

SYNODAL SYNTHESIS DOCUMENT

REGION XI CALIFORNIA AND NEVADA USA

Upon the request of His Excellency, the Most Rev. Timothy Freyer, D.D., Auxiliary Bishop of the Diocese of Orange in California, and Coordinator of the Synthesis Formation Process for Region XI, we, the Region XI Synodal Team, have endeavored to collect and synthesize the findings of the fourteen (Arch)dioceses in our ecclesiastical region. Following the format provided on the Holy See’s own Synodal webpage (<https://www.synod.va/en/synodal-process/the-episcopale-synods-phase/suggestions-for-dioceses-and-episcopal-conferences-on-the-prepar.html>), we present herein our final Regional Synodal “Synthesis” document, in three parts: First, we introduce the structures and modalities of our Synodal experiences in our (Arch)dioceses; second, we elaborate our discernment of the collected contributions of those experiences; and third, we provide a brief conclusion as to where we believe the Holy Spirit is leading us, both in our local churches here on the far West Coast of the United States and as part of the Universal Church of Christ.

I. Introduction: The Consultative Processes of Region XI

Each of the (Arch)dioceses of Region XI conducted our Synodal consultative processes in a variety of ways, but with many overlapping similarities. All told, the fourteen (Arch)dioceses in Region XI held 3,290 in-person sessions with a total of 61,056 in-person participants. Another 284 virtual sessions included a total of 4,034 virtual participants. Most of these sessions were sponsored at the parish level. One diocese also used one-on-one interviews conducted by their Synodal “team” members. Seven of the fourteen (Arch)dioceses also used internet-based surveys that involved 166,165 respondents.

Indeed, some of our (Arch)dioceses utilized combinations of these modalities, as the unique circumstances of each local church indicated and as our (Arch)bishops mandated for our processes. Naturally, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic complicated our processes at various points, but each (Arch)diocese managed to carry out the Synodal consultation of the faithful even in this challenging time. Cumulatively, these efforts created 1,364 reports.

II. The Fruits of our Synodal Experiences

Throughout the consultation of the faithful in our (Arch)dioceses, we heard many of the same themes concerning how we are called to “journey together” as the pilgrim

People of God. We have organized this “Synthesis” around ten major themes of the Consultation of the Faithful in Region XI.

1. The Eucharist, the Celebration of the other Sacraments, and other Parish-Based Ministries are Tremendous Sources of Joy for the Participants:

“The majority of responses focused on ‘Community and Hospitality’. Clearly people find their faith and experience God through a community that welcomes, sustains, and challenges them. This includes the parish at large and the small groups within the parishes” (Diocese of Reno).

“A number of people commented on the detrimental impact which the restrictions surrounding Covid-19 had on their personal and parochial lives. [...] At the same time there was a significant recognition of the diligence and dedication of priests, deacons and parish and school staffs in helping assure that people were kept safe when we were allowed to open. In this regard, pastors held Sunday Mass outdoors, erected tents, set up video live-streaming Mass, provided for hand sanitizer and called upon an army of volunteers to see to the sanitizing of Churches between Masses. All of this manifested a community spirit and there was a strong element of ‘togetherness’ in the experience” (Diocese of Santa Rosa).

“The principal joy that emerged in the synodal sessions was participation in the sacramental life of the Church. The declaration of one participant that ‘experiencing the beauty of our Church/ Mass with our families is what brings us hope’ was emblematic of comments in virtually every small group sharing” (Diocese of San Diego).

For most participants, joy comes from the experience of connectedness and community as part of the assembly at Mass, participation in sacramental life, and involvement in other parish activities. Many recipients reported how important the Eucharist was in their faith life and that their love for the Eucharist was heightened when COVID prevented them from attending Mass in person and receiving Communion. Participants also reported deep appreciation for the celebration of the sacraments of Baptism, First Eucharist, Confirmation, and Matrimony with family and friends.

Many of our participants celebrated the various organizations and ministries in their parishes as being significant aids to their experience of “journeying together” in the Church’s life. For instance, they spoke highly of the various liturgical ministries in which the laity can be involved (such as being lectors, extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion, ushers, church musicians, etc.), as well as the many other ministries that often form part of the Catholic parochial experience (bereavement ministry, St. Vincent de Paul Society, homebound ministry, etc.).

The experience of community, especially within the context of one's local parish, is something that most participants cherish and want to experience more deeply.

2. Gratitude for the Synodal Process:

“...it became apparent that the Holy Spirit had a significant presence throughout this process, most notably in the repetition of certain themes, thoughts, and feelings. One noted comment was the sense of gratitude for the safe space that was created to share thoughts, opinions, hopes, disappointments, and sorrows, without judgment or prejudice, even when thoughts conflicted or were the opposite of someone else's” (Diocese of Fresno).

