



DIOCESE *of* LACROSSE

SYNOD 2021–2023 DIOCESAN SYNTHESIS FOR A SYNODAL CHURCH: COMMUNION – PARTICIPATION – MISSION

The Diocesan Phase of the Synod 2021–2023 was opened with the celebration of the Holy Mass on Monday, October 11, 2021, celebrated by the Bishop of La Crosse, Bishop William P. Callahan, OFM Conv., with many of the priests of the diocese concelebrating. On October 25, 2021, Bishop Callahan instructed the pastors of the diocese to organize and begin listening sessions throughout the parishes of the diocese. A pastor of the diocese, Father Alan M. Guanella, was appointed by Bishop Callahan to be the diocesan contact person for the Synod. Father Guanella instructed the pastors as to how Bishop Callahan wished these listening sessions to take place, as explained below. The listening sessions took place throughout the rest of 2021 and throughout the first half of 2022. The answers to the questions posed in Appendix D of the Synod *Vademecum*, containing the synthesized, compiled fruits of the listening sessions, are presented here in the diocesan synthesis for the Diocese of La Crosse, Wisconsin.

In terms of the process of the consultation, what were the main steps taken in the diocese?

Since the Synod of Bishops encouraged 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, Bishop Callahan asked each parish to have a special joint meeting of the parish pastoral and finance councils with the singular focus of “journeying together” in the synodal process. Pastors were 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.

Not all pastors or parishes seemed to be willing to host these listening sessions and a significant number of parishes and even deaneries, simply had a survey available and no listening session or “journeying together” took place. These surveys, created by the parish or deanery, were lamentable since the purpose of the diocesan phase was to be “more than simply responding to a questionnaire, [but rather] meant to offer as many people as possible a truly synodal experience of listening to one another and walking forward together, guided by the Holy Spirit” (*Vademecum*, 4.1). In fact, one person commented on a parish survey that “[w]e should have an open discussion, not a survey.” Another person, from a different parish, commented: “This survey was a real waste of time [...] and I do not feel much or any value can come from it.”

Special consultation sessions for certain groups were encouraged but none seem to have taken place. A few parishes included other parish groups, such as Parish Councils of Catholic Women, or parish-related organizations, such as the Knights of Columbus. Some parishes did host more than one session, however. Parish schools, unified school systems, or university groups were encouraged to hold consultation sessions with their own synthesis but none were returned. Finally, responses from individual persons were accepted, of which seven responses were returned.

What were the main questions posed?

Pastors were encouraged to open their listening session 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. Questions

posed were: 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?

Pastors were then encouraged to consider the “Main Questions for Consultation” from the *Vademecum* (5.3). Pastors were told that their conversation and dialogue did not need to be limited to those questions but rather to discern and focus on those aspects of synodality most pertinent in their group’s context. Pastors were encouraged to pose other questions, especially regarding the types of questions that evoke personal stories and real-life experiences. Questions used on surveys/questionnaires varied greatly.

What was done to engage as many participants as possible and to reach out to the peripheries?

While pastors were 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, how this took place in each parish was unclear. In those parishes that hosted listening sessions, there seems to have been a mix of how the sessions were advertised: printed in the parish bulletin, notices on the parish website, announcements during Mass, and some personal reaching out by the parish clergy and staff.

However, participation from non-practicing Catholics and non-Catholics seems to have been minimal. Nonetheless, at least in one parish, several non-Catholics were present at the listening session. According to that parish’s synthesis, they felt included and expressed gratitude. Their viewpoints were respectfully and warmly received.

In those parishes who only did a survey, maximum inclusion was easier since anyone could fill out a survey on the Internet, as long as someone had Internet access and knew about it.

Approximately what proportion of people in the diocese participated in one way or other?

Eighty-six parishes returned syntheses to the diocesan contact person out of 156 total parishes in the diocese. This equates to 55% of parishes. The compiled syntheses were over 250 pages in length. It is impossible to determine the actual number of people who participated as this information was not listed on returned syntheses for all parishes. In addition to the 86 returned parish syntheses, 7 individuals returned comments directly to the diocesan contact person. The diocesan contact person is aware of some parishes that hosted listening sessions but did not return a synthesis and at least one deanery that used a deanery-wide survey but did not return a synthesis (although one parish in the deanery did return one).

Were there any groups of people whose participation was especially noteworthy?

