UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS

Synod 2021 2023

For a synodal Church

communion | participation | mission

National Synthesis of the People of God in the United States of America for the Diocesan Phase of the 2021-2023 Synod

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ Jesus,

With immense gratitude I have the distinct honor of sharing with you the *National Synthesis of the People of God in the United States of America for the Diocesan Phase of the 2021-2023 Synod: For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission.* This pivotal document is the culmination of ten months of intentional listening throughout the Church in the U.S.

In the name of us all, I want first to thank those who participated in the listening sessions across the United States. The synodal consultations that were held—in parishes, schools, organizations, dioceses, and national regions— expressed the voices of hundreds of thousands in our local churches. I also want to thank the various writing teams on parish, diocesan and regional levels whose work has contributed in indispensable ways in the preparation, writing, and review of the National Synthesis.

The document that follows is an attempt to synthesize and contextualize the common joys, hopes, and wounds called forth with the help of the Holy Spirit in the unfolding of the Synod. The National Synthesis simply tries faithfully to express what emerged from the consultations. While not a complete articulation of the many topics and perspectives shared in the listening process, this synthesis is an attempt to express the broader themes that seemed most prevalent in the dioceses and regions of our country. Its writing is the fruit of an intensive time of prayer, reflection, and discernment by those on the U.S. Synod writing team.

The publication of the National Synthesis is a significant moment for the Church in the United States, responding to what our Holy Father Pope Francis has asked of us as the People of God in the world today. The Synthesis is, among other things, an expression of what we as a Church have heard each other say when asked about our deepest preoccupations and hopes for the Church of which, by the grace of God, we are all a vital part. The publication of this document is not a concluding moment, however; it is a reflective, forward-moving moment. It is an invitation to listen, to discuss together and to discern together as the Church, about how best to understand and act upon those matters that sit deeply in the hearts and minds of Catholics in the U.S.

A broad synthesis does not render obsolete the work of prior, more local Synodal consultations. It does, rather, add a perspective that contributes to the local and the more universal discernments that follow. The synodal path always includes an ongoing dialogue between local circumstances and concerns, and wider pictures. I encourage us all in our local communities to consider meditatively the contents of the National Synthesis, in company with the Holy Spirit, and in company with the living voice and person of Christ Jesus present to us through the Gospel. We must constantly ask that the voice of the Lord in the Gospel resonate among us throughout our synodal journey.

As Pope Francis frequently reminds us, synodality is not a one-time event, but an invitation to an ongoing style of Church life. We have taken the first steps of this path, and we have learned much; we have more to learn and more to do. Let us pray that this National Synthesis will in some way serve to deepen our communion as a Church, and encourage our continued path together as witnesses to Christ Jesus in our time. May God the Father, who by the gift of his Crucified and Risen Son has poured out the Holy Spirit upon us to renew all things, make fruitful the seeds that the Synodal path has planted among us.

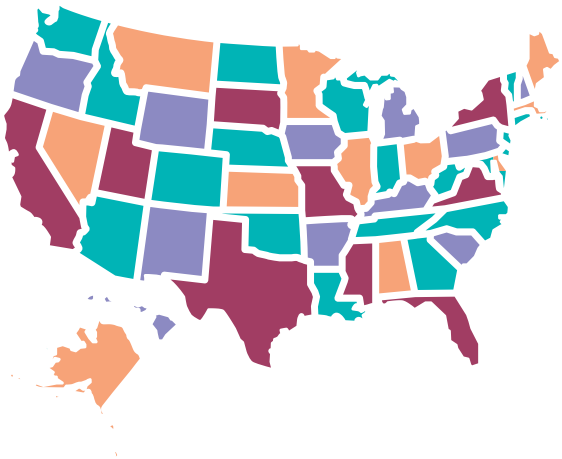
Yours in Christ,

+Daniel E. Flores

Most Reverend Daniel E. Flores, STD
Bishop of Brownsville
Chair, Committee on Doctrine

Introduction

In the Fall of 2021, the local churches in the United States of America joined the worldwide Catholic Church in entering the diocesan phase of the 2021-2023 Synod - *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission*. The Church in the United States is made up of an estimated 66.8 million Catholics[1] spread across one hundred and seventy-eight (178) Latin Church (arch)dioceses, including the Archdiocese for the Military Services, USA and the Personal Ordinariate of the Chair of St. Peter that serves both the United States and Canada, and eighteen (18) Eastern Catholic (arch)eparchies. For organizational purposes, the ecclesiastical provinces within the territory of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops are grouped together into fifteen (15) administrative regions. Regions I-XIV represent the geographic diversity of rural, suburban, and urban communities. The Eastern Catholic Churches come together in Region XV.