“Both those who shared and those who listened say they now understand that, even though we share the same faith, our individual journeys and experiences can be very different. Hearing what others value as important to their faith touches and enlarges the hearts of those who listen” (Diocese of San Bernardino).

There was an almost universal expression of gratitude from participants for the opportunity to engage in the Synodal process. Some said that it was the first time they had ever been asked by the Church to share what they thought. Others appreciated the opportunity to listen to the joys and sorrows of their fellow participants and learn that they were not alone in their thoughts and feelings. For many, the shared experience of “journeying together” was a powerful example of Church community at its best.

3. Evangelization of Youth and Young Adults:

“Our participants told us of their great awareness of the opportunities and difficulties of keeping youth and young adults active in the Catholic Church, especially in the challenging years between our teens receiving the sacrament of confirmation and their embracing of adult vocations (approx. ages 15-25). In particular, our participants expressed their concern for finding new ways to proclaim the faith to the young people of our parishes, so that we lose fewer of our young people to the ‘Nones’ (those without any religious affiliation) and/or to the evangelical ‘mega’ churches. We were told how neuralgic this issue is in our Catholic parishes, and how serious the attrition rate is for youth and young adults in terms of the practice of their childhood faith. [...] As part of our ‘journeying together’, participants encourage their sacred pastors to work assiduously to improve our outreach to youth and young adults” (Diocese of Orange).

“We need to bring young people and young families back in and help them feel they belong; recognize, empower, and engage youth as full members of our Church; [and to] keep the youth on the path of faith. [...] There are low numbers of youth and young

adults who participate in Mass; we need to reach out to them, [and] meet them where they are; we are a dying Church if they don't participate" (Diocese of Oakland).

Participants from every (Arch)diocese expressed serious concern about the Church losing so many youth and young adults and the challenges of finding effective ways to engage them. It was especially poignant to hear so many parents and/or grandparents lament the fact that their young adult children/grandchildren are no longer involved in the Church. There was a strong call from many participants for the Church to address this problem as one of its top priorities. Some participants encouraged much more use of social media and technology to engage youth and young adults more effectively.

4. Social Justice and Outreach:

"Many people feel the local Church and parishes need more leadership [in] encouraging all our people to reach out to the marginalized. Some people felt the People of God aren't aware enough of the social justice teachings of the Church" (Diocese of Monterey).

"Many participants commented that the Catholic Church should do more regarding social justice. The unhoused crisis was cited most frequently, and participants felt the parishes had to do more to become a place of welcome and refuge. Numerous participants also expressed the lack of addressing environmental protection of God's creation as an obstacle to being a relevant voice in our world and society" (Diocese of San Jose).

Many of the participants in Region XI expressed their desire that our pastors work harder to promote the rich social justice tradition of the Church and assist the lay faithful in understanding their call to put that social justice tradition into action. Many participants acknowledged that much outreach already takes place in our (Arch)dioceses. At the same time, many participants think much work remains to be done, especially in terms of our outreach to the most marginalized among us. Participants were clear that our "journeying together" is incomplete if it only includes those who are most "connected" to Church life, or if it in any way excludes those on the margins.

5. Hunger for more and better Efforts to help the Faithful Deepen their Faith and Grow in Understanding the Church's Mission and their Role(s) in that Mission:

"The people of the Archdiocese are hungry to learn more about the faith they love so dearly and about how to share the Gospel with others" (Archdiocese of San Francisco).

"A loud and strong theme was expressed that the people want good, challenging, effective homilies that are relevant to today's life and issues, i.e., 'how can what we

hear today help us to grow in our spiritual lives, in life's challenges, and in advancing the Mission of the Church?' They want homilies that in a short amount of time apply the Gospel to everyday life and Catholic Social Teaching" (Diocese of Stockton).

"There is an overwhelming desire among the People of God in Orange to hear better homilies from our sacred ministers. We heard many times how often people feel short-changed by the messages they hear from the pulpit, and our consultees expressed in serious terms how lackluster the preaching in our Catholic parishes often is. They criticized what they see as the paucity of homiletic preparation evident in the banality of the majority of the sermons they hear on a weekly basis, and they expressed how unfortunate it is when homilists are clearly preaching purely from personal experiences (such as when homilists speak about their personal vacations), and/or without any substantive and well-prepared doctrinal content. It is evident that the people expect much more from their preachers than what they typically receive from them. In fact, they pointed out to us that this is one of the many reasons why the Catholic Church loses so many people to our local evangelical 'mega' churches (such as Saddleback Church, Mariners Church, and Shoreline Church). More often than not, the preaching in these protestant communities is apparently far superior than that which we give our congregants" (Diocese of Orange).

Both the appreciation/gratitude for good homilies and the desire for better homilies are important aspects of this theme. Some participants shared their gratitude for liturgies where the homilist connects the Scriptures to real-life issues that are relevant to people.

