



For a Synodal Church:

A Letter on the Diocesan Synthesis Report

Dear People of God,

Pope Francis has invited all of us, through this current synodal process, to listen and share our experiences with the Church and one another. This theme of journeying together in synodality is decisive for the life and mission of the Church in the new millennium. As noted in the Synod preparatory document, “It is impossible to think of ‘a conversion of our activity as a Church that does not include the active participation of all the members of God’s people.’” Thank you to those who participated, as well as to those reading this report.

To aid in this reading, here are a few items of note:

- **Length and Format:** The report is constricted by instructions that it can be no more than ten pages including an introduction, body, and conclusion.
- **Next Steps in Synod 2021-2023:** This report will be submitted to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) where it will be joined by reports from dioceses across the region and country. It is during this “Continental Phase” that these reports will be further discerned by the bishops prior to the Synod of Bishops (the Universal Phase) to be held in October 2023 at the Vatican.
- **Limitations:** Nearly all of the data retrieved from the Synod process at the diocesan level has been qualitative in nature. The limited quantitative data obtained by our team cannot be considered reliable or statistically relevant, so it is not included in the report. Therefore, the contents of this report are illustrative of what participants shared most predominantly.
- **Terms:** The body of the report separates the content into major themes and minor themes.
 - A “major” theme is to be understood as a theme that emerged most consistently throughout the Synod.
 - A “minor” theme is to be understood as an additional topic that arose frequently from participants, but to a lesser extent than “major themes.” **Neither grouping reflects a level of importance or priority.**
 - The terms “participants” and “respondents” are used interchangeably throughout the report.
- **Quotations:** Direct quotations from participants – either from online submissions or directly from a parish/group report – have been included where the message is widely representative of a common perspective.

This report is the culmination of our collective journey of faith in the Diocese of Grand Rapids – listening to and learning from one another. Collectively, our Synod team has sought to serve you and committed a good faith effort to conduct this synodal process with fidelity. We thank you for your prayers and support, and offer this report with trust and confidence in the Holy Spirit.

Sincerely,

Handwritten signatures of Mary Panek and Greg Deja in black ink.

Mary Panek and Greg Deja
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Synod 2021-2023 Report

Diocese of Grand Rapids

Introduction

The Diocese of Grand Rapids invited participation in the Synod on Synodality through two means. The first and preferred means was through engaging in a listening session, gathering together members of a parish or other grouping (such as a community of religious). This method of participation allowed attendees to pray together as part of the synodal process, as well as to listen to one another. A vast majority of parishes in the diocese hosted listening sessions and submitted a summary of their discussions for synthesis at the diocesan level.

A second means of participation was through an online survey for individuals who were unable or hesitant to participate in a group listening session. These individual responses exhibited both overlap and contrast with the reports summarizing listening sessions.

While the reports submitted to the diocese were summaries of the listening sessions conducted at each parish or grouping, the online surveys were raw individual data. Herein, this diocesan synthesis report is a combination of both the parish/group summaries, as well as individualized online survey results.

Overall, online respondents were more likely to express alienation from a parish community. These individuals were also more likely to endorse views at extremes of spectra of opinion or to speak with brutal honesty about their thoughts and experiences. Nonetheless, once viewed in the aggregate, neither the concerns nor constructive suggestions of individual respondents departed significantly from those that emerged from group listening sessions; and, to the extent that characteristics such as age, ethnicity, parish affiliation, or frequency of Mass attendance are known, it could not be said that either method of participation attracted a clearly different set of participants. As such, there is little need to differentiate between the two modes of contribution when describing the main themes to have emerged from the synodal process in the diocese.

It is around those themes that this report is organized. Whereas the listening sessions and surveys proceeded through a succession of questions divided into “Sharing Responsibility for Our Common Mission,” “Celebration,” “Listening and Dialogue in Church and Society,” and the “Fundamental Question” regarding how Catholics are “Companions on the Journey” of faith, responses were not neatly divisible by question. Instead, ideas that arose toward the beginning of a session or survey were often carried through and elaborated in responses to subsequent questions.

Therefore, this report does not focus on specific questions and participants’ correlated responses. Rather, the report presents themes that emerged most consistently (described as “major themes”), as well as additional topics that arose frequently from a majority of participants, but to a lesser extent than “major themes” (“minor themes”). Neither “major themes” nor “minor themes” reflect a level of importance or priority.