An online survey was created by four parishes in the La Crosse Deanery. This survey was begun by 577 respondents and was fully completed by 450 respondents. This survey included input from one individual each from Canada and Costa Rica. The Netherlands had 2 respondents begin the survey, and 1 respondent fully completed it. Respondents from coast-to-coast in the United States also completed the survey, although the vast majority of the responses were from within the La Crosse Deanery.

The four parishes that created this survey clearly put in a great deal of time and effort although how much “journeying together” took place is open to discussion since there were no meetings or listening sessions except in one of the parishes for its parishioners. Since the purpose of the diocesan phase, as stated above, was meant to offer as many people as possible a truly synodal experience of listening to one another and walking forward together” (*Vademecum*, 4.1), seemingly few of these 450 respondents were able to listen to one another, even if their voices were heard through the survey.

Were there specific groups of people who did not participate for any reason?

Some parishes did not return a parish synthesis and thus it was concluded they did not participate in the listening sessions. Nevertheless, the diocesan contact person does know of several parishes that hosted listening sessions but did not return a synthesis. One pastor refused to participate, in part due to his reaction to a USCCB Twitter tweet from on January 10, 2022 regarding “seven attitudes for walking the synodal path” as well as the ongoing German Synodal Way and the outcome of the 14th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (The Vocation and Mission of the Family in the Church and in the Contemporary World and the subsequent apostolic exhortation *Amoris laetitia*).

What was most significant about the whole experience of the consultation?

As one parish synthesis noted, “[t]his synodal process is encouraging us to speak candidly.” Similar comments were made in other parish syntheses. One parish which self-reported an attendance rate of 11% at its listening session remarked, “Those who attended the in-person sessions seemed to appreciate the discussion, engagement, and opportunity to express their thoughts and opinions.” Another synthesis remarked that the listening session “exceeded expectations and met the goal of providing an opportunity for dialogue and listening, and also exposed the reality that there is much more that could be done.” On the other hand, one synthesis noted that “[t]here is too much unnecessary consultation.”

As is the case whenever comments are encouraged, many parish syntheses focused on perceived negative aspects of ecclesial life and practice. Nevertheless, for those parishes who hosted listening sessions, most enjoyed the process, even if the questions for consultation seemed nebulous or poorly-worded (one synthesis noted that the questions did not seem geared towards ordinary people). At least one pastor decided to have listening sessions three times a year after a comment was made saying: “How do we walk together if we do not meet?” Such comments were absent from parishes that only used surveys and did not have a listening session.

What were the high points and low points, or the consolations and desolations?

In nearly all parish syntheses, there was a common emphasis on the Eucharist. It is clear that the Eucharist is the center of parish life. However, there was a desire to see more reverence at Mass, from both the clergy and the laity, and to have more preaching on the Real Presence. Sacred music and singing was often described as important to the celebration of the Mass but there were calls for more and better liturgical music and singing. There was also a desire to see increased opportunities for Eucharistic adoration and popular devotions such as the Stations of the Cross and various Marian devotions. These popular devotions were seen as ways to gather people together for more community. A number of syntheses called for increased parish missions, parish retreats, deanery Eucharistic congresses, and other such activities.

In a significant number of parish syntheses, there was a common theme of the under-catechesis of adults and the lack of continuing education catechetical programs. While Bible studies and other such programs were welcomed, there was a persistent desire to have more, especially in regards to the Sacrament of Confession. This under-catechesis seems to be at the root of many people having a fear of commitment which hinders engagement with others. Furthermore, due to under-catechesis, many adults may have a fear of retaliation from the current culture (especially “cancel culture”) that is at odds with Christianity since some adults feel that they are not able to properly speak about Christianity or Catholicism in an increasing secular culture.

Another common theme was the difficulty attracting children and young people to the faith. There were numerous concerns about the lack of attendance of young people at Mass and religious education programs. A comment was made that “[p]arents no longer see Catholic formation in the home as their own responsibility.” The lessening importance of Sunday as the Lord’s Day is seen as a challenge in

parishes with the rise of work, sports, vacation, and other events (described as “faulty family priorities”) that take away from the proper celebration of the Lord’s Day. While many parishes expressed grief regarding the difficulties in catechizing, retaining, and involving young people, there were relatively few suggestions offered. One parish synthesis stated that the Church spends too much time *teaching* young people and not enough time *listening* to their needs or answering their specific questions. Many syntheses noted that young people exist in a much more digital world than the older generation and that the Church should better use modern technology to reach younger generations. That being said, it was also noted that the Church should not be pressured to conform itself to modern society or society’s ways but rather to transform society through the Gospel message.

