



ARCHDIOCESE
OF LOUISVILLE



“Journeying Together”

The Archdiocesan Synthesis II
Interim Phase

INTRODUCTION: In October 2021, Pope Francis opened the worldwide Synod on Synodality by inviting all the baptized to share their personal experiences, hopes, and concerns for the Church.

Initially, the three-year Synod had three distinct phases: diocesan phase (October 2021–June 2022), continental phase (Summer 2022), and universal phase (October 2023 and 2024 in Rome). After the first Synod meeting of bishops concluded in the fall of 2023, the interim phase was introduced. As a result, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) invited U.S. dioceses to conduct two to three listening sessions during Lent of 2024. Dioceses were asked to use the “Conversations in the Spirit” method introduced in the fall 2023 Synod of Bishops, focus on prescribed guiding questions, and prepare a three-to-five-page synthesis.

Local Invitation: In response to the call of the USCCB, the Archdiocese of Louisville scheduled three listening sessions. Unlike the first round in 2022 during which parishes, religious orders, or Catholic organizations facilitated the listening sessions, the Archdiocese facilitated these 2024 sessions.

The Archdiocese promoted the listening sessions through archdiocesan communication vehicles and asked all parishes and religious orders, as well as other groups involved in the first round of consultation, to promote it. This communication included the related questions for reflection. The USCCB proposed two guiding questions, which the Archdiocese of Louisville Synod Team edited slightly to create the following three questions:

- 1) Where have I experienced or witnessed ways in which Church structures, leadership, or life encourage and foster our shared mission?
- 2) Where have I experienced or witnessed ways in which Church structures, leadership, or life hinder our shared mission?
- 3) How can the Church’s structures and organization help us to proclaim the gospel and live as a community of love and mercy in Christ?

Local Experience: A total of 102 participants from 28 parishes and at least three religious orders attended one of the three listening sessions. Those in attendance were largely older and mostly Caucasian adults who were deeply engaged with the Church.

During these nearly two-hour sessions, the archdiocesan synod team utilized a “micro-version” of the “Conversations in the Spirit” method introduced at the 2023 Synod of Bishops in Rome. As recommended, time for prayer and reflection informed the agenda. Most in attendance expressed appreciation for the process and the opportunity to participate.

This archdiocesan report includes quotes focusing on the voices of the People of God. These quotes were not edited except to correct grammatical or typographical errors, and the original language is identified by quotation marks. Because of the way input was gathered, the quotes were often brief or bulleted. Thus, in many cases a word or phrase has been added to provide context or clarity to the quote. Those words are included without quotation marks, except when words were added in the middle of quoted material. These additional words are set off by brackets.

KEY TAKEAWAYS: Feedback from these Synod listening sessions included common themes, best summarized under the topics of hopes, leadership, inclusion, and engagement. Much of the commentary involved both positive and negative suggestions about what the Church should be doing; also included are insights that diverged from common opinions expressed.

Hopes: Those in attendance spoke about their love and concern for the Church and for the mission of the Church to be realized in the lives of Catholics and shared with the world at large.

“Let God’s love abide in us and among us. Believe that we can be and are called to be ambassadors of that love. Then run with that message!”

“If we focus on the power of the Eucharist, and we realize that we become what we receive, we need to do more to ACT as Jesus. Be conscious of our being the hands and feet of Jesus.”

Our group shared in common “our deep love for the Church.”

“I hope the Synod reveals what is important and what direction the Church should move to evangelize and meet people.”

Leadership: Clericalism among ordained leadership came up several times at each of the three sessions. Some comments described a style of leadership. Others focused upon what can help build strong leadership, including addressing the strains on ordained leaders and emphasizing the need for lay involvement, particularly the voices of women. In general, participants stressed “servant leadership,” which was seen in opposition to a “pray, pay, and obey” approach. One group report urged priests to be “foot washers.”

“The problem of a clerical structure where power is consolidated in one person and the problem of clericalism.”

I have experienced ways in which Church structures, leadership, or life encourage our shared mission through “good and faithful priests who work day in and day out.”

“The problem of [a] leader coming into [a] parish and changing things without learning the people of the parish...how things ARE.”

“There are not enough priests; they are too busy or stretched...not every parish has help for the pastor, which strains his leadership.”

“Clerical church structures don’t know the world we live in. Be more inclusive, humble, trusting others, respectful, collegial.”

