



DIOCESE *of* LACROSSE

SYNOD 2021–2024 DIOCESAN INTERIM STAGE SYNTHESIS FOR A SYNODAL CHURCH: COMMUNION – PARTICIPATION – MISSION

The Diocese of La Crosse Synod 2021–2024 Interim Stage listening session began with a meeting of the diocesan synodal team from the Diocesan Phase, led by Bishop William P. Callahan, OFM Conv., on January 23, 2024. After prayer and reading the materials communicated by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), the team determined that the most effectual way of having the Interim Stage listening session would be in a virtual manner, considering the time of year (winter and Lent), the large size of the diocese (15,078 square miles), and the brief span of time available to hold the sessions. Bishop Callahan asked Father Alan Guanella, diocesan contact person for Synod 2021–2024, to coordinate with the curial staff to create an efficient way of receiving the faithful’s responses to the Interim Stage questions. What follows are answers to some of the questions posed in Appendix D of the Synod *Vademecum*, adapted for the Interim Stage, and contain the synthesized, compiled fruits of the Interim Stage virtual listening session for the Diocese of La Crosse, Wisconsin.

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

As was stated in the introduction, due to the time of year, the large size of the diocese, and the brief span of time available to hold the sessions, the diocesan synod team decided to hold a virtual listening session for the Interim Stage. The team determined that the proposed questions would be adapted and expanded and placed into an online, fillable form so that anyone with Internet access could respond. Regular diocesan and parish communication channels were used to get the message out about the form. Pastors and parishes were asked to distribute widely the link to the online form on the diocesan website, although how much pastors and/or parishes did this is unknown considering the low response rate.

The diocesan synod team was very much aware that this virtual format was not an ideal arrangement since no “journeying together” could take place. The synod team understood that, like the diocesan phase, the Interim Phase should 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). Nonetheless, due to the reasons above, and in order to focus on maximum inclusion and participation, reaching out to involve the greatest number of people possible, at short notice, the virtual session was determined to be the best option, particularly so as to hear from voices that may not have been heard in earlier stages of the Synod.

What were the main questions posed?

The questions posed were adapted and expanded from the questions suggested by the USCCB. The suggested questions were broken up into four separate questions that respondents could answer in the online form. The Diocese of La Crosse’s questions were:

Question 1: Noting that the Church is larger than one’s parish or even diocese, and recalling that the Church’s mission to proclaim the Word of God and to work for the salvation of souls, where have you seen or experienced successes within the Church’s structures, organization, leadership, or life that encourage this mission?

Question 2: Noting that the Church is larger than one's parish or even diocese, and recalling that the Church's mission to proclaim the Word of God and to work for the salvation of souls, where have you seen or experienced distresses within the Church's structures, organization, leadership, or life that hinder this mission?

Question 3: Remembering that the primary mission of the Church is transmitting the Divine Word to everyone, how can the structures and organization of the Church help all the baptized to respond to the call to proclaim the Gospel?

Question 4: Recalling that Pope St. John Paul II stated that a vivid realization of the sharing of the laity—and especially the family—in the salvific mission of the Church is one of the greatest legacies of the Second Vatican Council, how can the structures and organization of the Church help all the baptized to live as a community of love and mercy in Christ?

Approximately what proportion of people in the diocese participated?

One-hundred and two (102) responses were obtained using the virtual format. This number is less than the total number of parishes in the diocese. The Catholic population of the diocese is 135,268. Therefore, the proportion of people in the diocese who participated was low at only 0.08% (rounded up).

SUCCESSSES THAT ENCOURAGE THE CHURCH'S MISSION

What dispositions, attitudes, or feelings were notable?

Many of the respondents to question 1 commented on the success of various groups within parishes, Catholic schools, and the diocese, as well as national organizations. Parish groups such as parish religious education and formation programs, parish pastoral councils, parish councils of Catholic women, Knights of Columbus, and faith-sharing groups were seen as successes. Some respondents stated their parish priests and religious sisters or brothers encouraged the Church's mission. Diocesan groups, organizations, or programs such as the Eucharistic Revival, Retrouvaille, Bishop Callahan's blog, Casa Hogar (diocesan orphanage in Peru), and Catholic Charities were all seen as successes that encourage the Church's mission. Nationally, Catholic media such as Relevant Radio, EWTN, and Dynamic Catholic, organizations such as FOCUS, CNEWA, CCHD, CRS, and the Wisconsin Catholic Conference were seen as successes. One respondent stated that Synod on Synodality itself was a success. A number of respondents commented that the Traditional Latin Mass and traditional devotional practices were successes that encourage the Church's mission. One respondent commented the Church's confronting of past sexual abuse and current safe environment practices have been a success.