What dispositions, attitudes, or feelings were notable?

The continued difficulties in emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic were often referenced in parish syntheses. While there were varying comments about the local and national handling of the pandemic, the majority of responses indicated that parishes are still recovering from the loss of attendees at Mass and parish programs. With the decline in Mass attendance and participation in parish life, a number of parishes found that there is an abundance of evangelization work to be done and those who are willing and able to help in such work have become fewer. While the importance of televised and live-streamed Mass was stressed, there was a common fear that people have become used to “attending Mass” on TV or via the Internet and may not come back to in-person attendance. There was an overall concern about the low attendance at Mass in general. It was noted that parishes need to re-educate, re-invigorate, and re-connect with the faith and the parish community.

In regards to pastoral initiatives, it was often noted of the need for greater emphasis on ministry to the elderly, homebound, and shut-ins. Parish syntheses both commended pastors and laity for their time in visiting the elderly and homebound, but also called on them, especially pastors, to spend more time in visiting and caring for the elderly and homebound. There was a noted need for better ministry to women, ethnic minorities (especially Hispanics and Hmong), the handicapped, LGBTQ persons, the divorced and remarried, the poor, and fallen-away Catholics or those who rarely or never attend Mass.

In the parish syntheses, there were varied concerns about the Church’s involvement in society and national politics. One parish synthesis noted that suggestions of the laity get stifled by Church leadership, thus producing a “what’s the use” attitude among many, especially for those on the periphery. While the majority of syntheses noted that the Church should comment on society’s issues, there were varying remarks on what issues are most important: pro-life, marriage and family, LGBTQ issues, among others.

The shortage of priests was a common subject of the syntheses. Syntheses encouraged prayers for vocations to be prayed before, during, or after Masses. While the shortage of priests was a common topic, there were relatively few suggestions other than prayer and a change in the Church’s discipline to ordain married men (or permit priests to marry) or to allow women priests or deacons. There were also remarks as to the challenge of pastors having multiple parishes, especially rural parishes, and the cultural and linguistic challenges of foreign priests. A comment was made that parishes and parish ministries overlap but parishes are often reluctant to collaborate with each other; in one synthesis, it was stated that parishes were “encouraged to not get too close” by the vicar forane. In a similar manner, there were concerns about the number of parishes and the increasing age of active parishioners in parishes. A person made a comment about the number of parishes in one city in the diocese and questioned what the future would look like with fewer priests, aging parishioners, and fewer young families.

A number of syntheses’ comments mentioned the clergy sexual abuse crisis and the Church’s response to it along with ongoing concerns about homosexuality in the clergy. Some syntheses’ comments observed that the respondents noted a hindrance of confidence in, and felt disillusioned with, the leadership of the Church due to the handling of the abuse crisis. Others noted that the Church must continue to repair its image in light of the crisis. At least one parish synthesis bemoaned the “raft” of safe environment procedures due to the crisis but other syntheses praised these policies and procedures.

Regarding the Diocese of La Crosse, there was a notable attitude that the lay people in parishes do not know what the diocese does for parishes, especially those in rural communities. A feeling of disconnect between the parish and diocese was prominent. In a similar vein, there were opinions that the diocese feels rigid and removed from parish life. Comments were made that the diocese seems uninvolved with parish life. One parish synthesis noted that the diocesan bishop had not visited the parish in years and some parishioners felt this to be “disrespectful and even insulting.” A number of parish syntheses called for the return of parish Confirmation Masses with the bishop rather than joint Masses at a single location.

In a few syntheses, there was a statement that the parish and congregation should have more input in the naming of parish pastors. Other responses show a perception of exclusion of the laity in diocesan matters and decisions, especially in regard to rural parishes—syntheses indicate that lay people are unaware of how the diocese makes decisions and see diocesan governance as vague and opaque. There was a strong desire that pastors should remain in their assignments for a longer time.

