

CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF CLEVELAND

SYNOD SYNTHESIS REPORT

OVERVIEW

In 2021, Pope Francis invited all Catholics to gather, listen and discern what it means to be Church and where the Holy Spirit is calling us. When the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops released the Preparatory Document, the Cleveland Diocese formed a synodal team made up of a diverse representation of ministries in the diocese including: Parish Life, Missionary Discipleship, Interfaith/Ecumenical Affairs, Youth Ministry, Young Adult Ministry, Human Life, Marriage and Family, Lay Ecclesial Ministry, Child Protection, Cultural Ministries, Catechesis, Catholic schools, Catholic Charities, Prison Ministry, Continuing Education and Worship.

On October 17, 2021, we celebrated the opening liturgy of the Synod in the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist. We trained over 200 facilitators from November 2021 through January 2022 to coordinate and lead the listening sessions in parishes, schools and organizations. Listening sessions began the first week of Advent and the online survey opened in February 2022. In February 2022, Bishop Edward Malesic also participated in a listening session with local ecumenical judicatory leaders. The consultation process ended at the end of March 2022 and all reports were due by the end of April 2022.

On June 11, 2022, we held a diocesan pre-synodal gathering with nearly 300 delegates from across the diocese. This gathering was an opportunity for diverse members of the diocese to come together to pray, reflect on their experience of the synodal process in the diocese, listen to feedback that has emerged from the listening sessions, dialogue about the current reality of the local Church and the signs of the times and discern the Holy Spirit's call for the diocese on the path of synodality. The conversations focused on the three primary themes of the Synod: communion, participation and mission. Delegates reflected on the common themes that emerged during the consultation process and identified action steps for us to take as we continue to journey together.

The following synthesis report outlines the process that was developed and implemented in the Catholic Diocese of Cleveland. It highlights the common themes from the listening and discernment process. It also includes the recommended emerging actions identified during the diocesan pre-synodal gathering.

For more information about the synodal process in the Catholic Diocese of Cleveland, please contact the co-directors:

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METHODOLOGY

Two main challenges facing the diocese as we began the synodal process were time and participation. We had very little time to prepare and implement a process of this magnitude. The process also began during the season of Advent and Christmas, which is an extremely busy time of the year. To address these concerns, we developed a process that was simple and adaptable, and hopefully a process that would be repeated often. We also set a target goal of 30% parish participation, as well as Catholic schools and other religious organizations.

The response to the Synod in our diocese far exceeded our expectations, especially in light of all the challenges that we faced.

- Over 200 facilitators were trained from October 2021 – January 2022
- 118 parishes (64%) conducted at least one listening session from December 2021 – March 2022
- 169 reports were submitted
- 12,684 people participated in listening sessions
- 610 responded to the questions online
- All 10 college campus ministries participated
- Just over 50% of participants were young people (under the age of 30) from parish children's religious education programs, Catholic schools, high schools, youth ministries, and young adult groups

The scope of our diocesan consultation process included diocesan personnel, diocesan advisory committees and ministries, parishes, Catholic schools, college campus ministries, religious congregations, lay organizations, ecumenical groups and Catholic Charities. Click on the link for more [demographic information](#).

GATHERED SESSIONS

The diocesan synodal team adapted resources from the Australian Catholic Conference to develop the listening and discernment process used during the consultation. The focus of the consultation process was the fundamental question in the Vademecum and the themes of communion, participation and mission. We also adapted the suggested questions in the Vademecum and provided a variety of resources to facilitate conversations at the local level. These resources are available on our website: <https://dioceseofcleveland.org/synod>.

We highly recommended that facilitators think of their parish, school or organization as a community made up of many small communities, and to invite staff, committees, ministry groups, etc. to gather in small groups of five to seven people for a listening session, either in-person or virtually. Also, to take time during already scheduled meetings and activities to participate in the listening and discernment process.

Participating groups engaged in reflection using St. Ignatius of Loyola's great prayer of Examen, Scripture meditation or other less formal ways of sharing, and the practice of [Spiritual Conversations](#). For more details about the process, see the [Facilitator Guide](#).

- **Examen.** The preferred option recommended for the diocesan synodal process was the Examen, developed by our team using the themes of communion, participation and mission. The Examen was also adapted for [children and youth](#) in elementary school, middle school, high school, youth ministry and for [Ecumenical conversations](#).
- **Scripture reflection.** The second option was a Lectio Divina. We selected several scripture passages from the list provided by the Vatican for the [Opening Liturgy for the Synod](#).
- **Narrative approach.** The third recommended option was a [narrative approach](#). We selected two options from those provided by the Vatican and encouraged groups to choose one as a conversation starter or use their own question.