Major Themes

Clarifying the Church's Mission

When asked to reflect on how well the Church is living up to its mission call, participants believe the Church would benefit from clarifying the mission itself. "Sometimes the Church herself doesn't know her own mission: we are given mixed signals, contrary theology among clergy. We need to unify our mission, make it solid within our own parishes before we can evangelize to others."

Participants expressed confusion or dissatisfaction with the way that mission is often understood and lived. Participants' understanding of the Church's mission seemed varied with some investing great importance in what might be called charitable outreach or corporal works of mercy while others thought "The Church needs to rediscover its mission for the salvation of souls."

While such a complaint was not particularly frequent, it was still the case that the discussion prompt seemed to evoke more thought of relieving physical needs than any other form of service. That is to say, if providing specific examples of how the Church helps its members live out their mission or ways in which the faith community is currently accomplishing that mission, a report was likely to include more examples like collecting food and necessities, providing material aid in the wake of emergencies, or organizing blood drives rather than ministries like Communion to the homebound or prison ministry. And yet all those examples just listed can be found in the same report, which was typical of a blend that leaned toward physical needs without neglecting care of the soul among the many ways in which participants perceived the Church advancing its mission.

The extent to which synod participants considered the Church to be successfully advancing that mission seems to correlate to their existing involvement with their parish communities and the ministries supported by the parish. While participation via online survey did not necessarily reflect dissatisfaction or disengagement with one's parish, responses were far more likely than group reports to indicate wholesale failure: How does the Church help me live out this calling in a missionary way? "It doesn't," or "I'm not sure. Providing some opportunities to serve through some organizations. But I don't know if I could tell you much of what those are." Respondents also generated a great variety of means by which the Church draws its members into the works of its mission, spread across "liturgy, catechesis, justice, and charity." Moreover, respondents expressed more agreement than not with the general assessment that, while ministries offered may not always match exactly with perceived needs of participants, the Church nonetheless pursues its mission in myriad ways and offers the faithful a baseline of means to participate.

Participants felt the Church collectively does much to advance its mission, but that too few individuals contribute to these efforts. "There was lots of discussion around all of the local opportunities that our parish has and participates in. Discussion was also centered on how to get more people involved as only a small percentage of people volunteer time in ministry or outreach (whether in the parish or wider community)." Participants largely agreed that there is not so much a need for more types of ministry; rather, the Church could be strengthened from greater clarity on the mission itself while inviting all to become involved in its many forms.

COVID-19

Respondents noted that the COVID-19 pandemic and the Church's response to it have left wounds from which both individuals and the greater Catholic community at all levels are still trying to recover. Some Catholics consider some or even all diocesan restrictions to have been unjust or disproportionate, while others expressed that not nearly enough was or is currently being done to protect those most vulnerable to the virus. Both groups fault the Church's response for depriving them of access to the sacraments and a community of faith.

And while complaints were ultimately founded upon spiritual concerns, pandemic related arguments also revealed other fault lines within communities. Thus, while so-called political divisions need not have any direct link to pandemic response, the way in which these rifts reinforce each other can be seen: "Since Covid-19, many parishioners have not returned to Mass with some sharing concern that politics has entered the Church." Likewise, in survey responses, politicization of the faith was more frequently lamented, COVID-19 was listed alongside politics as a challenge to unity or authenticity. Others suggest, "This has gotten more pronounced with politics since Trump, COVID-19, and issues of racism & sexual orientation/gender identity" and "Of course the pandemic, political jargon, and changes across the world impact us."

Division

Beyond the mere fact of disagreement, participants note division between the laity, and the laity and their priest. As noted with the COVID-19 pandemic, the lay faithful do not always believe that fellow Catholics have respect for their health or will support them in upholding a shared faith. At other times, it can be discerned the clergy themselves are not united: "Different bishops say different things. Different pastors say and teach different, even opposite things. This causes confusion in the pews and hinders the effectiveness of the Gospel message."

But the division most often communicated is between the laity and clergy. "The Church, especially the hierarchy, has not been open and transparent about issues in the past, such as the clergy sex abuse scandal," and this "lack of transparency (i.e. abuse crisis) continues to be major concern." Accordingly, it is not only the sins of abuse but also the failure to communicate honestly and openly about them that now simultaneously erodes trust within the Church and risks turning away those who might otherwise be open to the Church's message. "Scandal has hurt the church in huge ways. The sin of one can hurt everyone. Unfortunately, it will take considerable time to heal and for the Church's reputation to be repaired."