Many syntheses noted an attitude of distrust regarding what the diocese does with funds collected from the Diocesan Annual Appeal and a fear that such funds are being used to cover up clergy sexual abuse. As one synthesis commented: “Parishioners see themselves as funding mechanisms for the diocese but, at the same time, they see the Church as family.” There was a lament that lay people only hear from the bishop when donations are being solicited. Syntheses also indicated a perception that the financial demands on parishes are too great in proportion to parish size or population. There were a number of calls for the diocese to be more transparent and open with its finances, especially concerning the use of funds received from the Diocesan Annual Appeal. In addition, there were numerous calls for parishes to be more transparent in their own finances and stressed the importance of financial reports given to parishioners.

What tensions or disagreements emerged from the listening process?

In the majority of parish syntheses, there seems to have been healthy tensions or disagreements during the listening sessions. Such disagreements also came out of those parishes that used surveys. Some of the major tensions and disagreements were:

There was a tension between those who felt the Church was abandoning the ideals of the Second Vatican Council and those who felt that either those ideas were not being implemented correctly or desired a return to pre-conciliar ways of doing things, especially in regards to the sacred liturgy and devotions. Some noted that they felt the Church was becoming less inclusive, especially towards women and minorities, and less ecumenical. There were comments that the Church seems too judgmental, especially to those who are LGBTQ, divorced and remarried, or who hold different viewpoints. A comment was made that the “Church should be open to all.” One parish synthesis noted that “Catholics who hold views other than orthodox or traditional may feel shunned or shut out as ‘other.’”

On the other hand, there was also a feeling that conservative or traditional viewpoints were being forced out or not heard in the Church. Some syntheses felt the Church, and especially dioceses and bishops, were not doing enough to tackle the societal pressures and ills. One comment noted that the bishops “should not be shy to proclaim the Gospel and [that] catechesis should conserve the truth, not move with the prevailing winds of society.” Even regarding the Synod 2021–2023, there were some comments that none of these listening sessions would make any difference since “Rome is going to do whatever it wants anyway” (as one synthesis noted).

Tensions regarding human sexuality were notable in a number of parish syntheses. Some participants noted that there was a perceived obsession with sexuality on the part of the Church. While there were calls for the Church to re-examine its teaching on LGBTQ issues, divorce and remarriage, and artificial contraception, there were also calls for the Church to have better catechesis regarding the Church’s traditional teaching on these matters and to boldly proclaim them in a world that does not accept them. There was a strong pro-life and anti-abortion consensus among syntheses. A final similar comment was made several times that the Church should re-examine its practice of ordinarily not permitting Catholic weddings outside of a church building.

What topics or issues gave rise to diverse points of view?

Throughout the parish syntheses, there were diverse points of view on multiple topics. In fact, especially in those syntheses that were based on survey results, there were contradictory statements from participants within the same synthesis itself. Among the diverse and often contradictory points of view, the following were most prominent, in no particular order:

It was felt by some that the diocese is “in it” only for the money and that the diocese has too many rules. There was much desire regarding the ordination of women to both the diaconate and the priesthood (even so, there were syntheses opposed to this, as well). In addition, there were numerous comments hoping that married men could be ordained priests or that currently ordained priests would be allowed to marry.

Even with the emphasis on the importance of the Eucharist throughout nearly all parish syntheses, there were many calls to permit non-Catholic Christians or even non-Christians to be permitted to receive the Eucharist. Furthermore, there was a desire both to accept divorce and remarriage in the Church and to allow those who have been divorced and remarried (without a declaration of nullity) to be permitted to receive the Eucharist. In addition, there was a desire in some syntheses for the Church to re-examine its stance on the prohibition of artificial contraception.

Finally, while there were many comments on the joy of the Sacrament of Confession and the desire for more opportunities and scheduled times for its celebration—especially in the diocese’s rural parishes—there were those who called for the regular use of the Rite of Reconciliation of Several Penitents with General Confession and Absolution rather than individual confession and absolution.

By no means were these points of view common to all syntheses. Many syntheses called for better catechesis regarding the topics mentioned above. As one parish synthesis noted: “The Church must maintain and act on her Magisterial authority.” Many syntheses called for a stronger and clearer voice from the bishops and the Roman Pontiff regarding these statements on faith and morals. A number of syntheses called for the Roman Pontiff to practice clarity and to better explain himself in order to promote truth and unity.

Overall, what were the fruits that the Holy Spirit has brought about through this experience?

The tradition of the Church lists twelve fruits of the Holy Spirit: charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, generosity, gentleness, faithfulness, modesty, self-control, and chastity (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1832).