ONLINE PROCESS

In an effort to include those not connected with a faith community, or who choose not to participate in a gathered listening session, we created an individual online process. For the [online questionnaire](#), we grouped the 10 additional synodal themes from the Vademecum under the three primary themes of communion, participation and mission. Then, we selected and adapted the questions that would be appropriate for an online format. The online survey was all open-ended questions.

MISSIONARY ACTION

As part of the synodal process, we were encouraged to take special care to reach out to the peripheries, to those who have left the Church, those who rarely or never practice their faith, those who experience poverty or marginalization, refugees, the excluded, the voiceless, etc. We all know someone disconnected from the Church. Therefore, we asked everyone who participated in the listening sessions to consider taking one extra step, as a missionary action, to have a one-on-one conversation with someone they know who falls into this category. The conversation starters recommended were the same as the ones for the narrative approach during the gathered listening sessions. A similar process of missionary action was implemented during the [Fifth National Encuentro for Hispanic / Latino Ministry](#).

In addition, the diocesan team and parishes made special efforts to reach out to specific groups of people including:

- Catholic Charities (family, disability, and outpatient mental health services)
- The incarcerated, their families and administrators from correctional facilities
- LGBT family support groups
- Bereavement support groups
- Non-Catholics (Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, Orthodox, Protestant)
- CYO coaches

- The homebound
- Parents
- Youth and young adults
- Fallen-away or inactive Catholics

INFORMAL MOMENTS

A few other informal moments also served as opportunities to share and listen. Since the synodal process took place during the holidays, we provided two additional resources: a [holiday activity for families](#), and a [Synodal Celebration of Las Posadas](#).

- **Synodal Celebration of Las Posadas.** Las Posadas is a novena that takes place December 16-24 and commemorates the journey Joseph and Mary made from Nazareth to Bethlehem in search of lodging or an “inn” (literally what posada means) so Mary could give birth to Jesus. We adapted the questions provided in the Vademecum under the ten additional synodal themes and developed reflections for each day of the Posadas novena.
- **Holiday conversations.** We also developed a simple conversation starter for holiday gatherings with family and friends. The one-page handout included a QR code that led to an online report form. The same handout was adapted for use during the season of [Lent](#).

Most participating groups held gathered listening sessions or referred people to the online questionnaire. Only 19 people took advantage of the opportunity to have conversations with family and friends using the holiday conversations handout. Lastly, even though several facilitators encouraged participants to complete a missionary action, very few people did.

TOP 10 COMMON THEMES

LIFELONG FAITH FORMATION

The most common theme that emerged from the consultation process was the importance of lifelong faith formation. Participants expressed an interest in increased opportunities for adult faith formation on a wide range of topics, retreats, family-centered catechesis and small faith sharing groups for different age groups. They also expressed the need for more resources for ministry with youth and young adults, as well as the importance of bridging the gap between youth ministry and college.

Providing support for missionary disciples was of particular interest. Participants are looking for ways to deepen their understanding of faith, prayer teams and discipleship groups. They would like the Church to help mobilize their missionary efforts by helping them discern their gifts and communicating about service opportunities that meet the needs of the community.

MISSION AND OUTREACH

The second most common theme that emerged from the consultation was putting faith into action and spreading the good news. Responses show that participants have a strong desire to be missionary disciples, share their gifts with the Church and care for others. They would like opportunities to learn more about social issues and Church teachings, do more outreach into the surrounding community, become involved in local community issues and continue charitable works.

The general consensus among participants was that media and technology are essential to the mission of the Church. They highly recommended increasing the diocesan social media presence. They would also like the diocesan website to provide information that promotes parish ministries and events, as well as access to digital evangelization resources. All communication media should also reflect the rich diversity of the Church.

Some of the challenges to mission mentioned include: limited human and financial resources, slow or no responsiveness to social issues, increased secularization, fear and divisiveness in the Church and society, the busyness of life, conflicted feelings about the Church's direction and a lack of confidence in knowledge of the faith. The relationship between the Catholic faith and politics was an area of much discord. One group of people wanted the Church to take a firmer stance on moral issues in the political sphere, while others would much prefer that the Church stay out of politics and focus more on bringing people closer to Christ.

COMMUNITY AND FELLOWSHIP

Most people felt great affection and gratitude for their faith community, especially as they were growing up. The Church community is like family. Post-pandemic, people are seeking to rebuild a sense of community. They would like more opportunities to get to know one another, to learn from one another through faith sharing, and to pray with and for one another. They also talked about the importance of welcoming newcomers and fostering intergenerational relationships within the parish.

While most people consider the Church community a place of peace and safety, there was some concern that the Church has become too polarized, which causes some people to feel unwelcome. Participants felt it was important to treat one another with respect and charity, and to focus more on the things they share in common.

