs and opportunities was met with enthusiasm in north and central Alabama.

The diocesan phase began with Bishop Raica’s visits to parishes in the four corners of the diocese, spending time in prayer before the Eucharist with the people of each region, preaching on the purpose of this endeavor, and asking the Lord’s blessing on it.

To launch a “season of dialogue,” Bishop Raica again went out to four regional sessions, praying with and listening to God’s people as they responded to questions posed by the Synod of Bishops in Rome: how does our particular Church journey together in the way of faith? How might the Holy Spirit be guiding us to grow in the work of accompaniment on the journey? How does the Church and her leaders listen to God’s people? How does she recognize and encourage each person’s co-responsibility in the mission of the Church? The season of dialogue continued with 14 sessions in parishes and communities around the region, engaging more than 1,000 participants – lay, religious, and clergy - in the work. The categories of questions provided by Rome to guide the process of dialogue are reflected in the headings and organization of this document.

This document is a synthesis of the contributions of a diverse cross-section of the diocesan community. It brings to the fore common themes that emerged in dialogue, and the voices of those who offered differing perspectives. With Bishop’s blessing, the local synod team is pleased to offer this report to pastors, participants, and all the people of this diocese for their prayerful consideration – for planning and for action.

The Fundamental Question

Responses to the fundamental question were as varied as the respondents. Many required initial help in understanding the language of the question to get at its meaning and to form an answer. The vocabulary, and to some extent the concept, of synodality or “journeying together” remain unfamiliar to a many of the local faithful.

Some noted consolations on the journey of faith. Participants from one parish noted that the presence of a kind and attentive pastor and the community’s participation in common devotional life helped families feel welcomed and accompanied. In a large parish, one person remarked that Catholics tend to be more intentional about journeying together as a people of faith in the largely Protestant, southeastern United States than their counterparts in other regions of the country who sometimes enjoy a cultural milieu that supports a more casual Catholic identity.

Some noted challenges. Many reflected on how the Church competes for time and attention with a multitude of options in entertainment, materialism, and from other voluntary societies (such as sports teams). Women religious of the diocese particularly expressed the

desire for more frequent encounters with one another, with pastors, and through them, with the people of God in parish communities. Several lay people also noted a desire to have more regular relationships with religious sisters and brothers as companions on the way.

Members of English and Spanish-speaking communities remarked on their separation. Language and cultural differences have sometimes hardened into barriers, preventing a common journey of faith. But people from both communities regularly noted the desire for greater unity and companionship. While acknowledging that “parallel paths” often define the life of their communities, many wondered how to overcome divisions, to gather more frequently for worship and fellowship, and to share the gifts of each with the other.

Some shared experiences of desolation. One young adult, sharing her experience, described life in the Church as a “self-journey” of faith - one in which people express by their remoteness, “you do you, and I’ll do me.” Another young adult remarked on feeling unrooted and transient in parish communities, making the experience of companionship difficult to find.

Some saw opportunities for companionship. Several noted the importance of support from parents, godparents, and sponsors in providing help on the way. Several also shared how they found community in service through the Church, in family-focused activities, homebound and prison ministries, seasonal liturgical celebrations, and in providing food and other necessities to the most vulnerable.

Category 1: The Journeying Companions

A recurring theme emerged from this topic: we must be a light in the darkness. The way for the Church to reach the marginalized is by our joyful living of the Gospel. The Sacraments and the liturgical life of the Church were considered the most common ways the Church journeys with us. Eucharistic adoration was cited as helpful for building community, and there is a need emphasis on the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist

There was a significant division among participants when it came to the question of “Who is the Church?” Responses could be broken into three main categories:

- A number said the Church consists of those who belong to my parish, go to Mass with me, worship the way we do, or believe the way we do.
- An approximately equal number of responses indicated the Church is all the baptized, all those who believe in Jesus Christ, those who have left the Catholic Church or who were baptized into other Christian traditions.
- A smaller number of responses indicated the Church is all those who are near to us, interact with us, or with whom we have a relationship of service.

Several discussions focused on how cultural habits, personal experience in upbringing, and ethnic boundaries, can all color the way we define Church. There were both responses that saw the diversity of multicultural groups in parishes as evidence of good growth. Others looked at the same groupings and asked how we can call the Church universal when we still label parishes as “Black parishes” or groups as “Hispanic communities.” In dialogue with the historically Black parishes, there was a divide with some feeling the desire to be better integrated

with all Catholics, and those who believe the Black Catholic Community must band together because they are alone and left out.