Participants expressed concern beyond specific incidents of scandal, however, and that this division ultimately creates a certain ambivalence even among enthusiastic participants of this Synod. Participants indicated not only satisfaction at the opportunity to come together for the synod listening sessions, but also a desire to make them a recurring event. Yet, at the same time, there was uncertainty about whether the report of the in-person experience would even be seen and considered by those in authority, and thus whether it would bear fruit. "We might be heard in our own parish but may not be by the higher ups like the Bishop." Or, to extend the line of communication, participants wondered if their local contributions to a global synodal process would actually make their way into deliberations at the highest levels of the Church.

Priestly Ministry

Expressions of division should not be conflated with opposition, as participants often expressed empathy for the challenges faced by the clergy and offered suggestions for overcoming them. For instance, a major recurring theme from participants pertained to priests and their formation.

Respondents expressed a desire for their priests to be present and for greater interaction with them. While there is great love and care for priests, there is also, at times, frustration about priests' disconnect from their parishioners. "Busy priests – Some raised the question of what has made our priests so busy... They are often so busy they don't have much time to be with the people, teaching small groups, and so on." Participants expressed a desire to find ways to relieve administrative burdens from their priests so they can minister more deeply and grow together in more authentic human relationships.

Participants were curious about or expressed a desire for improved priestly formation. There was a repeated note that younger priests can sometimes seem out of step with the laity. Many participants commented generally on this theme, such as "Priest formation is so important and the future of where our Church is headed" and "Training [of priests] needs revamping and needs to be in touch with the real world." Others, however, noted more specific improvements to priestly formation they hoped to see such as training for better homilies and improved training in the skill of listening. Participants emphasized the importance of pastoral skills to meet people where they are. "There needs to be training in empathetic listening and communication, though the Pastor needs to stand up for the truth. When a person conveys an issue to a Priest, the Priest should use it as an opportunity for catechesis."

Several other topics pertaining to priestly ministry were routinely discussed by participants and merit inclusion in this report. Respondents noted that a change of pastor can significantly change the parish community and the experience of the parish. This can lead to parish-shopping, which further affects parishes. Participants expressed hope that better formation of our priests could help to alleviate some of these changes to a parish when a new pastor is assigned. Concern was also expressed that sometimes recently ordained priests are placed into positions of great responsibility without the necessary ripening of experience and/or honing of their skills.

The Importance of Prayer

Another prominent theme was the centrality of prayer to life. While respondents discussed various forms of prayer given to us by the Church, there was a clear focus on the Eucharist as the Source and Summit of prayer life. Connected to this, there was a craving for Adoration and for the silence that is attendant to Adoration with one participant stating, "every parish should have a time when the Blessed Sacrament is available for adoration."

There were also repeated comments concerning the need for silence. "We need to learn how to listen to God when he speaks to us... It is about teaching people to remain in the silences of life." Participants, though, desire teaching and guidance on the various forms of prayers. "Many felt that they have not been properly prepared to engage in an active life of prayer, and lack understanding of how to relate the power of prayer in our 'everyday' lives." Or, more simply put, "[O]ur people need to learn how to pray."

In regard to worship and prayer, many participants believe “a greater emphasis must be made on reverence in the Mass, as well as properly understanding what our interior disposition should be when participating in the liturgy.” Participants expressed a desire for beauty and reverence, which frequently took the form of a call for more reverent celebrations of the Eucharist. The importance of music was a common topic, though there were divergent opinions of its preferred style and liturgical appropriateness. Thus, these calls for greater reverence were sometimes linked explicitly to how that reverence has been expressed in the liturgical tradition of the Church.

Listening

Participants identified the need for the Church to listen better. This need reflects both priests and representatives of the Church listening to their people, as well as the People of God listening to each other. To be clear, very few of the respondents suggested that the Church conform herself to the age. To the contrary, “[We] need to listen even when we reject what is being said.” Indeed, repeatedly there was a mention of listening so as to be able to respond to the world with love. Participants suggested listening as a first step to evangelization, to proclaiming the Good News to the entire world. “More effort is needed to know the Catholic Faith and present it faithful[ly] in order to listen honestly.” Another way of expressing this theme was that “The Church as a whole needs leadership that can facilitate conversations of differing opinions while finding opportunities to pastorally pass on the official teachings of the Church, explaining why the Church teaches what it does.”

