



DIOCESE *of* LACROSSE

October 25, 2021

Dear Brother Priests,

As I presented at the Fall Ministry Conference, in preparation for the 2023 General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, each diocese has been asked by Pope Francis to foster a broad consultation process in order to gather the wealth of the experiences of lived synodality at the local level. The heart of the synodal experience is listening to God through listening to one another, inspired by the Word of God. We listen to each other in order to better hear the voice of the Holy Spirit speaking in our world today. The aim of the Synod is to discern how we are “living the faith” and how we as a Church are achieving this together. Ultimately, this process seeks to achieve three major goals: (1) encouraging individuals and communities to participate in the life of the Church; (2) building communion through journeying and walking this path of faith together, and (3) building a foundation where committing to the mission of the Church and fulfilling that mission is encouraged and possible.

The Synod of Bishops encourages dioceses to use already existing “synodal” bodies such as parish pastoral councils to facilitate the synodal process, provided that efforts are made to reach out to the peripheries and to those voices that are seldom heard. Therefore, as described in Bishop Callahan’s letter regarding the synodal way, each parish should have a special meeting of the pastoral council to facilitate the listening session requested by Pope Francis. This meeting should have the singular focus of “journeying together” in the synodal process and should take place before **February 15, 2022**. You are encouraged to focus on maximum inclusion and participation, reaching out to involve the greatest number of people possible, and especially those on the periphery who are often excluded and forgotten. No one should be excluded from sharing their perspective and experiences, insofar as they want to help the Church on her synodal journey of seeking what is good and true.

The Process. Now that you have the materials in hand, please consider who you might want to invite to this special meeting of the pastoral council in addition to the current members. You may want to consult your pastoral and finance councils, parish staff, leadership team, and other parish organizations to come up with an apposite group. You are encouraged to foster full and active participation of the ordained, consecrated religious, and laity of the community, including children, young people, single persons, married couples, families, and the elderly. The group should represent the diversity of socio-economic and cultural/ethnic backgrounds and abilities in the parish, as well as encouraging consultation with those who are less active in the practice of the Catholic faith, those from different Christian denominations and other faith traditions, and residents who have no connection to the parish.

Once you have a group of people willing to participate, schedule the date, time, and place of the meeting. In order to allow for the greatest degree of participation, you may want to schedule the meeting on a Saturday morning or other non-standard time. After the meeting is scheduled, please send out the participants’ guide to the invitees. Please make sure enough time is allowed between the sending of the guide and the meeting itself so that the invitees can thoroughly think about and prepare to discuss the themes and questions (2 to 3 weeks ahead is recommended).

The Meeting. You are encouraged to be welcoming at the listening session meeting, especially if there are invitees who do not usually participate in parish meetings. Refreshments might be considered. At the beginning of the meeting, please begin with the prayer *Adsumus, Sancte Spiritus* found in the participants’ guide. In order to begin the conversation, you may want to open with a discussion of what

synodality means to the group or to have participants reflect on the journey of their local community up until now. *What has been the history of the faith life of the community? How has the community traveled to where they are now? How has God been present?*

Eventually, you will want to consider the “Main Questions for Consultation” from the participants’ guide. Your conversation and dialogue do not need to be limited to those questions. The aim is not to cover all the questions but rather to discern and focus on those aspects of synodality most pertinent in your group’s context. It is often better to have fewer questions which can be explored deeply, rather than have many questions that would be covered superficially. These questions are provided to initiate and facilitate the experience of sharing and listening. You can pose other questions, and are encouraged to do so. As a general guide, give more emphasis to the types of questions that evoke personal stories and real-life experiences rather than “doctrinal” statements.

All participants are encouraged to share with honesty and openness about their real-life experiences, and to reflect together on what the Holy Spirit might be revealing through what is shared with one another. Everyone is invited to speak with authentic courage and honesty in order to integrate freedom, truth, and charity. The listening session will probably last one hour, but shorter or longer discussions can be just as beneficial. You should end the meeting with a prayer.

The Synthesis. At the beginning of the listening session, someone should be nominated as the recorder to take notes. You can choose a participant, ask someone from the parish staff, or even serve in the role yourself. After the meeting, these notes should be compiled into a synthesis. This synthesis does not have to be “meeting minutes” but should convey the main fruits of the discussion, both positive and negative. It should not only report common trends and points of convergence, but also highlight those points that strike a chord, inspire an original point of view, or open a new horizon. The synthesis should pay special attention to the voices of those who are not often heard. The synthesis should not only underline positive experiences but also bring to light challenging and negative experiences in order to reflect the reality of what has been said. Something of the experience of the local gathering should be conveyed in the synthesis: the attitudes of the participants, and the joys and challenges of engaging together in discernment. Each parish’s synthesis should be sent to me at aguanella@diolclergy.org by February 21, 2022.

Future Prospects. If a pastor wants to have more than one listening session, he is encouraged to do so. A pastor also may want to host special consultation sessions for certain groups (for example, adolescents, young adults, married couples, migrants, those who are less active in the faith, or those who experience poverty and marginalization). Only one synthesis should be prepared at the end of the “official” sessions. Parish schools, unified school systems, or university groups may benefit from a consultation session with its own synthesis. A pastor may want to continue in thy synodal way if proves beneficial for all involved. Individuals can also contribute their feedback directly to me via e-mail.

For More Information. I encourage you to visit the Synod’s website at www.synod.va and read the *Preparatory Document* and the *Vademecum* or to read the International Theological Commission’s 2018 document, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*. I am also happy to answer any questions or concerns that you may have during this diocesan phase of the synodal journey. I express my appreciation to you for your assistance in fulfilling Pope Francis’ request to “journey together” with our people. The aim is not to overwhelm pastors and parishes, but rather to integrate the synodal process into the life of the local Church in creative ways that promote deeper communion, fuller participation, and a more fruitful mission.

Sincerely in Christ,

Father Alan M. Guanella

Diocesan Contact Person for Synod 2021–2023