Major themes of our group included “Leadership [that is] sincere, inspiring, well-educated and hope for the future.”

Our group discussed a common theme of a “personal encounter with the priest as person of Christ.”

While there was frequent commentary about married men and women being admitted to ordination, others discussed the need for the Church to foster shared leadership through greater involvement of the laity and by more effectively involving the voices of women.

We need “greater input from people of the parish. More input by people.”

There is “a lack of [the] feminine voice, youth perspectives (other than older male)...all gifts subordinated to the priest.”

“Women’s voices are denied.” There are “attempts to listen but history and structure are obstacles.”

“I fear the synodal process will, if allowed, accelerate declining attendance and further sow dissension within the Church. Given the...views expressed by those attending, I now do not find it surprising that the German Church or any other European country would recommend female ordination, performing of marriages for homosexuals, and other ideas contrary to the teaching of the Church.”

“Someone has to be ‘in charge’ – that’s human nature, but we have to be able to grow with the times, using all technologies and all talents.”

“We affirm that all people are gifted, and that leadership should be opened to all (ordination).”

“Clerical persons often fail to recognize the giftedness [of] those they are called to serve.”

We need “to change the way power is used and balance it with input from all involved.”

With the concern expressed about leadership, participants stressed the need for better training and formation.

“Seminaries need to incorporate the results of the Synod.”

We need “more and better training of clergy and deacons.”

We agreed “on the need for ‘pastoral’ training for priests (local and international) and for other parish ministers.”

Inclusion: The refrain “All are welcome,” informed the discussion of many groups that participated in the listening sessions. At times, this focused on specific persons who feel distanced or ostracized from the Church, such as the LGBTQ community, divorced and remarried Catholics, people of color, youth, women, and the poor. Others spoke more generally about being a welcoming church, building community, and reaching out more effectively.

It should be noted that some group reports reflected tension between a welcoming Church and the importance of the clarity of Church teaching, particularly regarding contemporary moral issues.

We need “to build a more welcoming Church and turn no one away or do the best we can to help.”

“Why are so many leaving the Catholic Church?” We are “not reaching out to people.”

The church’s mission is hindered “by polarizing issues such as homosexuality, divorce, and abortion. Not handled in a non-threatening or non-condemning way.”

“We must love the sinner. We need more passion for the Gospel. Claiming our Catholicism.”

I have experienced Church structures, leadership or life that encourage our shared mission in “parish life that builds community and accepts (most) all.” I have experienced Church structures, leadership, or life that hinder our shared mission “in avoiding or hiding from contemporary life, especially regarding gender roles, women, and LGBTQ families.”

“We need to stop asking ‘why don’t they come’ and ask instead where do we as a Church need to go to be present?”

Church structure, leadership or life hinder our shared mission with “the appearance that we are ‘excluding’ people or that we have a ‘lock’ on salvation.”

A major theme of our group was “the need to include all people with a sense of belonging and community...All are welcome.”

“Inclusion is of God. Division is diabolical.”

Engagement: Engagement emerged as a pressing issue for those who attended these listening sessions. Those attending spoke about the power of worship and service to bring us together and their sadness over those not engaged. Examples of the lack of engagement included youth, young families, those who have left the faith or are inactive for a variety of reasons, and groups mentioned above who feel marginalized in the Church. Participants

proposed a variety of approaches to increasing engagement including small faith groups, more relevant preaching, mining the depth of Catholic prayer experiences, the need for better catechesis, increased vocations, vital worship, the importance of evangelization, greater focus on spiritual development, the centrality of the Eucharist, creating more vibrant parishes, and fostering gift discernment and calling forth people to leadership and participation. There were several suggestions about strengthening the understanding of Catholic social teaching, and there was a strong focus on the Church more effectively supporting families. Catholic schools were cited as a great strength and opportunity to advance the mission, but participants noted the lack of engagement among some school parents.

“Families not engaging with the faith; integrating the faith into their lives. Hard to get families from Catholic schools to come to Mass. How [do we] continue religious education in a meaningful way after 8th grade Confirmation class?”

The Church’s structures and organizations can help us to proclaim the gospel... “by meeting the needs of busy families, recognizing that we all aren’t monks and nuns.”

A major theme from our group was “Love – the need for vehicles for people to experience this through the Church [with] structures that engage ordinary people, enable participation, such as service opportunities, social events, in effect opening doors.”

