



Office of the Chancellor

## Introduction

The Diocese of San Diego held two diocesan-wide synodal events as part of the Universal Church's *Synod on Synodality*. The first diocesan synod on synodality provided an opportunity for the diocesan faithful to express their joys, sorrows, and hopes through their own personal narratives in small group dialogue sessions. This diocesan led synod took place in the Spring of 2022 with more than 11,000 participants. A second diocesan-wide synod took place in the Fall of 2023 focused on "Building Eucharistic Communities" with more than 13,000 participants with a significant number of youth and young adult participants. The methodology for these two synods was the same, which was using small group dialogues to create a space for personal storytelling centered on one's own experience in the Church and with the Eucharist.

The completion of the second diocesan synod in the Fall of 2023 corresponded with the conclusion of the first meeting of *Synod on Synodality* delegates in Rome. The synthesis report that was produced from the October meeting in Rome was distributed and read by clergy and lay leaders throughout the diocese. During January and February of this year, several diocesan advisory and leadership bodies assembled with Cardinal McElroy and the three auxiliary bishops to answer the question, "*How do the current diocesan and parish structures encourage or impede the formation of a synodal church which reflects co-responsibility for all?*" The groups that were separately convened to answer this question included the Diocesan Synod Commission, the Diocesan Pastoral Council, the Diocesan Pastoral and Administrative Curia's, the Chairs of the Parish Councils, the Presbyteral Council, members of the diaconate community, and women religious. The following is a summary of the answers and reflections to the aforementioned question.

## Structures that Encourage Synodality

The consultations pointed repeatedly to the enormous ways in which the priests of the diocese seek to lead their faith communities with faith, zeal, compassion and kindness. There is wide recognition of the foundational evangelizing role that our priests, especially our pastors play in forming and guiding the pilgrim people of God.

The consensus of the groups was that the particular Church in San Diego with Cardinal McElroy's leadership as well as other diocesan leadership to include the laity promoted a synodal model of Church and a culture of listening and inclusion. The diocese's synodal events and continual

outreach to include all persons to participate in the Synod on Synodality in San Diego was acknowledged as positive progress. The culture at the diocesan level is viewed as encouraging and supportive of creating a synodal Church with co-responsibility with all the faithful. It should be noted, however, that the leadership throughout the diocese, particularly at the parish level, is not uniformly in sync with establishing a pastoral climate that encourages synodality and co-responsibility. The consultative bodies that participated in this particular process are structures that currently exist that promote synodality and model co-responsibility in the diocese. However, parishes in the diocese vary greatly in terms of the structures that exist for pastoral and administrative governance. One example of this variation in structures is the parish pastoral council; some parishes have active parish councils while others may have a standing parish council that is not very active while still others may not have a parish council at all.

### **Structures that Impede Synodality**

The current polarization throughout society was identified as an impediment to moving toward a synodal culture as well as embracing opportunities for co-responsibility in the Church. Additionally, a culture of not listening and simply responding with your own viewpoint has emerged as a compelling cultural barrier to moving toward a synodal Church. A member of the Diocesan Synod Commission, wrote: *“What impedes the formation of a synodal church is that there is a culture of contempt in society, it has leaked within the Church that on some levels have led to a disregard of each other purely on a political stance or status. A culture in which we are not listening to each other’s hearts. We have been geared to hear words at face value and not allow the Holy Spirit to flow through such words. The problem is that secular media, even Church media, has gotten ahead of those dealing with the synod firsthand to discourage and even stray away from this process (synodality).”* In this sense, one of the significant barriers to a synodal Church is less structural and more attitudinal. All People of God must trust that synodality and co-responsibility will enhance the life of the Church and bring us in greater communion as a body of believers.

