

**Synthesis of Spring 2024 Synod Sessions:
Gathering the Fruits of Our Conversation in the Spirit**
Roman Catholic Diocese of Albany, New York

Three regional in-person and one virtual synod sessions were held, with about 250 people participating. Excerpts from the *Joy of the Gospel* were used to define the Church's mission. Namely, to bring Jesus' offer of friendship and the light of the Gospel to all people. The focus questions were: "How has the Church encouraged or hindered this mission? How can the Church help all the baptized to participate more fully in the Church's mission?" The Conversation in the Spirit method was used with some degree of success. It was challenging for people to just listen and not to respond with immediacy; however, participants appreciated the pauses for prayer throughout the sessions.

Participants in the synod process expressed divergent views on the same topics that have been at the forefront of liturgy, spirituality, and daily life as active Catholics for some time. Responses are thoughtful and solutions-oriented, focused on being better Catholics and expecting more from our faith leaders and parish/diocesan administrators. The notable take-away is that despite the divisions, a recurring theme is that participants appear to have hope for the future of their faith and the Church, even if they believe it should be moving in a different direction.

- 1. What convergences have emerged—areas of coming together?**
- 2. What obstacles or differences emerged?**

While these are two distinct questions, the responses overlapped on multiple topics of importance to synod participants, and so exploring them together as convergences and obstacles at the same time may be worthwhile.

- Ongoing faith formation and religious instruction across all ages
- The role of women in the church (as lay people and possibly ordained)
- Clergy are stretched thin with all their responsibilities, especially those who minister to multiple parishes
- Inclusion of LGBTQ+ and other marginalized groups at church and in the faith

There were also commonalities that arose in responses to these two questions in what participants said they wanted—out of the process, from their Church, and their diocese; some saw these as areas of coming together and others saw these as differences:

- More effective leadership (diocesan, clerical, lay)
- More and better lifelong faith formation opportunities
- Greater distinction of Catholic education compared with public schools at all levels, including college
- Less confusion about Church teaching
- More help for overworked clergy so they can focus on strengthening pastoral connections with their parishioners
- A belief that things can/will improve, regardless of what that looks like to the individual participant

Among the most common ideas of coming together, people often identified ways in which their parish communities served those in need, such as through food pantries. There was also a persistent concern about the

abuse crisis, although solutions varied, and a deep concern about young, lapsed, inactive or non-practicing Catholics who were not present in the parish community and how to foster their returning.

- “Love our church but it needs fixing quickly”
- “You can’t love what you don’t know.”
- “How do we be welcoming and still remain Catholic?”
- “How do you welcome yet not invite to the table?”
- “We need to live by Jesus’ example and teaching rather than Church doctrine.”
- “Infallible doctrines shall not be changed.”
- “Inviting questions implies these things are questionable,” referring to blessing same-sex couples and ordaining women.
- “Clergy need to focus more on sacraments and reaching out to parishioners, not administering the parish.”
- “Condense multiple parishes/churches to fewer locations: less money, more availability of pastor at parish.”
- “Relationships are key to creating a parish family.”

Synod participants’ observations when discussing obstacles included a need to return to the “truth” of Catholic teaching (in quotes only to reflect that participants did not always use the word ‘truth’ to refer to the same set of ideas). Others spoke of a lack of priests, a lack of respect for clergy and Catholic hierarchy, and the future of small and rural parishes. Others are mistrustful of the synod process in general and expressed concerns about the synod process being a “cover” for a pre-determined Vatican agenda, in particular. These ideas were also described as obstacles:

- “We feel our priests are under-appreciated, but they also need to be immersed with the whole community... to see where the needs of the people lay.”
- “Parishes without pastors”
- “Church’s pursuit of ‘religious freedom’ not policies that impact the poor, marginalized.”
- “Chafing at the ‘rules’ without a real understanding of what the rules mean or what’s behind them.”
- “Not trusting the outcome of shared responsibility.”
- “Can’t evangelize without catechesis.”
- “There is a lack of communication from the diocese along with a lack of response and listening. It feels like they don’t care.”
- “There are more issues than abortion to focus on.”

3. Did new questions or insights emerge?

Participants expressed that many evangelical Christian churches are drawing young people in and want to know what about them is so appealing? In other words, what do they have that we don’t? Another relevant question raised was: “What’s the difference between evangelization and proselytization?”

The feeling of Catholic voices being “stifled” cuts across what are broadly described as progressive and traditional points of view. Others feel trapped in the middle: “The hierarchy in the Church love conflicts. The lay people are caught in it.”

Other topics that emerged include an appeal for an updated RCIA process and greater clarification about what it means to “accompany” others on our faith journey. Several people raised concerns about annulments, specifically the need for a trauma-informed annulment process, and having lay people accompanying those seeking an annulment through the process. The needs and concerns of interfaith families was also mentioned, including whether the non-Catholic spouse feels welcome as part of their partner’s religious life and faith community.

More than one group wondered, “Will these thoughts and concerns... be addressed right here, right now, in our diocese?”

4. What areas require further study, reflection & prayer?

A recurring theme focused on ways to ease the burden on priests. Possible solutions included utilizing the resources we have more effectively (including our lay people willing to serve) and reviewing the vocations in process and in action—lessening restrictions, possibly (or not) ordaining women as clergy or deacons, possibly (or not) married clergy.