There were similar diversities in defining the marginalized, which demonstrated a varied understanding of the meaning.

- Those who are new or only beginning to enter the Church, and those who have fallen away
- Poor people, people that live in poverty
- Atheists, people who don't have faith or believe in God, non-Christians or non-Catholics in mass.
- People from the LGBTQ+ community. We do not sufficiently show them or give resources on how to live their faith while being part of the community.
- People that have been hurt by the Church or her members
- Those in transitional stages especially those who recently received confirmation.

It was noted that in the past we used to go to family members in need, but families are farther apart in location or more isolated. However, it was noted that often those in our own homes can often be the furthest from the Church.

Several responses indicated that often leadership, both clerical and lay, create ministry bottlenecks by maintaining too much control over initiatives and projects, and fail to raise up additional leaders. The question was raised, “Can being too structured hinder our growth?”

Listening to others before preaching to them is the first step in evangelizing the marginalized. Religious communities have processes of listening and dialogue that could be used to teach others.

The need for more pastoral availability from priests was articulated, as well as the concern that clergy and lay leaders need more comprehensive formation for spiritual direction/guidance and pastoral care.

Those who participated in the dialogues are of the mind that more community outreach is necessary, and there is a need for greater awareness of marginalized communities and what could be done to serve them. Some people were concerned that young adults and youth often don't see what outreach already is being done by their own church to the homeless and poor.

There was a recurring theme regarding judgmentalism. There was recognized a need to proclaim the Church and the Gospel, but concern for how we might be received as judgmental. Those who have experienced judgmentalism find it very difficult to return to the Church again.

Those involved in parish related organizations feel heard and feel accompanied, but many of those who are not so involved do not feel this way. Others indicated that these primary modes of accompaniment do not provide access to those who have fallen away, left the Church, or who were never part of the Church. They highlighted the need for more opportunities for these people.

Parishes often have a generalized ideological position or habitual way of doing things. This can greatly hinder collaboration between parishes. “Each group has their own way they are living, so there isn't a single way to bring every group into Christ's Church.” There needs to be a way of encouraging collaboration without demanding uniformity.

Suggestions included:

- Small groups and peer-to-peer ministries need to be better leveraged with marginalized communities. The need for a mentorship and discipleship-based formation was expressed, particularly by the young.
- There is a need for greater formation in pre-evangelization ministry as well as in how to evangelize others. Particular attention is needed to teach the faithful how to invite others in.
- Providing simple services like buses to church making things more accessible.
- The Church needs to ask the parish: surveys, especially ask the young, inventory of parish resources/gifts/charisms should be taken, particularly among minority groups whose gifts are often unknown
- More people of color in leadership positions & parish ministries.
- An objective assessment needs to be made about what we call “welcoming,” we may not actually be as welcoming as we think we are.
- Priests need to regularly invite others individually- “you are needed.”

Category 2: Listening

Two patterns of response regularly emerged in answer to the questions regarding the Church’s practice of listening to God’s people. The first was a prompt expression of feeling unseen and unheard by the Church. Many shared examples of this experience and noted that it was most commonly felt among women, young people, and religious. The second pattern of response was a kind of defensiveness against the questions, perceiving in them implied accusations that Church leaders lacked attention to God’s people or showed preference to some. Many on both sides of these responses regarded the synodal dialogues as living examples of the Church’s listening. Most also expressed the desire to see a continuation of the process of dialogue, with new questions being generated to suit the pastoral needs of particular communities.

Category 3: Speaking Out

One respondent expressed the sentiments of many in this statement: “It is through listening to the confused faithful that Mother Church is better able to focus her teaching, and in particular, the phrasing of teaching...”

Among the most frequent comments regarding listening, was the necessity for prayer to come first before speaking out. Participants said it is necessary to listen to, and pay attention to, the conversations, conditions, and surroundings of our communities in order to discern what needs to be spoken and heard. This was noted as being extremely important regarding multicultural ministries.

Responses indicate a belief that speaking out should include not only doctrine, but the sharing of experiences. It is believed that by sharing experiences one can understand another's perspectives, which is necessary for dialogue with people on the margins (specifically mentioned were racial minorities and the LGBTQ community).