With regard to the division previously noted, a contributing factor for the division between laity and the priests is that laity expressed feeling minimized as a credible partner in social dialogue within the Church; therefore, the laity do not have confidence that their interests are sufficiently considered by their priests and bishops. The key complaint is not that lay Catholics do not have a decisive vote; it is that they do not feel heard or valued before decisions are made. Participants clarified that while “the Bishop and Priest have their prerogative, they need to have open lines of communication.” And while the parish pastoral council was often mentioned as an existing or at least promising forum for giving a voice to the lay faithful, that council itself was characterized as remote or opaque to non-members. “With the Synod under way, the question has arisen asking who is on the Pastoral Council and what do they do?”

Respondents frequently mentioned a desire for more formal means in which to engage with their priests and bishop. They would like to have opportunities to know that their priests and the bishop are listening to their concerns, and even to address them directly. “Many participants felt that the ‘place and means of dialogue’ in our parish typically happen during their participation in various committee meetings, studies, and/or parish sponsored activities” but too few people’s opinions are welcomed.

Participants frequently noted that they had not experienced something like the synodal listening sessions and thought that a recurring practice like such listening sessions in this Diocese might be of great benefit going forward. “For most people, this was their first opportunity to have an open and honest conversation about the state of the Church.”

Evangelization and Catechesis

Participants also identified the need for ongoing formation around evangelization and catechesis, both for themselves and for others.

Synod participants acknowledged their personal desire to have a better understanding of fundamental Church teachings concerning the Eucharist, sacraments, moral and social justice, and the celebration of Mass. They felt the deeper knowledge would assist them in dialoguing with persons who are disaffiliated, marginalized, unchurched, or disengaged with their parish and the universal Church.

Along with better catechesis for themselves, many participants felt that if people had a clearer understanding of the Church's teachings, they would not disaffiliate from the Church. Catechetical formation around rituals and reasons behind them would also foster unity and discourse between those who prefer the current form of the Roman Rite and those who prefer how the Mass was celebrated before the reforms initiated by Vatican II.

Participants often noted that, in general, the Church must do more to reach out and evangelize to those beyond our present community, which will involve witnessing to the Gospel in word and deed. Although participants believe that evangelization is best accomplished through personal encounters, they often feel ill-equipped to do this themselves.

Pertaining to young people, many agreed that the Church provides an adequate number of opportunities for formation and catechesis of youth. Although catechesis and religious education is readily available to children and youth through parish schools and faith formation programs, the participants expressed concern that the instruction is not taking root in the hearts and minds of young people. Moreover, there is a perception that most formal catechesis ends after the Sacrament of Confirmation or after high school. Participants believe an effective means to re-engage the youth and young adults is important for lifelong learning in the faith.

It was also noted, however, that it is difficult for the average Catholic to understand and stay true to the teachings of the Church when members of the clergy seem to be proclaiming different messages regarding theological and moral issues. The lay faithful are looking to bishops and priests to preach and teach the Truth; some participants expressed a desire for bishops and priests to speak up against errors in teaching presented by their fellow clerics. At the same time, this desire of some Catholics presents concern for others who believe a strong stance in upholding the teachings of the Church without sufficient catechesis or pastoral care alienates members of the Church who are struggling with issues of sexuality and gender, abortion, mental illness, and divorce, among others.

Participants believe there is a need to first lay a groundwork for fruitful hearing of the Church's message, as one participant states, "We as Catholics have a deep, rich faith and history that can be for some a wall to hearing the basic Gospel of Jesus Christ... A person needs to hear and then experience the good news of Jesus and salvation offered to us by our heavenly Father through His Son. Once that happens, then everything else about our faith, scriptures, Eucharist start to make sense. Then the Holy Spirit is leading and teaching the beauty of our faith."

Minor Themes

Bridging Cultural Differences

Although only a small number of parishes have such cultural diversity as to offer Mass in more than one language, the challenge of uniting across cultural differences remains relevant for all.

With a fast-rising Hispanic Catholic population in the diocese, building bridges across cultural differences requires a lot of effort and leadership because as one person said, “It’s hard to journey together.” And yet, to the extent it could be determined, participants in the synod who identified as Hispanic shared experiences that were consistent with the themes and experiences identified by participants in general.

Participants noted that bridging the gap of cultural differences – in multicultural parishes or even more homogeneous parishes – requires love, respect, and openness to diversity of opinions and culture, as well as being open to evolve past practices. In multicultural parishes, the pastor’s leadership effectiveness can be challenged because he is serving several parishes and has limited availability. The absence of the pastor may be interpreted as providing preferential treatment to one parish community over the other.

While bilingual liturgies are recognized as helpful in bridging the gap for many parishioners, it was also acknowledged that they may leave some parishioners outside their comfort zone or even disgruntled. Communities find that working together in service and outreach to others, as well as social events, is an effective way to bring the language communities together.