“Young families need support [by] helping families with their needs. All demographics need help in living out their baptismal call...; encourage vocations-teach discernment. We can have unity without uniformity, balance with clarity and charity. [Promote] Catholic social teaching, [as] compelling case for the Gospel.”

We need “more adult formation/education; family prayer/rituals.”

“Youth focus is not there. In most churches, it is lost.”

“Every parish should have an outreach program to the poor, disaffected, LGBT, and other marginalized Catholics and non-Catholics as well.”

“The organization...hasn’t adapted to be dynamic in a dynamic way. Particularly for orthodox families who are seeking other young families...the parish structure has become obsolete to meet the needs of orthodox Catholics to deepen their faith.”

There has been “a great exodus of ‘nones’ without lament.”

“Meet busy families where they are.”

“There is no fire for souls in our bellies. Older Catholics are demoralized and grieving. A lot of universalist or semi-universalist believers make evangelization an after-thought.”

Our group recognized the need “to reach out to all families, traditional and non-traditional, including other cultures.”

Our group identified “the need for ongoing formation, solving the dilemma of how to get people engaged, attend, etc.”

A major theme in our group was “the powerful role of parents, dealing with outside influences.”

We need “stronger stances on dogma...make the ‘why’ known.” We need “stronger beliefs and stances. Get youth involved.”

I have experienced ways in which Church structures, leadership or life hinder our shared mission through “my teenage children not ‘buying in’ to the Catholic faith because of their distractions/rigidity of Mass.”

The Church’s structure and organization can help to proclaim the gospel by being “on fire with mission, [including] different ways [of] learning, working, praying, outreach, social mission.”

“Most often Church structures are geared to maintenance. Unfortunately, the structures themselves tend to reinforce the status quo, not engage in shared mission.”

TENSIONS: The synthesis from 2022 identified polarization as a major theme. Polarization did not emerge in the same way through these 2024 listening sessions. Many of the small group reports reflected notable agreement among participants. However, some tension emerged between a more traditional or orthodox view of the Church and the viewpoints of those who often described themselves as the Vatican II or progressive Church. Below is a reflection forwarded from one person who attended a listening session:

“Many of us feel the process was instituted to achieve a specific public and internal relations outcome...I recognize my communication is in vain, but I feel compelled to let you know there are many who do not share the progressive views you heard last night.”

CONCLUSION: INSIGHTS OF THE SYNODAL PROCESS: Our first synthesis identified insights for the local Church. All of these remain relevant and are offered below with edits reflecting this round of input. It is important to recall that the purpose of this synodal process was to journey together, guided by the Holy Spirit, and not to immediately develop solutions or action plans. In considering the fundamental question of the Synod, what is the Spirit saying to our local Church?

- We need to continue to talk to one another. Synod insights from listening sessions again revealed how Catholics value coming together to talk about their faith and their Church.
- Utilizing the “Conversations in the Spirit” method and the kinds of questions raised by the Synod, which sought to move people beyond personal agendas, as well as training in dialogue and discernment skills, could enhance this journeying together. Significant efforts in these areas, including dialogue among clergy and laity, could begin to address consistent concerns about clericalism.
- Engagement is a critical issue for our local Church, especially for youth, young adults, families, and other groups that experience alienation from the Church. Those who participated in the synodal process want the Church to be a vital force in the lives of individuals and communities, and they care deeply about the disconnect with some members of the community. People want the Church to accompany and help people as they deal with the joys, sorrows, and challenges of daily life.
- Participants at these 2024 listening sessions frequently cited the importance of promoting the full scope of the Church’s social teaching. Related action in these areas could provide rich opportunities for deeper engagement. It also could serve to address issues of inclusion among various groups and to confront the various “isms” that plague our communities (racism, materialism, individualism).
- Issues continue to emerge about the discipline and doctrine of the Church in the areas of ordination, moral teachings (such as human sexuality), and practical issues (such as the formation of priests and greater involvement of laity in decision-making in the Church). While most in attendance engaged in respectful dialogue, there is tension among those who cite the importance of strongly reinforcing Church teaching and those who believe Church teaching needs to change.
- Trust in leadership and transparency, at both the parish and archdiocesan levels, are critical issues. Efforts to improve leadership skills need to be supported and enhanced to help address concerns about engagement and clericalism. The legacy of the sexual abuse crisis cannot be forgotten.