Noting that many people are uneasy with listening, one working group contributed the following statement: "It is important to be clear that everyone should speak out and be heard, but that is different than everyone being right."

Dialogue groups consistently reported a need to have more of these dialogues to provide regular, collaborative avenues that allow constructive conversation to take place. However, it was also noted that these opportunities for speaking should not just be scheduled events but a habitual culture of listening

Responses indicated overwhelmingly that the faithful believe it is clergy and religious who speak for the Church. Many noted that it is often the case that this right to speak is held exclusively by the clergy and religious, or by parish staff and employees, to the exclusion of others. Participants expressed the need to find ways to increase the number & types of people who can speak for church: married, single, lay, young mothers, and members of minority communities were all mentioned. Participants believe their Church must find ways of inviting and encouraging more voices to speak out. The responses also show a belief that this must be done by personal invitation and individual encouragement.

Opinions expressed in the dialogues included that:

1. The Church, as well as individual Catholics, should be speaking out regularly, not only when we have a "hot-button" issue to speak about.
2. It is necessary to speak out when others are in times of trouble.
3. This kind of speaking out requires a "radical availability."

A Parish Council could speak for the church in their parish, but some faithful are concerned that, in many parishes, there may not be a situation where such a council will be listened to, and an action taken.

There are many challenges which cause Catholics in our diocese to feel uncomfortable with speaking out:

1. Catholics are such a minority in our diocese (3-4% in an area where there are aggressive members of other Churches or ecclesial communities).
2. Modern culture makes people feel that speaking openly your heart & mind is forcing one's views on others.
3. People seem to have hardened views about hard topics making speaking out scary or difficult, or useless.
4. Society seems very polarized.
5. Groups within the Church are divided by their own opinions.
6. It is difficult to know what should be said publicly or in private.
7. Our own judgementalism and prejudices keep us at a distance from people.

The most noted concern was people feel they do not have enough knowledge of what the church teaches and are unprepared for speaking out.

A common concern, but one particularly mentioned among the Spanish-speaking communities, was that often only one member is allowed to speak for the whole community. Clergy or lay leaders limit the voices who are given the chance to speak, and people feel they do not have the authority to speak out any different opinion. Some reasons given for this were fear of being wrong, fear of being criticized, or a lack of humility.

Many felt that when the Church, through her Bishops and Priests, does not speak boldly, the resulting silence speaks loudly. They expressed that since Catholic politicians and public figures who erroneously profess to speak for the Church speak boldly and loudly in the culture, the Church must do the same.

We need more accessibility and presence in the communities, in order to know their needs and to speak to them according to those needs.

Several groups suggested that parishes should establish media ministries within parishes so that social media and websites are easy to find, attractive, effective, and clear. They also suggested that Chancery resources be allocated to forming consistent quality across church and parish websites and media.

Participants expressed that the diocese and parishes should establish clear, easy to find, and easy to reach points of contact for when people have questions. As many people feel unprepared to speak for the Church, each parish needs people with formation in evangelization and apologetics to serve in this way. The Church needs to invest more heavily in well-formed educators, particularly for the young. Perhaps one method would be a conspicuous opinion/question box located in each church.

Category 4: Celebrating

The word used to describe the Liturgical life of the Church, particularly the Holy Mass, was that it is “the anchor of our common life.” There is a need for the faithful to approach it with wonder, awe, and great joy. The Eucharistic celebration should inspire us to bring out the Gospel to the world and to invite others in. It needs to be a joyful experience, one that is “unforgettable.” Prayer and liturgy also provide an opportunity for facilitating learning of the faith.

Several groups noticed the loss felt by the lack of our common celebration during Covid shutdowns. Different communities have had different experiences of returning to normal celebrations since reopening.

Beautiful liturgy was observed as a chief point of attraction to the church, but it was also noted that we need more varied opportunities to gather in common prayer. It is necessary to bring our community together through the rosary and adoration of the Most Blessed Sacrament. Emphasis on the Church’s teaching regarding the Eucharist was requested.

There was a divide between participants emphasis on joy and exuberance and others emphasis on silence and quiet. Responses appeared to place these at opposite ends of a spectrum. Some requested more traditional elements such as Latin Mass, while others emphasized greater attention to upbeat music. Some stressed strict silence in the Church, while others noted some communities are comfortable with greeting and fellowship inside the Church building. Requests

were made for attention to congregational singing, that music be singable and allowed to become familiar.