One prevailing theme that corresponds with polarization is a general resistance to any change. There are clergy and laity that simply reject any idea or change such as synodality that is not viewed as either traditional or firmly rooted in the past. A member of the pastoral curia, wrote, *“there are still many roadblocks that impede the formation of a synodal Church. Chief among this is an attitude that can only be described as one that does everything possible to keep things the way they have always been. The mentality of ‘not fixing something if it is not broken’ is encountered repeatedly.”* Similarly, another participant in the consultation wrote: *“some are afraid of change and tired of doing new things, content with doing things the way it has always been done before.”* This mentality, sometimes referred to the “maintenance mentality” is rooted in many different parts of the Church and impedes new efforts for evangelization and service to God’s people. There were five areas identified that potentially impede synodality and co-responsibility in the Church: (1) The many burdens placed on pastors, (2) The absence of formation for clergy and laity on synodality and co-responsibility, (3) The inconsistent utilization of the laity in Church governance, leadership, and ministry, (4) The need for community discernment, and (5) Operating in silos between schools, parishes, and diocesan offices.

## **Burdens placed on Pastors**

All groups emphasized the important role that pastors play in the leadership, management, and pastoral care in parish and diocesan life. These however, are impacted when a pastor is not able to create and sustain a collaborative and co-responsible culture within the parish given the many burdens that rest upon them. Some pastors lead with an emphasis on inclusion and co-responsibility while others lead with a more centralized and vertical approach to decision-making. There needs to be an intentional effort in our parishes to foster collaboration, co-responsibility, and a listening culture in order to move our particular Church in San Diego toward synodality. One of the auxiliary bishops summarized this point when he wrote: *“Clergy must be open to this type of listening and move away from clericalism. Our parishes and pastoral offices need to be open to this model (synodality) of listening to everyone’s opinion.”* Change toward a listening, synodal culture can only succeed when the lay leadership throughout the diocese are receptive to synodality and co-responsibility.

Pastors and the ordained clergy must lead all faithful toward synodality. Likewise, the lay leadership and all the People of God in San Diego need to be receptive to synodality and be willing to accept greater roles in leadership and ministry, that is they must be willing to be co-responsible. Many in the laity have supported the notion that the Church needs to be more open to the voices of all and the sharing of leadership within the Church. There are also many lay persons that prefer the current hierarchical model of leadership and stewardship in the Church.

## **Clergy and Lay Formation**

Many in the consultative groups expressed the lack of leadership formation for clergy and lay persons. A member of the Presbyteral Council stated, *‘that he was frustrated with the lack of priestly formation in the area of administration and outreach to the marginalized.’* A lay leader in the diocesan pastoral council, stated that *“leadership formation for current and future pastors needs to be developed. The diocese should have proper leadership professionals and formation to carry this out.”* The formation programs for priests, deacons and lay leadership provide very little education and training in what synodality or co-responsibility means, and no training on how to move toward a synodal, co-responsible Church. In fact, there is very little leadership and management training provided for pastors, clergy, or lay persons in the diocese. One of the deacons from the diocese wrote, *“asking a priest with little or no leadership experience to take on the role of a pastor seems to be setting him up for failure and a disservice to the parish where he is assigned.”* Leadership courses during formation for seminarians and deacon candidates could be a positive first step to equipping ordained clergy for leading, managing, and resourcing ministries and pastoral care. Additionally, ongoing leadership education and mentorship opportunities for both ordained and lay leaders is necessary for Church leaders to feel confident in embracing and leading a synodal, co-responsible Church.