66.8 Million Catholics

178 Latin (Arch)Dioceses
18 Eastern Catholic (Arch)Eparchies

Here in the U.S., the beginning of the diocesan phase of the Synod was met with a combination of excitement, confusion, and skepticism. *"Several dioceses noted some apprehension and even opposition as they began their synodal listening – ranging from those who felt the process would be futile, to some who were afraid of what it would change, to clergy and parish staff who perceived it as an overwhelming task."*[2] As the Synod continued, however, *"many were surprised by a level of engagement and richness that surpassed their expectations. It was frequently noted how much agreement participants found when they listened to each other."* [3]

This National Synthesis concludes the diocesan phase of the synodal process. All one hundred seventy-eight (178) Latin (arch)dioceses contributed syntheses. Due to the size of the country, these contributions were gathered regionally, to produce fourteen intermediate syntheses which aided in the development of this national synthesis. Due to their long history of synodal practice, the Eastern Catholic Churches shared their reports directly with the Holy See, to be incorporated along with the U.S. Latin Church national synthesis into the Document for the Continental Stage, which represents the next step in the 2021-2023 Synod.

To incorporate contributions from the large number of Catholic associations, organizations, and national ministries in the United States, as well as individual contributions, a sixteenth region ("Region XVI") was created. One hundred twelve (112) submissions were received from organizations. Combined with the syntheses from each of the (arch)dioceses, two hundred ninety (290) documents

in total were received. These contributions represent over 22,000 reports from individual parishes and other groups. Although not every group, parish, or diocese kept statistics, from those that did, we know that there were over 30,000 opportunities to participate in the Synod through in-person and virtual listening sessions as well as online surveys. An estimated 700,000 people participated in the diocesan phase of the Synod in the United States.

700,000 PARTICIPANTS

30,000 OPPORTUNITIES

22,000 REPORTS

A wide-reaching sentiment expressed by many was a *"great appreciation for the synodal process. They were truly grateful for the opportunity to be heard and to listen, and for the spirit of openness. The ability to sit around the table with strangers and share joys, concerns, hopes, and suggestions without intense debate or fear encouraged and motivated many."*[4]

"Many who conducted listening sessions described being transformed by the process of listening to others' stories and hearing about their faith journey. Those who shared their stories, especially those who participated in small group sessions, stated that they felt listened to by the Church for the first time."[5]

While synodal consultations conveyed many areas where we as Church can grow in communion, participation, and mission, there was also a deep sense of gratitude and love for the Church and the local community. Overall, *"participants expressed much appreciation and gratitude for the support they experience in serving the community and praying together. Parish life and social activities foster a sense of community and strengthen personal relationships among members."*[6] Throughout the consultation process, this joy permeated through all the discussions, even when the conversations touched on very painful and difficult topics.

What follows is a synthesis of the honest and authentic contributions of the People of God in the United States. Highlighting the joys, hopes, and wounds present in our Church, these consultations express a deep desire for greater communion. Several common themes emerged; while by no means a complete account of the varied topics and perspectives that arose in the listening process, they express the fruit of listening, encounter, and dialogue from communities diverse in culture, language, and social setting. This synthesis aims to provide the matter for discernment as we continue this synodal journey.