Many other participants throughout Region XI have a strong desire to hear better homilies from our ministers, and to learn how to translate the knowledge of their faith learned from the Sunday homily into effective action. They expressed frequently that they expect much more from their preachers than what they typically hear from the pulpit, and they challenge homilists to prepare their homilies well.

Also, many participants expressed a desire for strong faith-formation programs for adults, more retreats, etc. They want adult formation programs that will build community, foster unity, deepen their understanding of their faith, and provide more faith-sharing opportunities, so that our people can become "missionary disciples". Some participants expressed the hope that the Church will make more use of technology in evangelizing and build on what has been learned by using technology during the COVID pandemic.

6. Desire for a more Hospitable and Welcoming Church:

"Another main topic, especially among the more progressive Catholics, was the lack of welcome and openness to all God's people, especially those who experience

marginalization, such as the LGBTQ community, the divorced, the homeless, immigrants, and other minorities. They perceived the Catholic Church as being stuck in ‘tradition’. The need for openness to all and inclusiveness came up in almost every listening session” (Diocese of San José).

“Participants also note marginalization in our communities flowing from the realities of life in society today. The divorced long for participation in communal life. Likewise, the divorced and remarried yearn to return to sacramental life but feel the annulment processes are too burdensome. Individuals without housing or jobs, recent immigrants, the elderly, those with disabilities, those suffering from alcoholism, drug addiction and mental health issues, and the incarcerated and their families also live on the margins of our parish communities. At times, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals and their loved ones’ experience judgment and rejection and are confused and hurt by the harsh words and actions by some Church leaders. Some participants feel the Church and parish leadership listens disproportionately to those with money, media access, power, and influence” (Archdiocese of Los Angeles).

Most marginalized groups in Region XI were underrepresented in the Synodal process. The realities that led to this lack of representation, however, differ for each marginalized community. On the one hand are those groups that experience marginalization within the Church because of their lack of socio-economic power. Included among these, participants mentioned some immigrant communities, ethnic minorities, the homeless, the incarcerated, those with disabilities or mental health issues, and those suffering from various addictions. The feelings of exclusion voiced by members of these groups who *did* participate in the Synodal process echo the reality of society at large. It is a sign of hope that many who participated in the Synodal process recognized the marginalization of these groups and spoke out against it as being contrary to the Gospel. On the other hand are those groups that experience marginalization within the Church because of circumstances in their own lives, especially those relating to sexual relationships, which are perceived as (and per current Church teaching, often are) impediments to full participation in the sacramental life of the Church. Included among these are members of the LGBTQIA+ community, the divorced, those who have remarried without first obtaining an annulment, and those who are not married in the Church.

All participants are opposed to the marginalization of these or any groups. Many participants expressed the desire to be more welcoming and inclusive with these groups even to the point of asking for a change in Church teaching. Others, while also desiring a welcoming and inclusive Church for all, were opposed to any change in Church teaching.

7. Full Recognition of the Leadership Talents of Women in the Church:

“Women are limited to certain leadership roles, with their spiritual gifts not being fully recognized and utilized. Many voices advocate for offering greater opportunities for women to serve in leadership; some raise the possibility of women deacons”
(Archdiocese of Los Angeles).

“As regards the role of women, a small minority of respondents voiced the opinion that women should be excluded from any liturgical or ministerial roles, up to and including female altar servers. The vast majority of respondents, however, strongly opposed this attitude and urged Church leaders to recognize the ‘unique charisms’ and ‘pastoral gifts’ women bring to the Church. Broad support for ordaining women was voiced by those participating in the synodal process as were calls to include women in leadership positions, discussions, and decisions at all levels of the Church” (Diocese of Las Vegas).

A substantial number of our (Arch)diocesan reports included some observations reflecting this theme. There were many expressions of hope that the Church would increase the involvement of women in significant leadership roles in the Church. Many men as well as women expressed this hope and the leadership roles envisioned were at both the parish and diocesan levels. For some, these leadership roles would include ordination at least to the diaconate and possibly to the priesthood. Some others would disagree with this proposal.

Finally, some participants also mentioned that the way the Church treats women is one of the many reasons young people are not attracted to the Church.

8. A Desire for more Focus on “The Basics” of Love and Mercy:

“‘Church is too often in its head, not its heart.’ They clarified that the Church cannot just be about rules, but about people living the example of Christ. Another remarked, ‘We can be our own worst obstacle when we refuse to listen, learn, and understand’”
(Archdiocese of San Francisco).

“A lack of trust, therefore, looms over many as they try to identify with the Church today. Many fear that traditions and rules are more important than unity and love of neighbor. Participants lamented that the loudest messages are ‘what people cannot do or cannot be.’ Instead, a focus on proclaiming the mission of the Church, its mercy and saving grace should prevail” (Diocese of Sacramento).