Participants noted “a silo effect” that divides churches of various customs and called for ways to unite. Prayers for community healing was suggested as a common way to unite. The young adult community contributed the observation that sometimes it appears when we gather, we are glorifying our own ideas more than we are glorifying God.

There was a nearly unanimous request for increased reverence for the Holy Mass and the Eucharist, but also the notation that reverence is not a uniform concept and may look different in different cultural settings.

Consistent, ongoing effort is required to keep lay people engaged in those parts of liturgical celebrations that are appropriate to them. However, it was also noted that liturgical role or activity is not the primary means of full and active participation. A refresher is needed to instruct people on how to fully participate in the liturgy even when not occupying a liturgical role.

All communities acknowledged the need for greater instruction about the Mass, its parts and the meanings of its rituals and symbols. Some suggested this be done during the Liturgy, others suggested it be done at other times. In addition to greater instruction about the Holy Mass, the faithful request a reassessment of the Mass times, and at what times Mass is offered in other languages, chiefly Spanish. There is a need for bilingual celebrations, not one or the other.

Specific mention of homiletics was often made. It was expressed that homilies can tend to be vague, lacking direction, or disconnected from application in daily life. This does not mean that teaching or rituals should change, but that it needs to be applicable to life.

The general intercessions were mentioned many times. While many participants noted it as an area for improvement, there was little agreement about what that should look like, though several requested the ability to add petitions relevant to the specific people in attendance.

There were many requests for more frequent and more convenient times for the Sacrament of Reconciliation at local parishes. The faithful also expressed need for better instruction about the Sacrament and its purpose.

The recommendation and encouragement to all the faithful to pray the Liturgy of the Hours should be made. The religious communities could share in bringing the praying of the Divine Office to the laity, teaching it and building community through it. Prayer takes work. People need to be taught and brought through the growing process of that work. The Catholic tradition includes a vast menu of different forms of prayer, and there is concern that many of these are not made accessible or available to the faithful. More instruction is needed on the array of means of personal and common prayer, especially *Lectio Divina*.

All parish organizations and activities should start with and include prayer. Bible studies and small prayer groups were noted as other ways of celebrating. Making use of surveys or a questionnaire on the parish level can allow pastors and liturgists to see the thoughts and needs of their people. Liturgy and other parish celebrations must be able to engage the whole family. Hospitality is a key feature that should mark all our celebrations.

Category 5: Co-responsible in the Mission

In answering questions regarding all believers' co-responsibility in the mission of the Church, one elderly gentleman offered an evocative image to describe his feelings of frustration. His image summed the feelings of many. This man described sitting in a pew in a parish, his chin pointed upward, listening to stories from the clergyman about how each person should actively engage in the work of missionary discipleship in his or her own life. But he said that the chasm between the altar and the pew seemed to put up a wall. He could observe how the clergyman could give his life to God in his service at the altar. He could not as easily find a model for how the person in the pew should contribute his life to the work of sanctification in its own way. He noted having seen other ecclesial communities offer easier pathways for lay members to find their way toward active ministry in the Church and in the world.

Category 6: Dialogue in Church and Society

A highlight was given about St. Joseph Parish in Huntsville. The community made a film about how they experienced their parish which started as a predominantly Black parish but had since integrated. This was noted as an exceptional effort to establish a point of dialogue with society.

Participants believe that dialogue with society requires that integrity, “acting as the same person during the week as we act on Sunday at church.”

Many of the responses highlighted a common situation of having close friends and family members who belong to another faith, often in the same household; and this requires better preparation for dialogue with society. They noted many other Christian churches in our area approach new neighbors and are not afraid to enter this conversation with strangers, but rarely do Catholics do so. It is very scary to invite someone who may be hostile to our beliefs into a dialogue about faith.

The need was expressed for more dialogues like these. People need room to discuss differences in a non-hostile environment. Society and culture have become extremely divided, and it has become difficult to maintain dialogue with those who disagree. This division also exists in the Church. There is more debate than dialogue. This makes it hard for Catholics to enter conversations with society.

The Black community expressed concern that Catholic perspectives on difficult issues, such as racism, are seldom heard from the pulpit. Our communities are still segregated by race or language. The specific question was raised: “If we cannot address these issues inside our own Church, how can we have dialogue with society about them?”

Inter-parish and diocesan communications were recurring themes. Many experience a lack of transparency because it seems information is not spread widely, and sometimes only received by a few via word-of-mouth.