Enduring Wounds

Over the course of the diocesan phase, several enduring wounds emerged. Many of these wounds have been inflicted not only by individual members of the Church but often by the institution itself. *"People shared their experiences, their dreams for the Church, and their concerns with openness and courage. Participants appreciated the opportunity to share their stories— including painful stories—without interruption, contradiction, or apologetics. Many expressed that the process and the experience were healing and hopeful, and desperately needed in the Church today."*[7]

Chief among the enduring wounds that afflict the People of God in the United States is the still-unfolding effects of the sexual abuse crisis. *"Trust in the hierarchy of the Church is weak and needs to be strengthened. The sex abuse scandals and the way the Church leadership handled the situation are seen as one of the strongest causes of a lack of trust and credibility on the part of the faithful. Feedback revealed the strong, lingering wound caused by the abuse of power and the physical, emotional, and spiritual abuse of the most innocent in our community. There was a recognition that this pain has had a compounding effect on priests and lay ministers' willingness to develop closer relationships with the people they serve due to a fear of being misinterpreted or falsely accused."*[8] The sin and crime of sexual abuse has eroded not only trust in the hierarchy and the moral integrity of the Church, but also created a culture of fear that keeps people from entering into relationship with one another and thus from experiencing the sense of belonging and connectedness for which they yearn.

The sense of community among the People of God has also suffered from the ongoing effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic itself *"has led to the fraying of our communities in some ways, accelerating a trend towards disengagement and intensifying the isolation and loneliness of many, youth, and the elderly in particular. A large number of the faithful have not yet returned to worship."*[9] Many acknowledged the strides made during the pandemic toward finding new and innovative ways to reach out to the community and remain connected, and that *"absence heightened a sense of how important the experience of Church and, more particularly, Eucharist is for the life of faith."*[10]

Another enduring wound widely reflected in synodal consultations was the experience that the Church is deeply divided. Participants felt this division as a profound sense of pain and anxiety. *"As one participant shared, the divisive political ideologies present in our society have seeped into all aspects of our lives."*[11] Division regarding the celebration of the liturgy was reflected in synodal consultations. *"Sadly, celebration of the Eucharist is also experienced as an area of division within the church. The most common issue regarding the liturgy is the celebration of the pre-Conciliar Mass."*[12] The limited access to the 1962 Missal was lamented; many felt that the differences over how to celebrate the liturgy *"sometimes reach the level of animosity. People on each side of the issue reported feeling judged by those who differ from them."* [13]

Many regional syntheses cited the perceived lack of unity among the bishops in the United States, and even of some individual bishops with the Holy Father, as a source of grave scandal. This perceived lack of unity within the hierarchy seems to, in turn, justify division at the local level. *"People at both ends of the political spectrum have set up camp opposing the 'others,' forgetting that they are one in the Body of Christ. Partisan politics is infiltrating homilies and ministry, and this trend has created divisions and intimidation among believers."*[14] Another regional synthesis highlighted how *"our use of media increasingly serves to reinforce our preconceived notions or preferred ideology."*[15]

Closely related to the wound of polarization is the wound of marginalization. Not only do those who experience this wound suffer, but their marginalization has become a source of scandal for others, especially for some youth who perceive the Church as hypocritical and failing to act consistently with justice toward these diverse communities. Those who experience marginalization, and thus a lack of representation in the Church, fall into two broad groups.[16] The first includes those marginalized who are made vulnerable by their lack of social and/ or economic power, such as immigrant communities; ethnic minorities; those who are undocumented; the unborn and their mothers; people who are experiencing poverty, homelessness, or incarceration; those people who have disabilities or mental health issues; and people suffering from various addictions. Included also in this group are women, whose voices are frequently marginalized in the decision-making processes of the Church: *"women on parish staff said they felt underappreciated, underpaid, not supported in seeking formation, worked long hours, and lacked good role models for self-care."*[17] The second group includes those who are marginalized because circumstances in their own lives are experienced as impediments to full participation in the life of the Church. Among these are members of the LGBTQ+ community, persons who have been divorced or those who have remarried without a declaration of nullity, as well as individuals who have civilly married but who never married in the Church. Concerns about how to respond to the needs of these diverse groups surfaced in every synthesis.

The synodal consultations around the enduring wounds caused by the clergy sexual abuse scandal, the pandemic, polarization, and marginalization have exposed a deep hunger for healing and the strong desire for communion, community, and a sense of belonging and being united. *"Throughout the synodal process, it was evident that most participants genuinely believe that support for one another is essential –laity and clergy; Churched and unchurched; and those in need of healing."*[18]

> *...most participants genuinely believe that support for one another is essential...*
>
> *Region II Synthesis*

Enhancing Communion & Participation

Specific topics repeatedly arose in almost every synodal consultation which can be understood as a common longing underlying the experience of the Church in the United States. These topics are invitations to discernment, reflection, and dialogue as we continue to walk the synodal path. The consultations all point to the fact that the People of God desire to draw closer to God and each other through a deeper knowledge of Scripture, prayer, and sacramental celebrations, especially the Eucharist.