Through the various consultations that took place in the diocese, it is clear that these fruits exist in manifold ways. However, with charity came a concern that certain groups are excluded. Some syntheses noted that more could be done for the poor and marginalized, especially in cooperation with other local parishes and non-Catholic churches. One synthesis noted a desire to do more for the diocesan-sponsored Casa Hogar Juan Pablo II orphanage in Lurín, Peru.

With joy and peace came a concern that the aging population of parishes, the shortage of priests, and the increased burdens on current priests make the future of the 156 parishes in the diocese unclear. With patience came the challenge of the increased divisiveness within society, both secular and ecclesial and how the Church should interact with secular politics and politicians.

With modesty, self-control, and chastity, a number of synod consultations questioned the Church’s teaching on divorce and remarriage, artificial contraception, marriage between one man and one woman, and the ministry to LGBTQ persons.

Among the feedback from the local meetings, what was particularly significant, surprising or unexpected?

One of the most significant areas of feedback was regarding unity. There was a consensus among the syntheses that there is an increasing divisiveness in the Church. At times this unity is intra-ecclesial. A number of syntheses noted frustration in the lack of unified teaching, or application of that teaching, among priests, bishops, the Roman Pontiff, and the Church as a whole. At other times this unity is extra-ecclesial. Many syntheses reported exasperation with the Church's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, recent elections, and current sitting politicians. This unity also included the recent discussion of "Eucharistic coherence" and the Church's discipline regarding admittance to Holy Communion, the Sacrament of Unity.

There were numerous conflicting viewpoints, however. Some syntheses noted a growing laxity among the faithful, especially in the practice of their faith (further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic). In spite of this, at the same time, some syntheses noted that the strict implementation of the Church's policies and discipline, especially in administering the sacraments, and the lack of pastoral charity on the side of the clergy on this matter, is a hindrance to people's practice of the faith.

What new perspectives or new horizons opened up?

A parish synthesis noted that offering welcome is easier in small group settings and encouraged parishes to seek out more opportunities for such settings, especially when reaching out to those on the peripheries. Comments were also made that in modern society, saturated with technology and social media, it is difficult to get to know fellow parishioners. These small groups and one-on-one meetings can help people "journey together" in parishes. Another parish suggested community and social events simply for the purpose of getting to know fellow parishioners. Some parish syntheses noted that parishes and parish organizations have good intentions but that these intentions are not implemented well.

A rural parish noted that joy comes from overcoming obstacles and from meeting and getting to know new people, especially at Mass and parish gatherings. There was a comment, also from a rural parish, that noted an apparent lack of the desire to serve within the laity. The joy in serving appears to be missing for many individuals. However, those who have answered the call mostly do so with great joy. In many cases once someone has experienced the joy that comes with serving, they are more likely to keep serving.

A number of parish syntheses touched on those people on the periphery, especially those forgotten by the world. For many of these people on the periphery, their faith life competes with other facets of life for priority. Examples of these competing facets—which are not unique to those on the peripheries—include work or business, family commitments, and educational, athletic, or social commitments. Parishes expressed the need to minister to those on the peripheries but noted the challenge of reaching them in an evangelical manner.

Which particular stories or real-life experiences were especially moving and why?

Stressing the need for beautiful liturgy and good preaching, a parish synthesis noted that a person had attended Mass and the celebration of a Baptism and therein had observed the scriptural basis for these sacraments and decided to return to full participation after a 40-year lapse.

Encouraging the involvement of parents in their children's religious education and formation, another parish synthesis described a religious education teacher teaching her class that Sunday Mass and other Holy Days of Obligation should be treated like important appointments. On the night of the Immaculate Conception Mass, one student said his/her parent was sitting in the vehicle and asked if he/she should go get the parent. In a short while, the parent came into Mass with the student.

Noting the importance of adult catechesis and formation, one parish synthesis told the story of a person who spent time searching different religions. After becoming a member of the Marian Catechist

Apostolate (began by the Servant of God Father John A. Hardon, SJ, to form catechists, both spiritually and doctrinally) this person remarked, “God reached his hand into my life and saved me.”

Which points of view seem to have strong resonance?

In no particular order, the following themes had strong resonance across the submitted parish syntheses: ministry to children, youth, and young adults; ministry to the elderly and homebound; a call for better preaching and homilies by the clergy, and finally an increase in opportunities for the celebration of Confession in parishes.