PARTICIPATION IN LITURGY

Participation at Mass is tied to significant memories and special liturgies such as baptisms, marriages, first Communion and Christmas. Many believed that being involved in ministries made them feel more connected to the Church and helped to foster a sense of community. Participants recommended catechesis on the Mass and other liturgical practices in order to improve liturgies and foster devotion to the Eucharist. They also recommended improving the

quality of preaching to be more catechetical, interactive and relatable, especially for young people.

Many are concerned about the impact of COVID and the future of their parish. They believe the pandemic and the closing of churches has made going to Church optional. Some people are still hurt that parishes closed during that time, and others recommend that we conduct an evaluation of the pros and cons of virtual Masses. Most people agree that we need to find ways to bring people back to Church.

Some groups are also feeling alienated by the Church when it comes to participating in liturgy. The changes regarding the Mass in the extraordinary form (Traditional Latin Mass) has left some people feeling unheard and saddened by the restrictions. The consensus was that different forms of prayer appeal to different people and the Church should be welcoming and inclusive of all. Young people recognize the importance of the liturgy and, yet, they struggle to understand what happens at Mass and how it relates to their lived experience. Finally, the Communion restrictions imposed on specific groups of people were described as unsympathetic, out of touch and/or hypocritical.

LISTENING

In general, the listening sessions were a very positive experience. Participants felt uplifted by each other's stories and highly recommended that we continue the conversations begun with this synodal process. They also shared an appreciation for the Church's presence and support during difficult times. They felt it was important for the Church to engage with the community and listen to their needs, to provide a safe space for people to struggle with their questions and to be more forgiving.

The need for healing was closely related to the theme of listening. Participants feel that Church leaders have not heard their concerns with regards to the sexual abuse of minors, nor responded adequately enough to address the root causes. This has led to feelings of disappointment and a lack of trust and credibility in the Church. They have asked for greater accountability and more support from the diocese for families and faith communities that have been impacted.

INCLUSION

A common thread throughout the listening sessions was inclusion. If we are to journey together, we need to be more understanding and less judgmental. We need to move out of our comfort zone, reach out to the marginalized, and create safe spaces for those groups often left on the margins. Participants mentioned several marginalized groups, specifically:

- **Youth and young adults.** Young people expressed that they felt invisible, and are frustrated with the lack of inclusion in the Church. Adults were concerned about the spiritual and emotional well-being of the younger generations, and for the future of the Church in general.

- **LGBTQA+ Catholics.** LGBTQA+ Catholics and their families spoke about feeling unwelcome in the Church and, in some instances, afraid for their safety. Others had questions about the Church's position and the ways that individuals and communities can provide pastoral support.
- **Families.** Strengthening marriages and families was a common theme, especially developing ministries and provide resources to engaged couples, single parents and young families with children, and older adults.
- **Inactive Catholics.** Participants spoke about the importance of reaching out to those who have fallen away from the Church, finding out why they left trying to address those concerns.
- **Divorced.** Divorced Catholics expressed that they often feel judged or unwelcome in the Church. Participants recommended simplifying the annulment process and providing pastoral support for those going through divorce.
- **Cultural groups.** Participants emphasized the importance of increasing cultural awareness and sensitivity, eradicating racism from the Church, celebrating the richness of our diversity. They also asked for continued pastoral support and resources for cultural ministries.
- **People with disabilities.** Participants emphasized the importance of treating people with disabilities with respect and dignity, to provide accommodations when needed, and conduct outreach, especially to children with special needs.

EXPERIENCES OF PRAYER

A number of comments emphasized the power of prayer to provide comfort, healing and direction. Participants spoke about the value of a strong prayer life, especially the rosary and religious devotions. They would like increased opportunities for adoration, Scripture studies and retreat experiences. Participants also spoke about music as an important part of prayer and sacramental life.

The sacraments were significant experiences of prayer for participants, especially the Sacraments of Initiation. They were grateful for the sacrament of reconciliation and would like more opportunities to receive the sacrament. They recommended improving sacramental preparation for baptism and marriage. Baptisms and funerals were also viewed as important opportunities for evangelization. Many also felt that one way to bring back some marginalized groups is to allow them to receive Eucharist.

AUTHORITY AND GOVERNANCE

The overall consensus among participants is that we need better communication, more transparency, and greater accountability at all levels. In regards to the relationship between clergy and the laity, participants felt that leadership roles for the laity could be expanded in order to provide more administrative support for pastors, in particular the role of women.

Another consistent theme was the need for unity, clarity and consistency from Church leaders, including our bishops. While many of the participants believe the Church has become out of touch, politicized and polarized, most people seemed to agree that the Church's best response is to offer balanced catechesis on social issues, both pastoral and theological, especially about hot-button issues.