SACRAMENTAL LIFE

"While the People of God long for a true communion that can only begin through Christ as we know him in the Eucharist, a sufficient percentage of participants reported obstacles to community within their parishes, partly due to the divisive political climate and resulting polarization in the country. A significant percentage of participants also indicate that receiving Eucharist does bring them more closely in solidarity with the poor. Suggestions on building communion around the Eucharist include items such as warmer hospitality, healing services, and more invigorating preaching by clergy."[19] One recommendation proposed a role for a more profound formation process, particularly in the context of sacramental preparation involving parents and their children, as a prelude to ongoing faith formation continuing into and throughout adult life.

The Eucharist in the lives of Catholics was a significant starting point for many of the synodal consultations. While divisions exist, many saw the Eucharist as the source of hope for greater unity as the Body of Christ. *"The liturgical and sacramental life of the Church, particularly the centrality of the Eucharist, came up continually in all the dioceses as a point of unity, essential to Catholic identity, community, and a life of faith. Participants expressed a deep desire and hunger for God. While perspectives differed on what constitutes 'good liturgy' and what areas need renewal or better understanding, there was universal agreement on the significance of the Eucharist in the life of the Church."*[20] Across the country, many synodal consultations expressed great joy when reflecting on the *"beauty of the symbols used in the Liturgy."*[21]

A WELCOMING CHURCH

The most common desire named in the synodal consultations was to be a more welcoming Church where all members of the People of God can find accompaniment on the journey. The synodal consultations mentioned several areas where there existed a tension between how to walk with people while remaining faithful to the teachings of the Church, *"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."*[22] As one synodal consultation described, *"People noted that the Church seems to prioritize doctrine over people, rules, and regulations over lived reality. People want the Church to be a home for the wounded and broken, not an institution for the perfect. They want the Church to meet people where they are, wherever they*

> *People want the Church to be a home for the wounded and broken, not an institution for the perfect.*
>
> *Region XII Synthesis*

are, and walk with them rather than judging them; to build real relationships through care and authenticity, not superiority."[23] In no particular order, the following groups were frequently mentioned as integral to being a more welcoming Church.

The hope for a welcoming Church expressed itself clearly with the desire to accompany with authenticity LGBTQ+ persons and their families. Many *"who identify as LGBTQ+ believe they are condemned by Church teachings."*[24] There is *"an urgent need for guidance as [one parish] begged, 'we believe we are approaching a real crisis in how to minister to the LGBTQ+ community, some of whom are members of our own families. We need help, support, and clarity.'"*[25] Often families *"feel torn between remaining in the church and supporting their loved ones."*[26] In order to become a more welcoming Church there is a deep need for ongoing discernment of the whole Church on how best to accompany our LGBTQ+ brothers and sisters.

Persons who have been divorced, whether remarried or not, often feel unwelcome within the Church. *"A significant number of [consultations] included comments that divorced people feel judged by others in the church, in some cases even if they have gone through the annulment process but certainly if they have not done so. The annulment process is experienced as unduly burdensome and judgmental as well."*[27] This pain left many divorced and remarried Catholics *"feeling like they are held to a higher standard while people who have committed other sins continue to receive communion."*[28] Synodal consultations expressed a consistent plea for a more transparent and clear annulment process as one possible way forward in creating a greater sense of welcome.

Nearly all synodal consultations shared a deep appreciation for the powerful impact of women religious who have consistently led the way in carrying out the mission of the Church. Likewise, there was recognition for the centrality of women's unparalleled contributions to the life of the Church, particularly in local communities. There was a desire for stronger leadership, discernment, and decision-making roles for women – both lay and religious – in their parishes and communities: *"people mentioned a variety of ways in which women could exercise leadership, including preaching and ordination as deacon or priest. Ordination for women emerged not primarily as a solution to the problem of the priest shortage, but as a matter of justice."*[29]

