

A SYNTHESIS OF THE PREPARATORY PHASE FOR THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS 2023 THE DIOCESE OF PATERSON

I. Introduction

The Diocese of Paterson, under the leadership of its eighth bishop, the Most Reverend Kevin J. Sweeney, was quick to respond to Pope Francis' convocation of the Synod on Synodality. Bishop Sweeney gathered diocesan leaders on September 10, 2021, in order to discuss ways to implement the synodal path envisioned in the Vatican's *Preparatory Document and Vademecum for the Synod on Synodality*. Those of us who participated in that initial discussion were not yet fully aware of what would unfold in the next months. Our experience has confirmed the insight of Pope Francis, expressed to the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's theological commission on Nov. 29, 2020: "Synodality is a style, it is a walk together, and it is what the Lord expects from the Church of the third millennium." Our diocese has learned this truth, and has taken first steps on the synodal pathway since September 2021. During the journey, certain events revealed themselves as key moments of spiritual comprehension, conversion and growth.

A. The Milestones

We advanced our diocese's progress in this preparatory phase by reaching five notable "mile markers" along the way: *First, the convocation of a "steering" committee of diocesan leaders and pastoral ministers to initiate and strategize the diocesan phase of preparation.* Our steering committee, composed of eight members, included pastors, religious and laypeople of multiple languages and cultures, both men and women, young and old. After reviewing the relevant documents and the (earlier) timetable, the

committee mapped a diocesan path, proposing what it thought was a simple and responsible process. The Diocesan Plan for the Preparatory Phase was approved and implemented in late October.

Second, the appointment of delegates. By the time Bishop Sweeney celebrated an Opening Mass for the Synod on October 24, he had already asked every parish, religious community, diocesan institution and Catholic organization within the diocese (including Catholic Charities, Catholic hospitals, schools and universities) to appoint delegates for the synodal preparation. Additionally, Bishop Sweeney and the Synod Committee invited any person who inquired about the process, though not officially affiliated with any parish or institution, to be trained as a delegate to conduct consultations. In the end, well over 250 people were appointed as delegates to conduct small group and individual consultations.

Third, the production of local materials and the training of delegates. Once the diocesan plan was broadly communicated to all involved, a diocesan website was launched, a variety of templates were created for conducting small group and individual consultations, training was conducted virtually and/or in person, and consultations began around the end of February.

Fourth, key existing advisory and consultative bodies were engaged in the process, either by giving input concerning the pathway itself, or by participating in consultations themselves. These included the Diocesan Presbyteral Council, Diocesan Pastoral Council, and Diocesan Senior Staff, among others.

B. Turning Points

Decisive, positive movements and changes occurred. First, our diocesan leadership was quickly “converted” to the significance, value and impact of this synodal path, appreciating it not as a mandated process or program, but as a profound change of attitude leading to encounter, accompaniment, and collective discernment. Second, Bishop Sweeney decided to conduct consultations with all of his priests through visits to every deanery in the diocese, and then invited all priests to meet with him again to discern together diocesan pastoral priorities. Third, our diocesan Youth Ministry Advisory Board joined in the preparation by conducting an anonymous online survey to over 1000 of our high-school-age students. Fourth, our Office of Catechesis specifically consulted with catechists using the Spiritual Conversation recommended by the Synod of Bishops itself. Fifth, our synodal delegates embraced their roles, their training and their mandate to engage others in consultation, many of them reaching out to the peripheries in their local communities. Finally, multiple parish delegates not only conducted small group and individual consultations, but also created and executed synodal parish “town hall” meetings with open invitations to any who wished to attend.

C. Spiritual Dimensions of the Journey

The above-mentioned milestones and turning points awakened and revealed a number of spiritual fruits. First, almost all those involved identified the experience of synodality itself as most important, i.e., encountering, listening, and mutual reflection and discernment, rather than the tabulation of results and the production of a final report. Second, participants almost universally marveled at the spiritual hunger for God

in others, and their surprising depth of faith and willingness to be vulnerable, in harmony with, or in spite, of the Church in many cases. Third, most were inspired to gratitude and hope as a result of their involvement.

II. Discernment of the Collected Contributions

The input received from the diocesan delegates and the online surveys resulted in thousands of responses, comments and demographic data. This information will be reviewed, sorted, analyzed and compiled locally, and will be used, hopefully, to inform diocesan pastoral planning in the near future. (For example, responses could be sorted and analyzed according to ethnicity, age, relationship to Church, etc., in order to determine particular, targeted initiatives and strategies.) The synthesis that follows is necessarily a broad summary and brief distillation of a copious amount of material.