Referencing John 10:14, “The Good Shepherd knows His sheep,” some participants said pastoral care does not seem to be matching the needs of modern times. It seems that there are generational gaps, where the Church continues to do and offer things in the same modes and

methods from generations past and these are no longer working. Older generations have wisdom, but it needs to be applied according to ways that are usable by the young.

Pastor and priest assignments were a concern. Youth explained that they often do not understand how or why reassignments happen and find the transitions painful. Some priests from other countries have struggled to grasp the reality of their parish's culture. It appears to many that marginalized parishes do not receive equal consideration when assigning priests and often do not get the best fit. There is also concern that Chancery staff may be individuals who do not have parish experience from which to draw.

Category 7: Dialog with the Other Christian Denominations

One concern regarding Catholic dialogue with other Christians was described as a focus on uniformity instead of unity. Many participants identified difficult experiences with other denominations which they attributed to misunderstanding of what the Catholic Church believes. They requested training and tools to be prepared to explain those misunderstandings clearly and with charity. The faithful expressed the desire for this kind of exchange to be a dialogue and not a battle. Responses described their difficulty in having dialog with Catholics who have left the Church when they are bitter or angry.

It is important to know the history of good moments of Christian unity. An example was given of St Francis Xavier parish, which was destroyed by fire many years ago. The outpouring of support from local Protestant churches was generous, and this kind of story needs to be handed down.

Several dialogue groups wished to remind others that all baptized Christians are part of the Body of Christ and are in need of full communion, not adversaries. A suggestion offered to help with this is that Catholics need instruction regarding the other Churches in the Catholic Communion (e.g.: Eastern Catholics), and that knowledge of our own unity in diversity will help us engage Christians who are not in communion with a better perspective.

Participants felt most Catholics do not believe they possess as much knowledge of the Faith as the Protestants they encounter.

The need was expressed for a clear idea of the Catholic explanation of a “personal relationship with Jesus Christ,” so that it can be shared when other Christians claim Catholics do not have one.

We should find ways to make an encounter with our traditions and liturgies less intimidating for people of other Christian Churches. People feel as though they need to participate, and this is difficult when they do not know what to do.

Areas where we can find unity with other Christians include pro-life ministries, prison outreach, and outreach to the poor. Catholics have a rich tradition of spiritual practices that many non-Catholics are hungry for, and we can share this. Other denominations have exceptional programs of outreach to the poor and unchurched from which we could benefit learning.

There is a need to communicate the Church's teaching pastorally on the reception of the Eucharist and communion, as this issue drives many people away. Also, the process of annulment needs to be handled in a more pastorally sensitive way.

Category 8: Authority and Participation

Unanimously, continuing active dialogues such as these, was expressed as necessary to find out the needs of the people. The Church cannot presume the needs are known.

With regards to who exercises authority, the USCCB, the local Bishop, the Pastor, and the parish council were all mentioned. Participants agreed that they need Bishops to be more present equally to all parishes, but more intentional in minority churches to show solidarity. Those who control the parish flow of information, such as the parish secretary, exercise a form of authority. Often, the dynamic between the pastor and these staff members can be a source of breakdown in authority. A large responsibility rests on the priest, who should be a role model of holiness not only during mass and but in his daily life. This modeling requires that he share more life with members of the parish. When religious and laity have a poor experience with a priest, it causes them to wonder if anyone is minding the suitability of a priest to a particular ministry setting. The question was raised: “Does our diocese have any programs for evaluating and updating priests, deacons?”

It is necessary for the Church to encourage those who will become the leaders in the future to take a more active role in the parish today. We need to cultivate better leadership among the young. Additionally, the current models of parish leadership and participation are not designed to keep young families & middle-aged people active, amid the business required by modern culture. Existing resources of support to leadership and parishes need to be better communicated and easier to locate, and better utilized by those in authority. Parish pastoral councils need a more clearly defined role, as well as more involvement from those of diverse ages (particularly youth and young adults), backgrounds, ethnicities, and each gender. Opportunities for involvement need constant invitation in any (and all) manners, particularly personal invitation.

One conflict between authority and participation that was expressed is that Church authority often is seen as imposing one’s own sense of morality on others, with less concern for justice, and promoting a sense of judgmentalism.