Another common hope for becoming a more welcoming Church revolved around removing barriers to accessibility and embracing those with special needs and their families, particularly as it relates to an individual's sacramental life. One of the regions reported a lack of inclusion because there are so few priests and other ministers who are fluent in American Sign Language.[30] Families expressed great joy when steps of inclusion were taken, while many acknowledged the work still left to be done. *"Several families have left to other denominations where they are embraced. Where their spiritual, emotional, and physical needs are met."*[31] Synodal consultations also pointed to the need for intention and thoughtfulness as we continue to grow in a synodal spirit: *"there is the need to provide special needs-friendly steps for discerning."*[32]

Synodal consultations identified that more work is necessary to welcome diverse cultural and ethnic communities. As one region stated, *"Rather than divide us, our diversity should be a source of strength."*[33] Many acknowledged the ongoing "*need for deeper cultural understanding, more diversity in parish life: in faith formation, liturgical celebrations, and social experiences. Language barriers were mentioned frequently*

as obstacles although most dioceses felt they were making strides with multilingual masses and clergy."[34] The complex nature of parish life was raised as local communities weighed how best to balance the diverse communities within a single Church that desires to build bridges and fellowship. *"Having different Masses in different languages may allow each member of the parish to participate in their first language, but does it promote communion among all parishioners?"*[35] Some noted that those members of different ethnic and cultural communities have unique insight and expertise that enhance parish life *"There is increased strength to be found in councils, committees, groups, and activities within the Church that are diverse in age, race, and life experience, as a variety of perspective and understanding can allow for more effective ideas and actions to arise."*[36]

Synodal consultations also expressed concerns around racism: *"Catholic people of color spoke of routine encounters with racism, both inside and outside the Church. Indigenous Catholics spoke of the generational trauma caused by racism and abuse in boarding schools."*[37] Consultations noted that much still needs to be done: *"The sinfulness of racism fueled by events in our country in recent years must also remain an ever-present concern and be acknowledged by our Church. As we do so, we must continue to listen. Providing forums for conversations on race, immigration, and loving openness to others is critical in allowing individuals to be heard and understood."*[38] Some expressed a hope for healing: *"in 'casting their dreams' one diocese listed racial reconciliation as their primary objective."*[39]

> *Youth...stressed that they should not be seen and spoken of mostly as the future of the Church, but should be recognized for their importance now and given a significant voice in the present.*
>
> *Region III Synthesis*

Practically all synodal consultations shared a deep ache in the wake of the departure of young people and viewed this as integrally connected to becoming a more welcoming Church. As one synthesis noted, *"Young people also want the Church to speak out about issues that matter to them, especially justice, race, and climate change."*[40] Young people themselves voiced a feeling of exclusion and desired to participate more fully as members of the parish community. The feeling of exclusion also manifested itself in some youth seeking a sense of belonging in the Church's ancient tradition of faith, prayer, and devotion. *"Youth who participated in synodal sessions, however, stressed that they should not be seen and spoken of mostly as the future of the Church, but should be recognized for their importance now and given a significant voice in the present. They want to be both seen and heard and included more in Church life, especially by participating meaningfully in parish and diocesan councils and ministries."* [41]

Young people's waning participation in parish life was a source of great pain for many older community members. They lament the departure of young people with anxious concern: *"I feel like a failure because I was not able to hand down my faith to my children who are now adults."*[42] *"It breaks our hearts to see our children that we brought to Mass and sent to Catholic schools and colleges reject the Church."*[43]

Ongoing Formation for Mission

Another common hope that emerged from the synodal consultations was the desire for life-long spiritual, pastoral, and catechetical formation as disciples. Synodal consultations made clear the importance of evangelization as we continue to live out the Church's mission, which requires stronger formation. *"Participants of every age and demographic group spoke of the need for lifelong formation. They would like to see more opportunities for Bible study, in-person and online courses, lectures, small-group discussions, and convocations among other offerings. [...] Members of all dioceses also wish the church would do more to support their spiritual growth by exposing them to many aspects of the rich heritage of Catholic spirituality. They ask for retreats and other opportunities to pray and reflect together as well as for encouragement in their individual spiritual lives."*[44] This reflects a longing among the People of God for a meaningful encounter with Jesus Christ: *"many responded with a deep desire to know and be attentive to the Holy Spirit, especially the movement of the Spirit in the Church and their lives."*[45]