“The concern about how rules and policies are applied suggests that, at a practical level, they may be understood as an end unto themselves, rather than as a means to promote the flourishing of the community and a loving encounter with Christ. The

development, presentation, and interpretation of rules and policies should always be done in light of the two most important commandments, namely, to love God and love one another. Their role, therefore, is to organize and unite the community in concrete ways that foster and realize the mission of Christ” (Diocese of San Bernardino).

Many participants feel that Church leaders focus too much on rules and regulations and not enough on the Gospel call for love and mercy. For some, this relates to the treatment of those on the margins, especially the divorced and members of the LGBTQIA+ community. For others there is a broader concern about the lack of emphasis on the Church’s teachings on issues like immigration, economic inequality, etc.

9. Greater Transparency, Accountability and Communication from Church Leadership (namely, from Bishops and Priests) and a Willingness to Listen to the Voice of the People:

“In listening to God’s People, it is apparent there is still mistrust within our Church. Many shared a desire for more transparency in leadership, decision-making, and financial matters. They called for more accountable leadership among the clergy and parish staffs. Many expressed a desire to see priests’ ministry evaluated regularly” (Diocese of Monterey).

“The participants also want more transparency in all areas of Church communications: financial matters, handling of sexual abuse, changes in liturgical practice, or any other areas where the laity as a royal priesthood are able to contribute to the decision-making process” (Diocese of Stockton).

There were a number of aspects related to this theme that were expressed in the (Arch)diocesan reports. Many participants referred to the handling of the clergy sex abuse crisis as an example of the lack of transparency and accountability and they also shared that the wounds created by this crisis have yet to be fully healed. Others want to see much more communication and transparency when it comes to financial matters and the development of rules and regulations that affect the people in the pews.

For many, the perception is that the blanket application of rules and policies is used as a means of wielding power or acting as a gatekeeper. They perceive leaders at all levels of the Church having the tendency to hide behind the established rules and policies rather than engaging directly with the reality at hand and responding to it with pastoral sensitivity. In doing so, they shut down opportunities to listen and dialogue with those they serve.

Participants expressed a desire for the Church’s wisdom and guidance at all levels of decision-making, from administrative to moral. However, they also desire to be treated

like adults capable of making the best decisions for themselves and their immediate faith community. At the very least, they expect to be given clear and rational explanations for why specific rules and policies are necessary.

10.A Strong Desire for this Process of “Journeying Together” to Continue at the Parish and Diocesan Levels:

“It is our hope that this Synthesis provide not only a ‘snapshot’ of the lived faith, understanding, and experience of the People of God in the Diocese of Las Vegas, but will also serve to identify some next steps in the pilgrimage of the particular Church, through the mode of synodality, in her call to Holiness” (Diocese of Las Vegas).

“... each parish will be asked to identify two substantive issues that had been raised at its parish dialogues, with the aim of addressing them in the fall of this year. And the Diocesan Pastoral Council will draw from the dialogue mandates to establish concrete goals for immediate action. This will not only provide substantive reforms to distinct elements of our parochial and diocesan life; it will also provide additional opportunities to bring the hallmarks of synodality to the processes of parish and diocesan pastoral planning and decision-making. In addition, it will provide a direct feedback loop to the synodal small- group dialogues” (Diocese of San Diego).

As mentioned above in theme #2, most participants were very positive about and grateful for the opportunity to engage in this Synodal process. Many also expressed a strong desire to have the key elements of this process continue at the parish and diocesan levels going forward.

Deep listening, profound faith-sharing, exploring serious questions in a safe environment, and expressing hopes and ideas for the future are all things that most participants want to continue to be a part of as members of their parish and diocese. Many want to see Church leadership take more seriously the talents and knowledge of the laity. Some expressed the need to use more effective Parish Councils and Diocesan Pastoral Councils. Others want their pastors and bishops to explore more deeply with the laity how best to participate in understanding the mission of the Church and its efforts to evangelize its members and the world.

III. Conclusion: Where is the Holy Spirit Leading Us?

In some ways, the answer to this question is yet to be determined. Some participants expressed concern that their input really would not matter or that their (Arch)bishops would somehow change or massage the results of this consultation. Others shared that they definitely felt the Holy Spirit at work during their sharing with others.

Perhaps the most important lesson about “where” the Holy Spirit is leading us is that we must continue to find effective ways to “journey together” at all levels of the Church. If one thing is clear from the participants of Region XI in this Synodal journey, it is that they truly want the best both for our local churches as well as for the Catholic Church globally. While participants may have expressed some serious differences of opinion about some aspects of “what is best”, the Spirit was also evident in the expressed desire for deeper unity in the Church at all levels.

In other words, perhaps the medium of this Synodal process is, in fact, its most important message.