Leaders, particularly clergy, were observed by respondents as unprepared to strike a balance between micromanagement and being too hands-off. The experience of lay employees and volunteers is often vacillating between being treated with fearful mistrust or unguided delegation.

Some participating women responded that they don't feel discriminated against or excluded from authority, but others expressed that they do. The descriptions of these experiences were inconsistent. One suggestion given was to explore female diaconate, or to allow women to participate in the deacon formation program even if they will not receive orders.

Category 9: Discerning and Deciding

Most participants agreed that prayer, scripture, and participation in the Sacraments are necessary in order to discern and decide with the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Numerous suggestions were made to include Adoration of the Most Blessed Sacrament as a key to this process. An enlightening insight that came from several groups was that the loudest voice is not the only voice to listen to when discerning. Participants believed that everyone should be heard and consulted, but they also recognized that decisions cannot always be made by voting.

Participants gave the following additional points and suggestions:

- They agreed that involving the faithful in the process of discerning and deciding engages and excites them.
- In the listening phase, specific questions should be asked so participants know exactly what is being discerned, and who will be deciding.
- It is important to communicate what decisions are appropriate to be made by what level: committee, council, pastor, bishop, etc.
- The religious communities noted that prayerful discernment through a contemplative process is a fixture in their way of life, and that they could use this gift to form parish and diocesan leaders in this area.

Participants were unaware of any diocesan level discernment process. They feel they are not consulted and that they need more transparency from pastors and the bishop, specifically in the areas of finance. They do not know what is being discerned which might affect them, nor who is discerning these things. Within parishes, it was noted that English-speaking and Spanish-speaking groups often do not discern and decide together. One community makes decisions for the whole parish, while the other only makes decisions that affect themselves.

The concern was raised that parishes need more and better ways to assist young people in discerning both religious or priestly vocations and marriage. A common theme arose of the need for mentorship in discernment. There were concurrent suggestions for a program of connecting single young adults to married couples for mentorship in discerning their vocation.

There is a need for sharing best practices with parish pastoral councils and formation in these principles. Some were effective and others were not. Parish pastoral councils with newly ordained or foreign priests are often in conflict with the pastor/administrator. It was suggested that best practices be shared between parishes. There was a request for formation for pastors in these best practices, as well as for the members. These councils should be more diverse, specifically with regards to age. The election and appointment process should be clear and accessible. The meetings for parish pastoral and finance councils should be more regular, their agendas should be published widely, and recommendations/decisions communicated clearly. These councils should allow time or formal method for receiving input from the whole community.

Category 10: Forming ourselves in Synodality

Unanimously, each session reported a desire for more dialogues like these. However, there is a request for more clarity on the purpose and goals, and a plan of formation for participating in the form. There should be practical as well as spiritual formation for those looking to participate in synodal activities, some of which should be provided by the priests of the diocese. This spiritual formation must be focused on personal transformation, not simply doctrinal information or process. And parish formation should be available to adults, not only children and youth. Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament and participation in the Sacraments must be made part of this formation.

Participants noted the following features and areas of attention for ongoing synodality:

- Young people, particularly those from minority communities, shared that they do not feel welcome and find it difficult to be incorporated. They hope that any structures of synodality would intentionally make room for them.
- It was suggested that parishes in the diocese that seem to do “journeying together” well should be examined to develop best practices.
- It was noted that good habits of synodality need to be modeled for parishes in order for them to learn how to do it well.
- Inter-cultural dialogue requires bravery, being willing to accept earnest attempts at communication across language barriers, even if the results are imperfect: “I’ll give you my bad Spanish and listen to your bad English.”
- Honesty, integrity, and humility were all mentioned as key features of those who are well formed.
- The local Church cannot be isolated from the culture of the world. In particular, this concern was brought up regarding seminary formation. Lay participants are concerned that our seminarians may not receive formation in relational ministry in our modern culture.
- Parish leadership, councils, school boards, committees, etc. need to be trained in contemplative processes that discern decisions together.
- Formation should also be provided in processes of personal discernment.

The religious communities noted that their rules of life include participating in contemplative group discernment processes as a normal way of decision-making for their congregations. The religious suggested they could assist in teaching parishes such processes.

Frameworks for community, such as small Christian communities and other small group offerings, were described as essential in building up a culture that can live and move together in this way. Participants repeatedly requested these be highlighted and formed in parish culture.