In addition, the accompaniment of families throughout a life-long formation was understood as being crucially needed. "*Parents and children must make choices between Church and other activities, rather than being active in both. Reports said there is no longer a widely accepted day dedicated for Church involvement in communities— activities, practices, or games can happen any day of the week."*[46] Especially as *"the concept of the 'traditional family' continues to undergo significant change, it is important to acknowledge the presence of many types of families within the parishes of our dioceses, each of them with their own challenges, each seeking a welcoming community and ministerial outreach."* [47]

Another aspect of formation that synodal consultations viewed as central to our ability to journey together was the need for greater *"formation for seminarians and those already ordained to better understand human and pastoral needs, cultural sensitivity and awareness, greater emphasis on social justice, sharing resources with the needy, balancing the adherence to the dogmatic teachings of the faith with care for the emotional needs of their parishioners, how to include the laity in decision-making and learning to speak the truth with empathy, creativity, and compassion."*[48] Relatedly, many expressed 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."*[49]

SOCIAL MISSION OF THE CHURCH

The need for ongoing formation was keenly seen in the area of social mission, *"not surprisingly, since our social teaching is routinely described as our church's best-kept secret, there were very few explicit mentions of Catholic social doctrine or even the issues of justice in the region. However, when we consider the component themes of Catholic social teaching and the issues addressed, these concerns did surface regularly throughout the region."*[50] Synodal consultations acknowledged that *"the Church needs to help parishioners understand the connection between Catholic social teaching and outreach beyond the borders of the parish."*[51]

COMMUNICATION

Synodal consultations frequently expressed a hope for the Church to commit to strengthening communication. Many commented that *"improvement in communication between (arch)dioceses and parishes, between parishes and parishioners, and between parishes in the same (arch)dioceses, could lead to*

unity and reduce the spread of misinformation."[52] Other consultations saw the Church's use of digital media as essential to bringing the faith to the public square. One synthesis noted the Church's need for improvement in *"using media and technology for communications to serve in missionary discipleship — sharing the gospel— and covering geographic distances, to serve as the Church's voice in social and political arenas, and to be a place to learn demographics and needs and connect the Church and society."*[53]

Several reflected on the importance of clear communication, especially in the digital space, for reaching out to and engaging young people. Nearly all synodal consultations cautioned, however, that the Church and Catholic media engage in social and digital communications in ways that are both responsible and respectful, avoiding falling into ideologies that exacerbate division. *"Reports noted the great variety of outstanding Catholic media and digital resources, but they also lamented the challenge of identifying responsible Catholic media. Among the concerns expressed with media, it was observed that the most prominent perspectives are often the most divisive or sensationalist. Media is likely to report on hot-button issues, not the consistent ministry regularly provided by Catholic parishes and organizations. Our use of media increasingly serves to reinforce our preconceived notions or preferred ideology."*[54]

More poignantly, nearly all of the synodal consultations saw clear, concise, and consistent communication as key to the strong desire for appropriate transparency. *"The general category of transparency was mentioned over and over again: Transparency in the sex abuse crisis, transparency in making difficult decisions, transparency in financial matters, transparency in admitting when something goes wrong, transparency in planning, transparency in leadership. Transparency brings accountability which many people feel is lacking in the Church. To be a trustworthy Church, transparency is going to need to be an essential component in every level and aspect."*[55] As the Church seeks to continue down the synodal path, a commitment to clear, transparent, and consistent communication will be crucial. *"One key to improving collaboration among clergy and laity will be communication. Lay members in quite a few dioceses said they want greater transparency regarding decision making."*[56]

CO-RESPONSIBILITY

A genuine appreciation for the role of the laity in the Church and its mission was a hope that arose in many of the synodal consultations. *"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."*[57] This insight reflected a recognition of the tension between a genuine love for clergy expressed frequently in the synodal experience, balanced by an awareness of clericalism preventing full accompaniment and collaboration by the laity.