## **Utilization of the Laity**

At the diocesan level, the laity play a significant leadership role in leading the particular Church of San Diego. All of the pastoral ministry and administrative offices in the diocese are led by lay people with the exception of the Office of the Permanent Diaconate and the Tribunal. In parishes in the diocese, the laity are often in leadership positions to include many of the directors of catechesis and faith formation. Yet, the full utilization and empowerment of lay leadership and lay involvement in managing parish affairs is not present throughout the diocese. A member of a parish leadership team wrote, *“Parish structures are deeply dependent on the personality, spirituality, and leadership style of the pastor. And for generations, that style has mostly been top-down and centralized. Therefore, neither many priests nor many parishioners have much practical experience with synodal methods or polycentric leadership.”*

It was acknowledged by many of the groups that were consulted that women play a significant role in supporting, working, and volunteering in both pastoral and liturgical ministries. However, many expressed that women are a significant source of leadership, and were still not fully recognized as there was not a pathway to ordained ministry, particularly to the permanent diaconate. This sentiment toward diaconate ordination for women was expressed by both clergy and laity in the groups. The laity as a resource for leadership, management, pastoral care, and liturgical service needs to be fully embraced throughout the diocese and the parishes to move toward true synodality.

## **Community Discernment**

In addition to providing training, education, and formation for Church leadership, ongoing community discernment was discussed as a necessary part of implementing and sustaining a synodal Church. Another Synod Commission Member writes, *“The form of communal discernment was utilized in the 1<sup>st</sup> century Church, specifically at the Council of Jerusalem. Here the community gathered in a council or synod to discern how to St. Paul’s mission to the gentiles should be undertaken. While there are other forms of decision-making processes that are valid, discernment of spirits is the most traditional and effective way to lead the Church in her mission both universally and locally. The process of synodality can be enriched by discernment. It is the greatest need of the world today. We can make use of this grace.”* Discernment as a community should be continuous as the People of God in San Diego move to a model of Church that is a departure from the way we have been as a Church for much of our modern history. Several people in the consultations indicated that discernment can also provide opportunities toward a path of greater understanding of what is synodality and co-responsibility, and how our Church can be nurtured to grow through synodality.

## **Operating in Silos**

The Universal Church is the largest and oldest continuous operating organization in the world. In the Diocese of San Diego, there are more than 1.3 million Catholics, and there are thousands of people employed by the diocese, the parishes, the schools, and Catholic affiliated organizations to include universities, hospitals, and non-profit organizations. All the Catholic people have the same mission to serve God and His people, and as a Church we are often fragmented and not unified simply by the organizational structures and lack of opportunities for collaboration. A staff member for the Office for Diocesan Schools writes that “our departments work in silos. There are few opportunities for collaboration or for us to strategically support one another in our efforts. We have few opportunities to work together collaboratively in intentional ways. Speaking from the schools, I believe there are opportunities for greater collaboration between different departments and schools.” Synodality can be a pathway to dismantling operational silos, and likewise, dismantling silos can lead toward synodality. Organizational structures that support a collaborative leadership and work climate are necessary to move from a vertical to a horizontal model of Church. One of the principals of one of our schools, noted that *‘parishes and schools often operate independently and opportunities for evangelization are missed.’*

Several people in the consultation suggested that organizational structures either be established or existing structures be modified to foster more collaboration and co-responsibility. The diocesan deaneries, of which there are seven in the diocese, are one existing structure that could be a potential source for eliminating silos and nurturing more dialogue and collaboration among parishes and ministries. Similarly, structures within the parishes could be established or re-established that promote a more collective accountability and management of parish affairs.

## **Conclusion**

The move from the hierarchical organization that has been our Church for centuries toward a synodal model of Church with co-responsibility with all faithful is a momentous paradigm shift that requires patience, understanding, formation, and education. The movement toward synodality was described by one of the participating consultants as “generational”. Any organizational, cultural change takes time and resources to bear fruit. There was a general consensus that our priests, particularly the pastors, carry a very heavy-load with multi-faceted responsibilities. These heavy workloads may even “discourage collaboration” as a woman religious wrote in her response regarding impediments to moving toward a synodal Church. Synodality and co-responsible does involve work and understanding, and ideally, synodality and co-responsibility leads to a more balanced workload for priests, deacons, lay leadership, and all those faithful active in both ministry and administration in our Church. Leadership and formation for both clergy and laity are the key elements to successfully move our Church toward synodality.