Clergy and Religious expressed their hunger for the church to journey together with them, especially their Bishop. Bishop Raica’s presence was greatly appreciated at the dialogues and there is hope that this may continue. There was also the suggestion of ongoing dialogues among the religious communities at regular intervals. In order for religious communities to be able to share the gift of their presence in the diocese, the appointment of a Vicar for Religious or similar point of contact with the diocese and Bishop was requested.

Participants stressed that the PASTOR sets the tone for the Parish, citing that synodality will only succeed to the level the Pastor engages in the process with his people.

Other Contributions

The Vatican documents regarding the Synodal Process suggested that consultations be conducted with other organizations and churches which have a close relationship with the diocese, in order to gain some outside perspectives. In response to this, a consultation was completed with the Eastern Catholic Clergy present in the diocese. They indicated that synodality in their churches was a matter of governance and felt some disconnect with the use of the term in this context. They made four salient points relating to how the Roman Catholic Diocese of Birmingham might journey better together with them:

- Though small, the Eastern Churches have a history of synodality and of dialogue with their own people and non-Catholic neighbors. This history could be a great gift to the Roman Church. A perspective which views the Eastern Churches as ones to learn from, not simply a smaller, less significant relative, would be beneficial to the whole Church.
- When Eastern Catholics are taken into a Latin Rite parish, without instruction or encouragement in the appropriateness of returning to their ritual church or proper canonical transfer, this is not evangelism or growth. Evangelization should be directed at those outside the Church, not those within other sister Churches.
- Priests need to be formed in proper sacramental disciplines regarding Eastern Catholics. The local priests have had many experiences of priests of this diocese baptizing and marrying Eastern Catholics without regard for canonical protocols. These are opportunities for catechesis or encounter which are being missed.
- In an attempt to encourage full participation in the Liturgy, the Latin Rite includes many more roles and places for lay people which in the East are proper only to the priest or deacon. And yet, it seems, there is still a feeling among Roman Catholics that they are not able to be involved enough and don't feel there is a good role of the laity. In the East, roles of Liturgy have not been given over to the laity so freely, but the laity has been invited into more leadership and governance. Perhaps this might be of use to the Roman Catholic Diocese, to explore more administrative and governance roles for lay people, and perhaps not so much focus on the liturgical ones.

Summary

Through the process of reading and synthesizing the various dialogue reports, several themes arose which were common throughout. Some of the most salient common responses are, in no specific order, as follows:

- Our people expressed a desire for more structured dialogues such as these.
- They expressed a great need for a clearer vision and purpose of parish pastoral councils, and the formation necessary to make best use of them.

- There is a strong desire for small communities and small groups as a resource and support in faith and life.
- The faithful expressed that diversities existing in our local Church are often experienced as division and estrangement, and not as the unity of the Body of Christ which our Lord intends.
- A request was commonly made for formation and instruction in the Faith, especially directed towards sharing the Faith with others, particularly for adults.
- Our people desire that we adopt radically better habits of communication.
- Diocesan and local leadership were called to listen more attentively and exhibit more transparency.
- There exists a common need for assessment of the available gifts and resources that the faithful provide, particularly those of the Religious, the young, and minority communities.
- The faithful presented many ways local and Diocesan leadership may better serve the people of God throughout the diocese, marked by a call for ongoing formation for clergy and lay leaders.
- They felt all of us need to recognize that people's experiences of the same event can be completely different. For example: one may find a liturgy reverent and worshipful while the one next to them finds it distracting and disorienting; or one may experience a community as warm and welcoming while another finds it cold and impersonal.

A copy of this synthesis was submitted to the USCCB's Region V team and was included in the Conference Synthesis which has been completed and is being made available alongside this document. It is significant to notice that many of our major themes were echoed by fellow Catholics from all parts of the country. Looking forward there arises a sense of solidarity among all US Catholics who share similar dreams and struggles. It is also possible to share best practices and ideas for the use of this information in pastoral planning.

Building on the theme of "co-responsibility in the mission," there are concerns and comments present in this document which apply to Diocesan-level planning, but also many which will require the attention of the faithful to address along with their pastors. Parish communities are encouraged to examine these findings in detail, and to discern together with their pastors the best ways to use them locally. The Diocesan Synod Process Team, and in particular the Office of Discipleship and Mission, remain available to any parish who seeks support in this future endeavor and in the ongoing efforts to incorporate this kind of encounter, listening, and discernment into our habitual ways of being together.