"A great deal of what must be done in a parish does not require ordination and many lay people have administrative and organizational skills. They could relieve pastors of some of the burden, freeing priests to be present and to develop relationships with people of the parish – something both priests and lay people desire. Some priests would need help with letting lay people take over parish tasks for which they seem convinced they have final responsibility and must therefore have the final word in all things."[58] As we discern a way forward, synodal consultations hope for an empowered *"relationship of collaboration"*[59] at all levels of the Church: *"the People of God signaled that they are ready and willing to assume their responsibility for service in the Church and in the world."* [60]

Engaging Discernment

The synodal experience has enabled hundreds of thousands of Catholics throughout the United States to re-engage in the simple practice of gathering, praying together, and listening to one another. There was wide acknowledgment from the regions that the call to participate in a synodal time in the Church was initially met with skepticism and suspicion; however, the regions also report that the experience itself dispelled many of the misgivings that participants brought with them to the process. Within a context of pandemic, polarization, and ongoing wounds of the clergy sexual abuse scandal, there has appeared a seed of renewal, *"a commitment to re-learn the art of listening and envision a new mission, goals, and priorities – remembering that we are on a pilgrimage together."*[61]

Discernment is a practice of the Church carried on in a spirit of prayer, meditation, and ongoing dialogue. The Spirit is the principal agent of discernment and leads us together to gaze upon the face of Christ in one another. Local, attentive listening to one another within and outside of the Church; participation, honesty, and realism; and a continued willingness to learn accompany discernment. The rediscovery of listening as a basic posture of a Church called to ongoing conversion is one of the most valuable gifts of the synodal experience in the United States. The synodal consultations report that hearing the joys and witnessing to the wounds that others have experienced, with an inclined heart, has opened a way forward for the Church in the United States to better experience and express its communion as a people united in a common faith. The next step for the U.S. Church is to give special attention to its parishes and dioceses, even as we continue participation in the continental and universal phases of the Synod, for that is where the People of God most concretely encounter the Spirit at work and where the first fruits of this discernment will be realized. The call is an ongoing challenge.

At this moment in the synodal journey, one may agree or disagree with some of the perceptions heard and expressed, but we cannot assume they have no importance in lived reality. To the extent persons of differing experiences and perceptions of "what's really going on" in the Church continue to meet and listen to one another, perceptions become more realistic and less based on broader cultural or political narratives. Insight becomes more profound when perceptions are based on actual listening and personal experience. *"The value of simply listening is a clear message of the Synod process. People must be able to speak honestly on even the most controversial topics without fear of rejection. We must be open to new ideas and new ways of doing things. That will require an understanding of what is central to the identity of church, diocese, and parish; and what changes can help us grow rather than feel threatened. Faith formation can help us develop greater understanding and grow in trusting the Holy Spirit who, as the Adsumus prayer reminds us, is 'at work in every place and time."*[62] This is a path we have begun. Much depends on how we rediscover the spiritual discipline of listening and genuinely reintegrate spiritual aspects of discernment into local church life. Attentive listening in the Church provides the catalyst for engaging discernment.

Discernment attends to the voice of the Lord in the Church's liturgy, in the Church's teaching tradition, and in the voice of the lived experience of the People of God. Many dioceses report that the listening experience provided valuable participatory input concerning local parish and diocesan priorities and plans. This indicates that the local fruits of synodality are of enduring value. A common thread throughout the various consultations was that parishes hoped to continue to build on the foundation

that has been established in the synodal consultations. *"It was frequently reported that the participants would welcome more opportunities to be listened to and to hear the expressions of others' views on the faith and the life of the Church. It was thought that this might contribute in a significant way to overcoming the polarization that is felt everywhere. Some noted how few opportunities are offered for true listening in a culture where we routinely speak past each other."*[63]

Discernment forward must also involve continued engagement with communities that our initial efforts at synodality have not robustly engaged. *"African Catholics, Deaf Catholics, and Disabled Catholics all told stories of being overlooked and unseen."*[64] This includes further encounters with indigenous peoples as well as diverse ethnic and cultural communities, including immigrant communities from Latin America, Asia, Africa, and other recent arrivals. Many experience the effects of displacement and live a kind of "invisibility" in the midst of the wider Church. Linguistic and cultural diversity is a persistent challenge to local parishes.