Nearly all parish syntheses noted the challenges of ministry to children, youth, and young adults. Some parishes questioned the effectiveness of current religious education programs. Others noted the challenges of keeping young people involved in the parish and Church after Confirmation. Others observed the lack of young families participating in Mass and parish activities. There was a desire to increase ministry to these groups of people and to look for new and effective means to reach young people, especially in the age of technology and social media. One parish noted that “young people are driven by mission but are not being asked to do anything. They want to be invited into the conversation but end up going elsewhere due to the fact that they are being ignored.”

A large number of parish syntheses noted the aging population in parishes and appealed for greater ministry to those who are elderly, homebound, or in care facilities. Some parishes praised the continued efforts of livestreamed or TV Mass for those homebound and other such practices that came out of the pandemic response. Many syntheses invited pastors to make more personal visits to the elderly and homebound. Finally, there was a desire to have increased formation for parishes from the diocese regarding ministry to these groups.

Finally, there was a strong appeal to have better preaching at Mass by the clergy. There were challenges noted in hearing and understanding foreign priests but these comments were not numerous. A number of syntheses requested more preaching on the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist and on the Sacrament of Confession. In addition, syntheses requested more resources (booklets, pamphlets, etc.) on Confession to be distributed in parishes. Finally, in a similar manner, a number of syntheses requested an increase in times for the celebration of Confession in parishes. Rural parishes and parishes clustered with others especially noted the lack of adequate times for Confession.

Which points of view were mentioned less but are interesting and noteworthy?

Regarding the sacred liturgy, some parish syntheses called for the increased use of Latin at Mass while others called for the reduction of its use. Other syntheses asked for the use of a kneeler/prie-dieu to receive Holy Communion while others did not want to use one. Some parish syntheses asked for an increase in the Traditional Latin Mass and expressed grief regarding the *motu proprio Traditionis custodes*. More than a few syntheses noted that lack of reverence at Mass. Others indicated the unneeded proliferation of extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion. Many noted the lack of volunteers for liturgical ministries.

In addition to the call for ministry to the divorced and the divorced and remarried, there were calls to increase and enrich marriage preparation, especially regarding Natural Family Planning (NFP). In addition, there was a desire for more resources on combatting pornography.

Overall, what has the Holy Spirit inspired the community to see regarding the current reality of synodality in the local church, including the present lights and shadows?

A parish synthesis noted that there is risk to others and ourselves when we extend ourselves. This fear of risk can inhibit parishes from reaching out, especially to those on the periphery. Nonetheless, there must be true discernment when the “call of the Spirit” is felt. Parishes should spend more time in discernment to see where the Holy Spirit is calling them.

Some syntheses asked for greater openness, listening, and compassion from the bishops and clergy. One parish synthesis in particular called for priests who are “approachable and more involved with the people.” Another synthesis encouraged pastors to actively reach out to families (and those who have fallen-away) to better understand the needs of the parish and the struggles that people are facing. Some syntheses asked for better preaching from the clergy at Mass, especially in making sure homilies are not “over the heads” of the congregants and avoiding predictable and repetitive homilies.

A number of syntheses commented on the difficulty of the Church existing in a fast-paced society with a 24-hour news cycle that does not seek out all the facts. Some syntheses noted that the Church is slow-moving which puts it at odds with the society. One synthesis noted that the “media controls perceptions, both good and bad.” In spite of this, another synthesis remarked that the “[t]ruth is clear and the Church should present truth and lead us to heaven, [and] be other worldly in her focus and not lose direction over worldly concerns.”

What did participants have to say about areas where the Church is in need of healing and conversion, in its spiritual life, culture, attitudes, structures, pastoral practices, relationships, and missionary outreach?

A great number of syntheses noted the rise of weddings taking place outside of the Church without a dispensation from canonical form. In addition, there was described familial difficulty in attending or not attending weddings that would be deemed invalid by the Church: whether because of ecclesiastical law (e.g., due to a lack of dispensation from canonical form) or because of divine law (LGBTQ marriages, for example). In a similar manner, there was noted the large number of funerals taking place outside of the parish as well. This was noted as especially concerning when many of the deceased were life-long practicing Catholics but their children did not see the value in a funeral Mass or other funeral liturgy.

The rise of fallen-away Catholics and Catholics who rarely attend Mass was noted as especially worrisome. Many of the parish syntheses noted that young people fall away from their practice of the faith after Confirmation or graduation from high school. Parish syntheses encouraged pastors and even the diocesan bishop to reach out to those who rarely attend Mass or have fallen-away from the faith.