The clergy sex abuse scandal remains at the forefront for several participants, especially regarding the handling of finances, assets, and bankruptcy, and a rejection of top-down decisions about these matters.

Another prominent thread is a strong desire to return to the “true” teachings of the Church (the word ‘true’ is in quotes because there was not an agreed-upon definition of it used by all participants). For every group that advanced the idea that things can be changed, there is another that embraces the idea that things cannot be changed.

People appeared open to making synodality an ongoing process and implementing new ideas and initiatives based on synod work. Other areas suggested for further review include:

- The role of women in the Church
- How to be inclusive of the LGBTQ+ community while retaining our Catholic beliefs
- Expanded outreach to marginalized communities

This question also prompted comments on Catholic identity and how it relates to culture, the Church’s relationship with other Christian faiths, how to best share our faith, and how to get families and young people back at Mass and in parish life.

Participants discussed the need to shift mindsets from confirmation as “an achievement, not as a beginning in adult faith life, but as a graduation from Church.” Others spoke of the need to bridge the English/languages other than English gap for our parishioners.

Many people emphasized a need for “clarity, clarity, clarity.”

5. What steps may the Holy Spirit be inviting us to take—now or in the near future?

This is perhaps the place where the divergence among participants stands out the most regarding the past, present, and future of the Church:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “We are not democratizers of God’s Word, we are listeners.... remove heretics...” • “Repentance, an amendment of our ways to conform to God’s will. Humility and a more pure heart.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Stop allowing dogma and doctrine to supersede hospitality, inclusiveness and pastoral care.” • “The Holy Spirit is inviting us to be more welcoming and accept people for who they are.”
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This statement, however, may best reflect the potential for common ground: “We heard the Holy Spirit say the Church needs to figure out how to empower people in the church, lay people as well as clergy, women as well as men, with real power and not lip service, without threatening or dismantling the real elements of hierarchy/authority within the Church. It should be cooperation, not competition.”

There is significant consensus in the desire to broaden and strengthen religious instruction for all ages and at all stages of their faith journey as Catholics. Desires include “more and clearer teachings / religious instruction / faith formation from youth through adulthood,” and “review RCIA programs as some Catholic converts say some of their instruction went against Church teachings.” Some also commented about the beauty of our rituals but said they are not well-explained.

Participants appear eager to put in the effort necessary to support the health and growth of their parishes and their faith. Along with directly asking people in the pews why they are there and committing to prayerful support of the clergy, other actions people feel moved to explore for themselves and encourage in others include:

- “Think in terms of possibilities”
- “Time in prayer”
- “Move outside of our comfort zones”
- “Listen, listen, listen! (to each other, to the Holy Spirit)”
- “Keep our hearts, minds, and spirits open”

People feel called by the Holy Spirit towards forgiveness and in particular, “admit to failings in protecting those abused and molested.” In addition, the ideas brought forth by Pope Francis’ *Laudato Si'* were discussed, with

encouragement like, “We ask our diocese and parishes to participate and develop their plan to Care for Creation and our Common Home.”

Overall, participants generally appeared to find this phase of the synod process worthwhile and expressed a desire to continue holding synod sessions like these in the future and a hope that this is more than just talk:

“This meeting represents change from the grassroots. Now the leaders of our diocese must begin implementation.”

Summary Analysis:

In this consultative moment, the People of God were asked to consider *HOW can we be a synodal Church on mission?* Reflecting on the responses above reveals some initial and ongoing paths to address this question. Interestingly, the following affirms points raised in *A Synodal Church in Mission: Synthesis Report of the First Session of the Synodal Assembly (October 4-19, 2023)*.

- Though well-rooted in Scripture and the history of the Church, the concept of synodality is still a new term to many. Formation in this regard – and in the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council - needs to be deepened and enhanced.
- There is a definite sense of the laity’s role in being co-responsible for the Church’s life and mission. Many expressed it as a way to relieve the stress experienced by pastors. However, the Church must do more to encourage lay people in their call to ministry by virtue of their Baptism. This includes leadership in a variety of ministries, both administrative and pastoral.
- Formation in the Church’s mission is much needed. At some sessions, people asked “What do you mean by mission of the Church?” Is it rooted in Jesus’ message that “the Kingdom of God is at hand?” Or, in something else, such as ideologies of one sort or another?
- Formation in discernment and conversations in the Spirit needs to be broadened and deepened for all the People of God. Pastors and laity alike must be open to this as a more inclusive way of decision-making and decision-taking with due respect to roles, charisms, and ministries as defined by the Church.
- The deep polarities within the Church cannot be denied. At present it is challenging to see “the dynamism between unity and diversity proper to a synodal Church” (*Towards October 2024*, n. 1). Strategies are required to address this divide: to find acceptance, to pursue reconciliation where needed, and to develop an appreciation for the richness diversity can provide.
- Polarities aside, the need for developing and nurturing a community of disciples – on every level of the Church—is clear. Without a sense of real belonging and genuine welcome, the Church’s efforts to fulfill its mission will be impeded.

The Diocese of Albany remains committed to growing in its understanding and praxis for living as a Synodal Church in Mission and looks forward to implementing the final results of Synodal Assembly to be promulgated by the Holy Father.