What tensions or disagreements emerged?

One respondent commented that "there is often too much pressure on those in leadership roles to do all the evangelizing, while also maintaining the decaying and cumbersome infrastructure of the Church." Another respondent also commented on the Church's infrastructure by saying, "[t]he current structure and organization of the US Catholic Church hinders rather than helps it to achieve its mission." Nonetheless, concerning the Church in Wisconsin, a respondent commented that "[t]he Wisconsin Catholic Conference is an example of how dioceses can work together, however this is not the norm." Another respondent noted that no successes in encouraging the Church's mission came "from Rome or the USCCB." Similarly, one respondent answered the question by saying, "Not so much, I'm afraid. The timidity of our bishops to speak forcefully about abortion, same-sex 'marriage' and other evils of our culture is not very inspiring."

DISTRESSES THAT HINDER THE CHURCH'S MISSION

What dispositions, attitudes, or feelings were notable?

Many respondents commented on the lack of clarity in doctrinal issues, especially from the Roman Curia. Some respondents commented on the perceived lack of reprimand for those clerics who defy the Church's teaching and, at the same time, the perceived persecution of those clerics who speak up. Several respondents commented on unwelcome attitudes toward LGBT persons in the Church and/or diocese. A number of respondents mentioned that the Church's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic hindered the Church's mission, especially with closing churches and parishes. There were numerous comments about diocesan organization, and stretched clergy, that hinder the Church's mission. There were several calls for women's ordination. More than one response called for greater access to the Sacrament of Confession and a greater teaching on the Sacrament of the Eucharist.

What tensions or disagreements emerged?

There were tensions about the Traditional Latin Mass. Some respondents said that the Traditional Latin Mass hindered the Church's mission but others stated that the implementation of *Traditionis custodes* and the loss of the Traditional Latin Mass hindered the Church's mission. Some respondents, while not mentioning the Traditional Latin Mass, commented that the decline of traditional devotional practices, sacred art, and authentic liturgy hinder the Church's mission. There were also tensions about the Church's seeming fixation on abortion and other pro-life issues. One respondent, while noting the grave evil of abortion, commented, "abortion has badly distorted the execution of the Church's broad mission of evangelization...[Many] perceive the Church's stance as mean and insensitive, especially when bishops subtly or overtly support specific political candidates based on their purported 'pro-life' stance." More than one respondent commented on division in the Church which hinders the Church's mission. Some of this division is seen in in the diocesan church, some in the national church, and also in the universal church. There is a perceived overemphasis on money from a diocesan perspective.

STRUTURES AND ORGANIZATION THAT CAN HELP ALL THE BAPTIZED TO RESPOND TO THE CALL TO PROCLAIM THE GOSPEL

What dispositions, attitudes, or feelings were notable?

It was interesting to note that very few comments were made about the structure or organization of the Church in order to help the baptized respond to the call to proclaim the Gospel. Nonetheless, a large number of responses focused on better and authentic preaching by bishops and priests, especially regarding the Eucharist and on moral issues. A number of responses suggested promoting the various resources (print, online, radio/TV, etc.) to help catechize and teach the faithful. A number of responses focused on Sacred Scripture and called for more Scripture studies and distribution of Bibles. Several responses encouraged more small group and faith sharing groups. Community involvement was also seen as positive. Many responses encourage their bishops and priests to truly lead their flock with involvement of the laity. Very few responses called for any changes in Church teaching but a number noted that affairs are different in the church compared to 30, 40, or 50 years ago and the current structures and organization (but not teaching) must adapt to changing times.

What tensions or disagreements emerged?

Several responses called for women's ordination and/or the married male priesthood. More than one response said the Church is already providing enough through its structures and organization to help the baptized respond to the call to proclaim the Gospel. There were laments, however, of long homilies, low Mass attendance, and the inability to understand international priests. Several responses criticized the many "man-made rules" in the Church which seemingly hinder the proclamation of the Gospel. One respondent commented: "Focus on the actual Gospel over-and-above canon law, beatitudes over catechism, the good news over the 'thou shalt not's', mercy over judgement, humility over certitude." On the other hand, some responses commented that these "rules" of the Church need to be explained better, as one response noted: "The spreading of the Word of God is only as good as the Church can explain its mission to open a person's mind completely to take in the Word." Another respondent noted that "[y]ou can begin by aborting this Synodal Journey with immediate effect" in order to help the baptized respond to the call to proclaim the Gospel.

