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Vibrant parishes depend on teamwork and co-responsibility, by priests, deacons, religious, lay ministers, and all the faithful. As a priest of the Diocese of Cleveland for sixteen years, and a professor of pastoral theology for ten of those years, I have found that typically at the hub of a vibrant parish is a pastoral leader working collaboratively with a parish leadership team that honors and supports the baptismal call of all staff and parishioners as “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people” (1 Pet. 2:9).

Collaborative leaders recognize that all members of the Church, by virtue of their Baptism, share responsibility for the mission and ministry of the Church, and that mission is primarily in the world for most of the baptized, but for some, it is as ministers in the context of parish life where clergy and laity are both actively engaged (Lumen Gentium, 31).

In my experience with our local synodal process, and as a recent consultant at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, in Washington, D.C., I found hopeful encouragement that collaborative teamwork and co-responsibility are possible and should occur more frequently in our parishes and local diocesan Church. The following are three primary ways I believe that our parishes can increase in these priorities.

First, synod participants stated that pastors and laity should engage together in prayerful discernment and the sharing of charisms and gifts to better meet the needs of parishes and care for others in the Diocesan community. The model of leadership in our parishes should be grounded in a theology of shared responsibility similar to the early Church (Acts 2:43-47). My work at the Seminary and with our seminarians has shown me that a good starting point for this is the use of gift inventories (i.e., CliftonStrengths, Called by the Spirit, ‘Becoming Missionary Disciples,’ etc.), where individuals are affirmed in their God-given gifts and built into a close-knit community as they get to know each other more intimately through their strengths and charisms. By sharing charisms and gifts within our parishes, pastors can better individually empower their parishioners, and better plan for the succession of leaders who have long-held ministry positions.

Second, to empower the laity as co-workers in the vineyard, synod participants emphasized the importance of pastors inviting, empowering, and recognizing the contributions of the laity, communicating opportunities to serve, and creating space at decision-making tables. Healthy teamwork celebrates a culture of honest and open communication which permeates all parish and diocesan decisions and breaks down barriers of division between women and men from different ages, races, cultures, and socio-economic backgrounds. Teamwork requires an ongoing commitment by pastors and parish pastoral councils to invite and empower the voices of the laity through parish surveys and reflective listening sessions—similar to what occurred during the synodal process. This regular sharing of needs and priorities becomes essential information for parish pastoral council planning conversations where ordained and lay leaders share space at the decision-making table and recognize each other's contributions.

Third, reading the signs of the times, synod participants recommended strengthening the relationship between diocesan offices and parishes, sharing resources between parishes, fostering urban / suburban collaborative partnerships, strengthening the connection between parishes and schools, developing relationships with neighborhood organizations, and fostering ecumenical relationships. It has been said that God is best glorified when the greatest number of people participates to the fullest degree possible in the mission of Christ.

The National Eucharistic Revival should remind us that sharing ministries and resources across parish boundaries begins with regularly coming together in prayerful reflection around the Table of the Lord. When urban and suburban parish partnerships, school events, and diocesan gatherings begin with a Eucharistic liturgy, or a time of Adoration, participants root their relationships in our shared identity as the Body of Christ. It is from this foundational identity that our parishes and schools can reach outward to neighborhood organizations and ecumenical relationships to welcome and serve those in need.

While answering the synod's many priorities can be complex, we must avoid the disillusionment that change is not possible. Though we face painful and confusing divisions in the Church, when we are rooted in our shared baptism, and guided by the Holy Spirit, the ongoing efforts of the synodal process can lead us to a renewed vigor for teamwork and co-responsibility. As we continue to discern these pastoral priorities for our parishes and diocese, let us increase our efforts to invite all the faithful to identify their God-given gifts and empower them to share these gifts fully within their parishes, throughout the Church and in the world.

*Father Andrew Turner, Rector of Borromeo Seminary and Saint Mary Seminary and Graduate School of Theology.*