It is particularly noteworthy that local discernment is taking place about how to overcome standoffish or elitist attitudes, and how to welcome without judging. *"Whole groups of people feel that the teachings of the church preclude their sense of being welcome in the community. We need to examine the way in which certain teachings are presented, to demonstrate that we can be faithful to God without giving the impression that we are qualified to pass judgment on other people."*[65] Engaging and discerning with our sisters and brothers who experience the woundedness of marginalization, as well as those whose voices were underrepresented within the synodal process, will be essential for the unfolding of the synodal journey in our dioceses and in our country. Local communities report their experiences and hopes in this regard, but also report the tension of not always knowing how to catechize and evangelize in a way that does not impede the welcome, and the desire to accompany with compassion the wounded in our Church and in wider society. The local churches live this tension in the hope that synodal reflection on the level of the Universal Church will offer more guidance and direction so as to foster communion, strengthen participation, and effectively engage in the mission of the Church.

Gratitude is a gift of the Holy Spirit, which is essential for authentic discernment. Throughout all the synodal consultations, the People of God have continually shared their expressions of joy and gratitude for the invitation to journey together on the synodal path. These spiritual conversations and fraternal dialogues have renewed a sense of common love and responsibility for the good of our Church—in our parishes, in our dioceses, and in our country. Through participation in the diocesan phase of the Synod, the People of God have already begun to build the Church for which they hope. Listening brings forth the impetus toward healing our enduring wounds, and enhancing our healthy communion and participation, which is vital for living out our mission. This synthesis, as well as the syntheses generated on the local level, are an invitation to ongoing attentive listening, respectful encounter, and prayerful discernment.

> *"Attentive listening in the Church provides the catalyst for engaging discernment.*

End Notes

1 Catholic population (*The Official Catholic Directory*; parish-connected Catholics). Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, 2021. https://cara.georgetown.edu/frequently-requested-church-statistics/
2 Region V Synthesis
3 Region V Synthesis
4 Region III Synthesis
5 Region XI Synthesis
6 Region VI Synthesis
7 Region XII Synthesis
8 Region III Synthesis
9 Region XII Synthesis
10 Region VII Synthesis
11 "Region XVI" Synthesis
12 Region IX Synthesis
13 Region IX Synthesis
14 Region XII Synthesis
15 Region IV Synthesis
16 Region XI Synthesis
17 Region V Synthesis
18 Region II Synthesis
19 Region XIII Synthesis
20 Region III Synthesis
21 Region VI Synthesis
22 Region XI Synthesis
23 Region XII Synthesis
24 Region IX Synthesis
25 Region IV Synthesis
26 Region IX Synthesis
27 Region IX Synthesis
28 Region V Synthesis
29 Region XII Synthesis
30 Region IV Synthesis
31 "Region XVI" Synthesis
32 "Region XVI" Synthesis
33 Region II Synthesis
34 Region V Synthesis
35 Region IX Synthesis
36 Region I Synthesis
37 Region XII Synthesis
38 Region I Synthesis
39 Region V Synthesis
40 Region XII Synthesis
41 Region III Synthesis
42 Region XII Synthesis
43 Region XII Synthesis
44 Region IX Synthesis
45 Region VI Synthesis
46 Region X Synthesis
47 Region I Synthesis
48 Region V Synthesis
49 Region XI Synthesis
50 Region V Synthesis
51 Region XIV Synthesis
52 Region X Synthesis
53 Region X Synthesis
54 Region IV Synthesis
55 Region VIII Synthesis
56 Region IX Synthesis
57 Region XI Synthesis
58 Region IX Synthesis
59 Region X Synthesis
60 Region VII Synthesis
61 Region II Synthesis
62 Region IX Synthesis
63 Region V Synthesis
64 "Region XVI" Synthesis
65 Region IX Synthesis

Appendix A – The U.S. Synod Team

U.S. Synod Coordinating Team

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Bishop Daniel E. Flores, Chair, Committee on Doctrine, Diocese of Brownsville
Fr. Michael Fuller, General Secretary, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops
Julia McStravog, Consultant

Bishops' Synod Team

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Bishop John Stowe, OFM Conv, Diocese of Lexington, Region V
Bishop Joseph Tyson, Diocese of Yakima, Region XII
Bishop David Walkowiak, Diocese of Grand Rapids, Region VI
Bishop Thomas Zinkula, Diocese of Davenport, Region IX

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Appendix B – Catholic Dioceses in the United States