

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

**Diocese of Worcester
2022 Synthesis of Synodal Experience**

1. Introduction

Bishop McManus celebrated an Opening Mass of the Synod at Saint Paul Cathedral on October 17, 2021. Each of our ninety-six parishes and four missions was asked to send two representatives to join the Bishop, priests, deacons and lay faithful of the Diocese in invoking the Holy Spirit on the Synod process in our Diocese. After the final briefing of the bishops at the Fall USCCB meeting we sent a draft of a Synod Roadmap and Questions to all our pastors and administrators asking them to share it with their associates, deacons, staffs and parish and finance councils for review and comment. The Roadmap and Questions were also discussed at our twelve deanery meetings before a discussion of the drafts at the December Presbyteral Council meeting. Because of ongoing COVID concerns that continued to suppress Mass attendance, it was decided that there would not be Diocesan wide gatherings to solicit Synod input but that parishes and other groups would have the option to assemble in groups or refer their parishioners to a diocesan individual on-line survey. Parishes could also elect a hybrid model, holding actual group sessions and offering the on-line survey for those not yet comfortable in group settings. In early February 2022 the Diocesan Synod Webpage was launched in English and

Spanish with background, links to the Vatican Synod and USCCB Synod websites, a facilitators guide, prayers for the Synod's success, bulletin announcements and links for on-line response to the Synod questions. Information was sent to 96 parishes, 4 missions, 27 religious communities in our Diocese and contacts were made with groups at the "periphery" to arrange synod sessions. Stories and copies of the Survey questions were published in the Diocesan newspaper for those not using the internet.

In the end, we received 445 individual responses and 34 group responses which, in addition to parish assemblies, included sessions at a neighborhood health program, separate men's and women's residential substance abuse programs, a homeless shelter, a Catholic nursing home and a young adult gathering. Colleges and universities were solicited directly by the USCCB.

COVID presented frustrations as reluctance to assemble in groups continued and, even as late as May, prompted the cancelation of a Synod session we were planning for the county jail and House of Corrections and the postponement of a session with the elderly. The extension of the deadline for Diocesan reports to June 30 was greatly appreciated. There were challenges for some to grasp the concept of synodality. Nonetheless, those who gathered and prayed together were, especially after the COVID precautions, glad to be getting together. The resulting information and that from the on-line surveys has given us much grist to reflect upon as we

continue to discern how best to improve our consultative efforts and make use of their valuable fruits.

2. Synod Synthesis

The fruits of our Synod Consultations resulted from the prayerful invocation of the Holy Spirit to work through 27 group meetings (involving hundreds of people) and 445 individual responses. The thoughts and comments generated through the process were many and varied, and not always consistent and reconcilable. As we journey together as a Church we need to benefit from the varied cultures, life experiences and wisdom of our brothers and sisters while remaining united in one faith, one baptism and one Lord. Listening to those at the heart of the Church and to those at the peripheries was enlightening and encouraging as those who participated seemed to appreciate the opportunity even if there was some apprehension about the fruits that might result (the German Synod Path was cited).

The Journeying Companions. Ninety percent of the *individual* respondents identified themselves as practicing Catholics. Ninety-four percent were white. Only 2.83 percent of individual respondents identified as Hispanic. Fifty percent were age 65 and older, about 77 percent were age 55 and over. Eight percent of individual respondents were under age 44, though the youth *group* survey (grades 8-12) participants equaled 10 percent of the individual responses. Ninety percent of individual respondents said that they have considered inviting someone to Mass.

Seventy percent said they tried to share their faith with others. Nearly 15 percent of respondents thought their faith was a personal matter that they did not share with others. Seventy-three percent of individual respondents thought their parish did a good job of welcoming people. About 20 percent said they knew their fellow parishioners very well, 63 percent said they knew them somewhat and 17 percent said they did not know their fellow parishioners at all. Many of the non-Catholics speaking at “peripheral” group meetings had little exposure to the Catholic Church and though in close geographic proximity to a Catholic Church had not visited though at the three periphery meetings with non-Catholics present there were requests for a priest to begin to make regular visits. One religious community group meeting expressed concern that visits to the sick and the homebound be stressed.

Listening. Nearly 82 percent of the group respondents and 62 percent of the individual respondents were aware of at least one of the outlined efforts to solicit input of the local Church at the parish or Diocesan levels. Sixty-four percent of individual respondents had participated in one or more of those efforts while in all but the non-peripheral group meetings people had participated in all but one of the nine outlined efforts. In the peripheral group meetings, no one had heard of any of the consultative outreach efforts. Individual respondents thought that their parishes did a better job of listening than the Diocese (On a scale of 0 [low] to 100, parishes averaged 66 while the Diocese average was 45). Particular comments on

how well the Diocese and parishes listen to parishioners varied widely. A member of the former Diocesan Pastoral Council thought the Bishop “really did listen and care.” Others thought the results of consultative opportunities were predetermined, not followed through on or were not sufficiently inclusive of marginalized individuals and groups.

Speaking Out. There was wide solicitation for Synod input. There were varied fora for responses over five months. There was only one negative comment about the opportunity to express one’s views about the Synod process. Yet, there were concerns expressed about the utility of speaking out generally at both the Diocesan and parish levels. Some expressed the view that letters and calls to the Diocese were not answered; that a Chancery person should be identified as a parish liaison and that the Bishop and Diocesan officials should more regularly visit parishes. There were expressions that in some places, parish councils and finance committees don’t exist or function with energy and openness. There were suggestions of regular meetings like the Synod consultations or providing a suggestion box. There were numerous expressions that the Church is not open to and hostile to LGBT+ people. The youth group responses reflected frustration with the “rigidity” of Church teachings which conflict with societal views that are not heard by the Church. Others thought concerns over liturgical innovations expressed to the pastor or parish staff

were not welcomed or given a consideration. Still others were deeply concerned about “the non-synodal manner” in which *Traditionis Custodes* impacted those Catholics who cherish the Extraordinary Form of the Mass.