The rise of divorce and remarriage was noted by a number of parish syntheses. These syntheses called for increased promotion of the ministry of the diocesan tribunal in marriage nullity cases. Other syntheses called for an abolition of all fees associated with such cases. A number of syntheses urged the diocese and parishes to increase ministry to the divorced and the divorced and remarried.

In what ways is the Holy Spirit inviting the local church to grow in synodality?

One parish synthesis recommended that the local church, especially in parishes, concentrate on focused listening encounters which are essential to sharing faith. In these encounters, there exists an active seeking out of those who may feel peripheral, an attempt to understand their hesitancy, and the offer of a welcoming invitation to join in.

A number of parish syntheses encouraged greater emphasis on the parish pastoral council. There seems to be a need of revitalization in parish consultative bodies and education as to their function and purpose and to make sure that there are included members from all walks of life. There was also a call to reinvigorate parish committees: especially the social justice and family life committees. A number of syntheses called for greater communication between the parish consultative bodies and the parish population.

More than one parish synthesis mentioned an idea, comment, question, or suggestion box in parishes. Since some parishioners are uncomfortable posing questions or concerns to the pastor or parish staff, a question box could serve as a way for ideas or questions (about the faith or the parish) to be heard.

While not specifically synodal, many parish syntheses noted pastors and parishes that celebrate their volunteers, especially through dinners and recognition events. However, it was also mentioned that there

is a dearth of volunteers in many parishes and recruiting them is difficult. Much of the load of volunteer work in parishes is placed on the few. One parish gave some reasons for this scarcity: perceived unworthiness, lack of time, indifference to the mission, apathy, lack of welcome in the community, and, as of late, the pandemic.

What dreams, desires, and aspirations for the church were expressed by participants?

A number of parishes noted respectful relationships—and sometimes collaboration—with non-Catholic churches in their area but hoped for greater partnerships and collaboration, especially in works of charity and in times for joint prayer (an ecumenical Thanksgiving service, for example). That being said, however, one synthesis noted that some of non-Catholic churches are viewed more as a threat, especially the large evangelical churches that have attracted many Catholics. Another synthesis noted difficulty in having open and honest ecumenical discussions when some non-Catholic churches are not ready for such discussions.

There was hope that it would be beneficial if the diocese found more ways to reach out to the typical parishioner. Such reaching out would give parishioners a sense of belonging to the diocese. One synthesis noted: “[i]f the person feels like they truly belong to the diocese in the same way that they belong to their parish, this will only increase that person’s sense of responsibility for stewardship of the diocese.”

There was also a hope that the diocese could encourage, foster, support, and form more laity in lay formation and to continue to form those who have completed such programs. It was noted that “those who have been blessed to be part of lay formation at the diocesan level become treasures within their parishes.” There was a specific call for further formation and support in ministering to youth, family, and the aged.

Based on their feedback, what steps does the diocese feel called to take in becoming more synodal?

As this diocesan synthesis was formulated, a list of suggestions for the Diocese of La Crosse was compiled from the parish syntheses. These suggestions will be discussed and considered at the various existing synodal bodies in the diocese. The parish syntheses themselves will continue to serve as useful observations for future planning.

What are the next steps forward for our diocese on the path of synodality, in communion with the whole Church?

From the beginning of the diocesan phase of the synodal journey, it has been the hope of the Diocese of La Crosse to use the parish syntheses in particular to revive the Diocesan Pastoral Council and to guide future pastoral planning initiatives. This hope has not changed and the parish syntheses will serve as a springboard for these future endeavors.

What cultural image(s) articulate(s) our experience of synodality?

As one parish synthesis wrote: “There is an appreciation that the Church runs counter-cultural and offers a place to find truth. The Catholic Church is where our souls, intellects, and wills find their place, their purpose, and their nourishment. This is where we belong, our home—we find fullness of beauty.” In a diocese of over 15,000 square miles that covers nineteen counties in the State of Wisconsin, there are challenges that exist that do not exist in smaller or more urban dioceses. Many parishes are parochially focused: they see their parish alone as the expression of “the Church.” The parish syntheses show that more needs to be done to strive toward unity in the local church: from the parish to the diocese to the Church Universal. Future pastoral planning and pastoral endeavors must take into account this parochial tendency if they hope to be successful.