Beyond navigating linguistic and cultural diversity, synod responses generally indicate openness to unity in diversity that allows all to feel fulfilled in the exercise of their various gifts, spiritualities, and liturgical preferences. With so many permissible ways to live and minister faithfully, participants noted that no one parish will be able to excel at everything. While diversity can pose challenges, particularly of fragmentation, participants see value in maintaining connections and interactions across different groups within the broader Church.

Sexuality and Gender

A recurring theme was the question of how to respond to people experiencing same-sex attraction or gender identity issues. Most commonly, respondents used the cultural parlance of LGBTQ+ when discussing the issue. While some respondents indicated they thought the Church and her anthropology are out of step with the world, more expressed a desire to make sure that persons with same-sex attraction and gender identity issues felt included in the Church and that they be better treated by the Church and Her members.

Nonetheless, questions regarding sexuality and gender identity loom large for many respondents, which presents both an opportunity and a challenge for the local and the universal Church. As one participant said, “Unfamiliarity with or misrepresentation of Church teaching, even among Catholics, makes it difficult to navigate some of the new morals of sexuality and gender.” However, most respondents did not suggest a change in Church teaching is necessary. Indeed, participants offered support for the Church to remain true to Her teachings, yet desire robust teaching from the Church —

and better explanations so the faithful can understand and present that teaching in a cogent way themselves.

Lay Leadership

There is broad agreement that the Church would benefit from more lay leadership. The motivations for that increase are, however, quite varied, including negative reasons (i.e. “lay needs and voices are too often overlooked.”), as well as positive reasons (i.e. “because many ministries in and to the world are essentially lay tasks.”). Others note a practical necessity for increased lay leadership as the number of priests decline, as well as a concern that not enough young people are being formed to step into future roles of the Church.

Inaccessible Language

Finally, respondents raised concerns about the language and basic intelligibility of the Synodal questions, which were described as “ambiguous,” “difficult to understand,” and “incredibly fuzzy.” While this was by no means a majority of respondents, it was a recurring theme. To be clear, this was not a criticism of the exercise but of the verbiage employed by the Church to spur the exercise.

Participants also expressed a need to clarify terminology and emphasis that may cause confusion. For instance, as noted earlier, the synodal questions inquired how Catholics are engaged in the mission of the Church; and yet, the choice not to provide a clear definition of that mission raised confusion, and, even beyond the synod listening sessions, disagreement arose about the Church’s success or failure in accomplishing that underdetermined mission.

These concerns should not be seen as a criticism of synodality but can give insight to the Synod of Bishops and their means of pastoral outreach. “[It is] hard to adopt a spirit of listening when the discussion questions or the topics being spoken of aren’t clearly defined because you do not know what exactly you are supposed to be listening for.”

Conclusion

This journey of synodality is both a gift and a task: by journeying together and reflecting on the journey that has been made, the Church will be able to learn through Her experience which processes can help Her to live communion, to achieve participation, and to open Herself to mission. By and large, participants testify to an experience through this process that brought joy and speaks of a renewal in their feeling of belonging to an ecclesial community.

This synthesis report is not a strategic plan with accompanying tactics and next steps. Rather, it is better understood as an opportunity. How do we, both individually and collectively, respond to the Holy Spirit and where we feel called by this Synod process?

Regardless of whether you participated in this process, you are invited to join now. Thank you for taking the time to read the thoughts of your fellow Catholics and reflect on our shared journey. One of the goals of this Synod is to recognize and appreciate the wealth and the variety of the gifts that the Holy Spirit liberally bestows for the good of the community and for the benefit of the entire human

family. As such, you are invited to reflect on your unique gifts and pray on how you may be called to advance what the Holy Spirit has begun in our diocese.

For St. Paul tells us, “There are different kinds of spiritual gifts but the same Spirit; there are different forms of service but the same Lord; there are different workings but the same God who produces all of them in everyone. To each individual the manifestation of the Spirit is given for some benefit. As a body is one though it has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though many, are one body, so also Christ” (1 Cor 12:4-12).

Pope Francis reminds us that the purpose of the Synod “is not to produce documents, but to plant dreams, draw forth prophecies and visions, allow hope to flourish, inspire trust, bind up wounds, weave together relationships, awaken a dawn of hope, and learn from one another.”

In closing, we recall how the Holy Spirit has guided the Church’s journey through history and, today, calls each of us to be witnesses of God’s love. Let us find in the Lord our unity, so that we may complete our pilgrim journey together to eternal life.