The gathered input reflected the reality of the Church expressed in the insight (attributed to both James Joyce and Flannery O'Connor) that “Catholic” means “Here comes everybody!” Separate, multiple submissions recommended a return to the Church before Vatican II and the traditional Latin Mass; a full implementation, long-delayed, of Vatican II; or the convocation of Vatican III. Other submissions invoked as authoritative Fr. Richard Rohr on the one hand, and Archbishop Fulton Sheen on the other. Others called for the Church to fully adapt and adjust to current times and trends; still others, to clearly articulate her immutable, orthodox teaching without compromise. Contrasting suggestions were made; for example, to limit the participation of, and presence of, the laity in the sanctuary and affirm the male, celibate priesthood versus to allow a married clergy and ordain women as deacons and/or priests. A full spectrum of opinions was represented.

For many, the Church has been a significant part of life's journey; for many, it has not always journeyed effectively as a companion and guide. Participants determined this latter fact based overwhelmingly on the quality of local priestly leadership, and most especially on the quality of its preaching. They often added that the Church's teachings are widely misperceived due to the Church's failure to communicate the Gospel effectively, in society and in the formation and catechesis of her people. Also, her companionship is more greatly appreciated in proportion to her transparency.

Some additional, recurring themes emerged from the collected input. *First, a prevalent identification by most participants of Jesus with the Church in theory, coupled with a painful recognition of the Church's failure to communicate, reveal and embody Jesus in reality.* In particular, this failure was named as a lack of love and mercy, evidenced in the absence of inclusion and sensitivity to women, the Hispanic/Latino community, LGBTQ+ people, families with young children, people with special needs, people victimized by abuse, the elderly and other people who, for whatever reason, feel that they do not conform to the prevalent social or moral norms. In fact, the most prevalent reason people identified for feeling marginalized was gender for the English speaking community, and ethnicity for the Hispanic/Latino community. Although not all participants called for a change in the Church's teaching on these matters, they did call for a change in approach and attitude. *Second, a perception that there are gaps between the Church's teaching and practice and Christ and his Gospel.* Similarly, not all participants perceived these gaps to be equal in magnitude, but felt that the Church needs, to some extent, to "get back to basics." *Third, an ongoing fall-out and sustained pain over the sexual abuse crisis and the shortcomings of bishops in*

*dealing with the issues quickly, effectively and transparently. Fourth, a strong sense that the institutional Church, the hierarchical Church, is not listening, and as a result, is not perceived as loving. And finally, a partial understanding or misunderstanding of the nature of the Church and her relationship to Christ (i.e., her divine institution by Christ and her apostolic origins; her constitution as both an earthly, visible society and a heavenly, spiritual community; her identity as the People of God in Christ; her unity, holiness and sacramentality; her mystical union as Christ's Body to Christ her Head; her pilgrim journey on earth and her status as *semper reformanda*).*

Of the ten thematic nuclei highlighted in the Vatican's *Vademecum*, some surfaced naturally in the consultations more than others. Most commonly and strongly articulated were the experience of both the universal and local Church as a significant part of life's journey, the inspiration and direction provided by the sacraments and (to a slightly lesser extent) the Word of God, and the need for more listening and consultation in the Church (most especially to engage the next generations). The encouragement locally to serve others, the responsibility of the baptized for the mission of the Church, and a sense of teamwork and cooperation in the Church were commonly articulated as well. Less commonly articulated were the need for dialogue with other religions, the promotion of attentive listening and communication at the local level, and a positive experience of Church authority.

III. Conclusions

The great challenge in preparing this synthesis and in growing as a local Church in the way of authentic synodality is, in the midst of such multiple, varied and even disparate responses, to discern how and in what ways the Holy Spirit is calling the Church to respond. It is an over-simplification, to be sure, but also fair to say that the participants in the synodal process in our diocese fall into the following categories: first, those who have had a positive experience of the Church as mother, teacher and companion; second, those who have had an ambivalent experience of the Church as a mixed blessing; third, those who have been seriously wounded by and/or have felt excluded by the Church; and fourth, the small number of respondents who do not feel themselves to be associated with the Church and never have been.

What is striking is that in each of these categories, except the last, most of the participants gauged their spiritual life and their relationship to Jesus in reference to the Church, and most often, to the Catholic Church. Granted, the vast majority of the responses came from Catholics. Yet, even those with negative experiences or feelings of dissociation or exclusion felt those not as a result of their experience of God or his Word or the Liturgy, but as a result of their experience of community and the exercise of authority within community. They revealed, in an off-handed manner, an underlying desire for community, and not just any community, but the community of the Catholic Church.