TEAMWORK AND CO-RESPONSIBILITY

In order to engage the laity as co-workers in the vineyard, participants emphasized the importance of inviting, empowering and recognizing the contributions of the laity. This entails promoting the discernment and sharing of gifts, identifying opportunities to serve, making room at the decision-making table and providing leadership development opportunities. They also spoke about the importance of succession planning for leaders who have long-held specific ministry positions.

Another important aspect of teamwork and co-responsibility is collaboration. Participants recommended strengthening the relationship between the diocesan offices and parishes, sharing resources between parishes, fostering urban / suburban partnerships, strengthening the connection between parishes and schools, developing relationships with neighborhood organizations, and fostering Ecumenical relationships.

Less common but noteworthy was the feeling of disillusionment that change is possible. The divisions experienced in Church and society have been painful and confusing. Previous synodal experiences have also often not led to the desired results. However, many participants were encouraged by these listening sessions. Moving forward they would like more direction and structure in discerning pastoral priorities. They feel the Church is being called to read the signs of the times, put differences aside and attend to the needs of the community.

VOCATIONS

Participants expressed great concern over the declining number of priests. The discussion reflected the challenges that the Church is facing as it works to increase vocations. A common recommendation was the need to discern the possibility of expanding the priesthood to include married priests and/or women. Participants also felt that the lack of diversity in vocations is a concern. They would like the Vocations Office to promote a broad range of vocations, not only the priesthood. With regards to the formation of priests, participants discussed the need to evaluate seminary formation, open seminary classes to the public and provide more continuing education for priests. Recommended topics of interest included sensitivity training, pastoral care, liturgy and business management.

Less common was the recommendation to discern the diaconate for women, and provide deacon formation in Spanish as well as continuing education for Hispanic deacons. They would also like the diaconate to be more attainable. Currently, the requirements for the diaconate program can be quite challenging for the families of aspiring deacons.

EMERGING ACTIONS

Below are pastoral priorities identified during the diocesan pre-synodal gathering held on June 11, 2022.

COMMUNION	1. Form hospitality teams.
	2. Celebrate ethnic and cultural traditions.
	3. Strengthen ministry to LGBTQ+/same-sex attracted Catholics.
	4. Continue the synodal listening process with the marginalized.
	5. Provide opportunities for healing and reconciliation.
	6. Offer formation for pastoral leaders to easily recognize biases, increase sensitivity and inspire respect and inclusion for all, (i.e. sensitivity retreat).
	7. Promote ways to build community in parishes.
	8. Foster ecumenical relationships.
	9. Promote peer-led small Christian communities.
	10. Develop ministry with grandparents.
	11. Strengthen family ministry.

PARTICIPATION	1. Fully engage in the Eucharistic Revival.
	2. Increase opportunities for adult faith formation.
	3. Establish liturgical commissions and offer formation to improve quality of preaching.
	4. Promote seminary as a center for leadership development for all.
	5. Offer lay leadership training that is both pastoral and practical.
	6. Adapt baptism preparation to include topics of discipleship and stewardship.
	7. Organize ministry fairs.
	8. Encourage the discernment of gifts in all communities.
	9. Provide both human and administrative support for pastors.
	10. Practice self-care as ministry leaders.
	11. Discern the role of women in the Church.
	12. Discern the future of the priesthood and diaconate.
	13. Re-envision vocations awareness to include all vocations.
	14. Promote the rich variety of prayer experiences in the Church.

MISSION	1. Offer missionary discipleship training.
	2. Form prayer teams.
	3. Engage in pastoral planning at the diocesan and regional levels to increase capacity and maximize resources.
	4. Hold an annual convocation on best pastoral practices.
	5. Organize a day of service in the local community.
	6. Collaborate with area parishes and community organizations.
	7. Continue with the synodal process.
	8. Create a diocesan clearinghouse of parish resources and activities.
	9. Grow ministries with youth and young adults.
	10. Promote the spiritual and corporal works of mercy.
	11. Invite people back to Church.
	12. Evangelize through social media.
	13. Improve communications at parish and diocesan levels.
	14. Discern ways that parishes can care for the environment.

CONCLUSION

The synodal process in the Catholic Diocese of Cleveland was a very positive experience. More than double the expected number of parishes participated in the listening sessions. We were also able to reach several groups in the peripheries -- the homebound, cultural communities, persons with disabilities, the incarcerated, the LGBTQ+ and their families -- though not as many as we would have liked. Many parishes are continuing with the listening process in their communities. Some have also begun to share results from the consultation at the local and diocesan levels and to implement the recommended actions.

Although the feedback received was not surprising, it has helped to identify pastoral priorities for the diocese. We will continue to reflect on what we heard and discern ways to move forward towards deeper communion, fuller participation and more fruitful mission.