Celebrating. While celebrating the Eucharist and listening together to the Word of God must elevate “journeying together” and inform synodality, there were strongly expressed views of why Catholics are no longer attending Mass. Comments included the following: the COVID dispensations got people out of the habit of Mass attendance; people have many demands on them and their time resulting in priorities shaped by competing demands of Sunday sports, work; a lack of trust in the Church from fallout of the sex abuse crisis; poor liturgies, music and preaching; a lack of a prayerful atmosphere in Church which instead of silence, beauty and reflection tries to mimic the world; a lack of welcome or a sense of community, a cliquishness; poor catechesis for children and education for adults including ambiguous teaching and comments from Rome. It was very encouraging that more than 97 percent of the individual respondents believed that Jesus is really present in the Eucharist, that nearly 96 percent believed that the Eucharist imparts God’s grace to help live a better life and that for 94 percent the Eucharist was central to who they were as a Catholic.

Co-Responsibility for the Mission. The Second Vatican Council taught that there is a “diversity of ministry but unity of mission” (*Apostolicam actuositatem*, 2). The advice, counsel, competencies and input of the laity are critical for informed decision

making in the Church. That and the laity's distinctive task of renewing the temporal order "guided by the Gospel and the mind of the Church" (*Apostolicam actuositatem*, 7) highlight the importance of assuring continued opportunities for consultation at all levels of the Church. For consultation to be effective there is the need for: proper, accurate and effective education, preaching and teaching of the Catholic faith. In addition, a vigorous, faithful, regular and active liturgical and prayer life whereby the grace of the Sacraments and the gifts of the Holy Spirit may lead all of us--- laity, religious and ordained--- to greater holiness will enable us, by word and example, better to carry out, in our distinctive ways, our common mission to bring Christ and the Gospel to our people and the world.

Dialogue in Church and Society. The consultation sessions and surveys evoked numerous (and contradictory) comments that touch on dialogue between the Church and society, e.g. "the Catholic Church is incredibly out of touch with the needs of young people," "the church is so hung up in the old ways of teaching," "seeming lack of welcome to gay families, not accepting of divorced/alternative families" "the role of women." On the other hand, others expressed concern about the "lack of understanding of church teaching/bad communication of beliefs," "enrolling at a Catholic college showed me exactly how deficient my experiences were in high school CCD" "they've never been taught the depth of the Mystery of the Eucharist" "poor catechesis" "the Eucharist is not really relevant to young people today" "give

them answers,” “there is no unity within the Diocese,” “the Church is a unique institution and has the answers to all the social ills of today because Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Life.” Confusion about the content and reasons for the Catholic teaching on faith and morals needs to be dispelled by better education in order to have the essential dialogue with society and people of other faiths.

Ecumenism. Please see comments on Dialogue with Society.

Authority and Participation. The Diocese has 27 boards and commissions that provide input to Bishop McManus. Lay involvement on Diocesan boards provide advice on Diocesan and parish building projects, investment and retirement policies, child protection measures, parish loans budget, accounting and finances and approval of property transfers. These groups were not specifically the focus of the Synod consultation. Nor were the College of Consultors and the Presbyteral Council the focus of Synod input. However, consultations for pastoral planning, school consolidations, youth ministry, communications, capital campaign and parish pastoral and finance councils were outlined, reviewed and commented upon by those participating in the synod process. Please see the comments above at “Journeying Together” and “Listening.” The input of these groups is very helpful to the Diocese which needs and intends to rely upon such consultation.

Discerning and Deciding. Some of the most sensitive Diocesan decisions such as parish and school reconfigurations are made only after extensive consultations through pastoral and school planning which includes meetings, discussion and input from and among parishes and school representatives that may be affected. Input for the improvement of Diocesan communications, Youth Ministry and Diocesan departments and programs was previously sought through surveys or a solicitation of comments from the presbyterate, diaconate, parish staffs and parish councils and finance councils. Prior to the recent capital campaign input was solicited on whether the effort was timely and advisable and, if so, what the goals and use of funds ought to be. Many synod participants were aware of some of those efforts to solicit input to inform Diocesan decisions. Similarly, parish councils and finance committee are designed to seek input for parish decisions. As mentioned above, comments on people's experiences with these processes were mixed. Parish bulletins (95%) and parish websites (64%), parish emails (58%) the Diocesan newspaper (57%) were the most popular means for people being informed about Church matters. Substantial diocesan efforts through its website (19%), TV and internet programming (18%) are made to inform and invite parishioner input. Comments from young people suggested that efforts be made through Instagram, Snapchat, tik tok and YouTube. Efforts need to be made to inform and solicit continued input so that Diocesan and parish decisions can be well informed.

3. Conclusions

Forming Ourselves in Synodality

Hundreds of people participated in the Synod Consultation across the Diocese. People were appreciative of the opportunity to participate. Most of those who participated in the Synod Consultation had been aware of or participated in earlier Diocesan consultative efforts. In some cases, people were unaware of those efforts. In other cases, the effectiveness of those efforts and the efforts to communicate them were questioned. Our Diocese experiences strains and divisions reflective of society. Continued creative efforts at communication, opportunities for consultation, clear, faithful teaching and a deeper understanding of the nature of the Church, its worship and role in society will help us all as we continue to journey together to bring Christ and the Gospel to each and every one of God's beloved people in our Diocese.

Submitted on June 30, 2022