Synodal participants, and especially our synodal delegates, discerned and recommended directions, approaches and possible best practices for our diocese. They suggested that the

Church in general, our Bishop, and our diocesan and parish leadership, clergy and lay, do the following: first, lead with love, and begin by listening with compassion; second, evangelize and catechize the generations that need it, in imaginative and pro-active ways; third, be pastoral and prayerful, rather than formal, legalistic, regulatory and bureaucratic; and fourth, continue listening in the synodal way.

As previously mentioned, countless, specific recommendations were made by many people from a range of theological, political, social, and ideological perspectives. Consequently, many suggestions directly contradicted one another. Nonetheless, two specific concerns prevailed: the inclusion of the perspective and contribution of women (not necessarily through Holy Orders, although women deacons were mentioned multiple times) and the formation, supervision and evaluation of clergy and their “fit” for the parish.

Within the delegates’ final comments, a number of future possibilities suggest themselves. The first proposes that the Church commit herself to ongoing synodality. One way to achieve this would be to normalize, streamline and integrate this kind of consultation in the preparation for each future synod. Most dioceses created processes, structures and mechanisms for this encounter that could continue. Another way to exercise consultation more often at the local level would be to re-imagine members of the diocesan pastoral council as chief consultors, specifically trained and utilized not only to give their own input to the Bishop, but also to listen to and solicit input regularly from others.

Second, the Holy Father could elect and commission “co-workers” in the synodal way. Among the large number of delegates’ and others who had a positive experience of the Church and a strong and loving affiliation with the Body of Christ (i.e., a lived communion

with their parish and diocese), there now exists a new or heightened sense of responsibility for the synodal way and for the healing and reconciling mission of the Church. Having engaged in non-defensive encounter, attentive presence and active listening, many found themselves moved to compassion and eager and open for further dialogue. They are becoming bearers of the fruits of the Synod, demonstrating the attitudes of respectful listening, reverence for the other, and responsive love.

At the same time, many of those who have an ambivalent or negative experience of the Church still expressed a deep desire to be listened to and to be reconciled—indeed, to be a part of a community and specifically, the community of the Church. So the question arises, is there a way, through the animation, mobilization, formation and commissioning of those who are positively and lovingly affiliated with the Church, to minister to those who are not? Might the Church reach the marginalized and excluded not only through the usual, formal channels, but also through the gracious instrumentality of the “affiliated,” empowered to encounter, listen and discern via this synodal journey they have begun with the Church?

During the Jubilee of Mercy, Pope Francis commissioned and sent out Missionaries of Mercy, priests all over the world who were to be “a sign of the Church’s maternal solicitude for the people of God (*Misericordiae Vultus*, 18).” They were called to be instruments of human encounter and the ready welcome of the Father of mercy.

In his writings, the Apostle Paul speaks of “co-workers” or “associates (*synergoi*)” like Prisca and Aquila, who were assistants and partners in ministry. The early Church, then, saw active, evangelizing lay men and women, closely associated with the apostolic mission, who bore responsibility for loving outreach to others. An opportune response to the Synod

on Synodality might be, in a way similar to the Missionaries of Mercy, to formally elect and commission in, and for, each diocese lay men and women as “Synodal Associates,” co-workers in the apostolic mission of the Bishop, who oversee and animate for him ongoing encounter, listening and discernment.

Finally, the delegates’ final comments repeated, implicitly and explicitly, the necessity for the whole Church to evangelize in the ways that St. Pope Paul VI, St. Pope John Paul II, Pope Benedict and Pope Francis have summoned over the last half century—through teaching and radical witness; through new ardor, methods and expressions; through the re-proposal of the Gospel where it has never been heard or deeply received or forgotten; through an infectious joy in the Lord that extends merciful compassion to others. The Church needs to recommit herself to forming missionary disciples and lay leaders, and to evangelization and the new evangelization.

Again, this synthesis necessarily paints in bold and broad strokes, and is, thus, an insufficient summary of thousands of responses, comments and data points. Our intention is to continue to work with the input received, and to produce and share locally a more detailed summary, especially with our synodal delegates. In this document, we have done our best to present accurately the *sensus fidelium* of the Diocese of Paterson, with gratitude for the opportunity, and with the hopeful intention of further reflection and discernment upon the experience and input of this Preparatory Phase.

Respectfully submitted,

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