STRUCTURES AND ORGANIZATION THAT CAN HELP ALL THE BAPTIZED TO LIVE AS A COMMUNITY OF LOVE AND MERCY IN CHRIST

What dispositions, attitudes, or feelings were notable?

The number one response of this question was strengthening the family life of Catholic families. It was clear from the majority of responses that there is a desire for the structures and organizations of the Church to focus on family life, marital life, and Christian parenting. Other important areas that emerged were desires for the strengthening of devotion to the Eucharist, Confession, and outreach to the poor and marginalized in society. Some responses noted that while the Synod of Synodality is helpful, the focus of the questions is not: "Many of the topics discussed at the Synod on Synodality are not at all helpful in the lives of the faithful." While evangelization is key, especially in parishes, one respondent noted that "[m]any parishioners like the idea of evangelized parishes, but often do not know how to evangelize themselves. [...] The structures and organization of the Church needs to better lead and train lay disciples in the Church how to evangelize." One response had a solution to this problem through subsidiarity: "We need to identify the talent that is there in parishes and call it to action. The laity know their own needs and sometimes how to respond to them, as well as possessing the skill sets to carry out some of the business of a parish." Finally, a number of responses noted that Catholic schools can help the baptized but did note the high cost of tuition and the fact that many Catholic school alumni no longer practice their faith.

What tensions or disagreements emerged?

Several tensions about division in the Church emerged. There was a perceived tension between those who attend the Traditional Latin Mass and those who attend the 'Novus Ordo' Mass. This was sometimes described as those who want to follow the teachings of Vatican II and those who want to return to practices before Vatican II. There was also a perceived tension between the hierarchical leadership of the Church and the "rank and file" members of the Church (presumably lay, but perhaps clerics). There was tension about following the norms of Church teaching and practice and, at the same time, being inclusive to all. This also surfaced tension about the role of laity, especially of women, in Church governance. Some respondents asked for more lay, or more female, roles, whereas others stated that lay men should step up in their roles in the church. There were continued calls for women's ordination to the priesthood and/or married male priests.

CONCLUSION

The Interim Phase virtual listening session of the Diocese of La Crosse returned 102 responses. While this is a very small number of the Catholics in the diocese, there are some common themes that arose from these responses. In the nearly 30 pages of single-spaced responses, there was a great emphasis on the Eucharist. With the current Eucharistic Revival taking place in the United States, this is a strong sign of the desire of the faithful to not only revive belief and adoration of the Eucharist but to learn more about Eucharistic theology. There was also a strong emphasis on the need for additional times for the Sacrament of Penance in parishes and increased preached on Penance. Religious education, formation, catechesis, small faith-sharing groups, and Scripture studies were all seen as important areas of evangelization and assistance to the faithful of the church. There was a strong call to increase support and ministry to married couples, families, parents, and the marginalized.

It emerged that many people want their bishops and priests to know their hopes, joys, struggles, and fears. The faithful want authentic shepherds who are not hindered by bureaucratic structures or organizations. There are some fears that the church hierarchy is only concerned about power and money and not love and mercy or the Gospel proclaimed by Jesus Christ and taught authentically by the Church. Responses expressed apparent confusion about the Church's teaching, especially on doctrinal and moral issues, from statements issued by the Roman Curia and the variations of US bishops' preaching/teaching.

There surfaced tensions about the Traditional Latin Mass, about so-called "cancelled priests", and the lack of clarity from Church leaders, especially about doctrinal matters. Some respondents called for women's ordination or the allowance of married male priests. Most respondents did not call for any change in Church teaching but did call for the structures and organization of the Church to be more in touch with current trends and demographics so as to reach to the margins and peripheries; in other words, that "the way we used to or always have done it doesn't cut it anymore."

While there were some comments that the Synod on Synodality itself was a helpful structure, there were more comments that it was not helpful and that the topics proposed were out of touch with the real concerns or needs of the people of God. As one respondent stated, "This Synod is, at best, a complete waste of everyone's time." Nonetheless, these listening sessions have provided information to the Diocese of La Crosse on some of the desires and needs of the faithful, especially regarding better preaching, aid to family life, and increased access to the Sacraments, especially of the Eucharist and Penance. By having this knowledge, even with a meager response of only 0.08% of the diocese, fruit can come out of these responses.

April 6, 2024