

Diocese of Fort Worth
Diocesan Synthesis Report
Synod 2021-2023

Introduction:

The Diocese of Fort Worth, conscious that “*our identity and belonging together as the Catholic Church in North Texas are only given to us through Christ's loving and sacrificial gift of the Eucharist,*”¹ set up our synodal journey of listening to the voice of God and to each other to discern what the Lord is saying to us a local Church. We undertook the process as a spiritual experience, grounded in the Eucharistic presence of our Lord Jesus Christ, for it is in Him that we find our identity and unity.

The Diocese of Fort Worth extends 23,950 miles, across twenty-eight counties in the state of Texas and is comprised of 91 parishes, located in rural and urban areas. In an effort to reach the highest number of faithful, each parish held at least one listening session reflecting the synodal spirit that recognizes that all the baptized have something to contribute to the conversation and discernment. The synod also asked us to reach out beyond the parish boundaries, to go to the peripheries and in order to do that, there were listening sessions held by Catholic Campus ministries, a retirement community and a special session was held with the local Catholic Deaf Community.

In the Diocese of Fort Worth, the journey began on October 17, 2021 with Bishop Michael F. Olson presiding at Mass at Saint Patrick Cathedral. In the same month he named the Synod Diocesan Contact Persons—Paola Quintero-Araújo and Rev. Jonathan Wallis. He then authorized the establishment of a Synod Diocesan Team made up of lay persons and religious who began meeting in November 2021.

In February 2022, the parish listening sessions began. In preparation for the sessions, participants were given a document intended to guide each person to reflect on how well we are listening to the will of God and as the Church to bring the love of Christ into the presence of our world. Pastors were given the ability to schedule their listening sessions to adapt to the situation at their parishes. The parish listening sessions started with prayer and exposition of the Blessed Sacrament by the Pastor, a reading from the Gospel and silent time for prayer and reflection to allow the Word to take root in the hearts and minds of each participant. The goal was to foster genuine and fraternal conversations and communal discernment rooted in openness in sharing as well as hearing and listening.

For the listening sessions, the conversation was focused on the two-part fundamental question proposed by the synod: “A synodal Church, in announcing the Gospel, “journeys

¹ Bishop Olson’s Pastoral letter, June 3,2019

together.” How is this “journeying together” happening today in our local Church? What steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow in our “journeying together?”²

In addition to the in-person listening sessions an online survey was created. The survey was available via a link to the Diocesan website and was posted via social media and parish bulletins. We recognized the importance of reaching out to involve a broad variety of individuals. Our goal was to give an opportunity to hear those individuals that may not be affiliated with a particular parish, to those that due to COVID concerns have not come back to the parishes, those who could not attend their parish session, or those who may feel alienated from parish life.

There were a total of 112 listening sessions held across the diocese in English, Spanish, Vietnamese and ASL (American Sign Language). The total number of participants was 3,311 of which 41 were individuals who made use of the individual survey link. One of the surprises we found in the synodal consultation was related to the individual respondents submitted to the online survey. The submissions were not as numerous as initially expected and the demographics indicated that the majority of the respondents were white, married, female who attend Mass once or more a week. In the responses there were just a few grievances, but the vast majority were a genuine exercise of prayer, spiritual reflection, desire to contribute and offer their God-given talents to the service of the Church and to the building of the Kingdom of God.

The sessions were concluded on April 15, 2022. For each session, we requested that a summary highlighting the main themes that emerged during the synodal conversations be shared for the Diocesan summary. Once we received all of the individual reports, we then divided them up between six members of the diocesan synod team who then in a spirit of prayer summarized the main themes which were presented through the reports. This compilation of the major themes was then presented to the Presbyteral Assembly on May 5, 2022. They in turn reviewed the findings and discussed them in groups, and submitted their thoughts, comments, and additions.

The Diocesan Pre-Synodal Gathering was held on May 7, 2022 with the participation of Bishop Olson, several priests and deacons, and 90 delegates from parishes and campus ministries representing the diversity of the People of God in the Diocese. The delegates and 15 facilitators first attended Mass with Bishop Olson serving at the main celebrant. There was then a period of Eucharistic adoration. The group then assembled in the parish hall for a review of the main themes that emerged from the synodal conversations. The delegates then met in small pre-assigned working groups and the major themes that emerged from the listening sessions were discussed. Small groups then gave reports back to the large group. The morning ended with lunch and time for informal conversation.

² Preparatory document for the synod, 26; Vademecum, 5.3

The gathering was a very joyful and prayerful occasion. During the time together, we remembered the journey, we shared with each other, we looked at the paths opening for our local Church and had a dialogue about the steps the Holy Spirit is asking us to take to continue to journey together as the Diocese of Fort Worth united in Him and through Him.

There are two immediate fruits that became evident through the process: first, people are happy to be meeting once again in-person after the isolating experience of COVID. They were genuinely happy about the access they had during the pandemic to Mass and the Sacraments, beginning the first weekend of May in 2020. They also wanted people to know that they are cared for and there is a true desire to see people come back to the church after the pandemic. They saw the synodal discussion as a time to truly reflect on what God is asking of us to serve him in our present day and age. The second fruit was that many people took advantage of the synodal process to participate in constructive conversations to discern where the Holy Spirit is guiding our local Church. It was an exercise of the People of God in the diocese, both clergy and laity.

Synthesis:

While exploring the answers to the fundamental question, some of the other aspects listed under the ten thematic nuclei that articulate “lived synodality” were present. Topics such as: companions on the journey, listening, speaking out, celebration, sharing responsibility.³ These were the topics that emerged and became important in our local synodal process.

The major theme that emerged from the listening sessions was that the celebration of the Eucharist was the central point of unity in the Diocese of Fort Worth. The vast majority of participants stated that the Mass is experienced at the Sacrament of unity around which all the cultures, languages and age groups gather together in communion with God and each other. While recognizing that the Eucharistic is the source of our unity as one Body of Christ, participants also recognized that many members of the Body are absent from the table. There is a strong desire to reach out to those who have not returned to church since the beginning of the pandemic. There is a desire to let our brothers and sisters know that they are missed and we long to have them with us to express more fully our communion with God and one another. There was also a desire to reach out to those who have experienced hurt, are alienated from the community, and to those who do not feel welcome or do not have a sense of belonging⁴.

Another major theme was a great gratitude for the wonderful gift of priesthood of our local clergy and to those men who have come from foreign lands to give themselves in loving and faithful service to the Church. There is also the recognition and desire to work for priestly vocations from our local communities and families. There is a desire to have

³ Preparatory Document, 30

⁴ Cf. 1 Corinthians 12, 26

priests to be from and serve in our small rural communities. There is a hope to have our local families encourage their sons to listen to the voice of God and respond to His calling. Concerning the seminarians of the Diocese of Fort Worth, there is great support, encouragement, and gratitude for their diversity of ethnicity and language and also their belonging to the local church of the Diocese of Fort Worth. Important to their formation is to be sensitive to the pastoral needs of different cultures, as well as those with special needs, the elderly, disabled, deaf, migrants and to learn to minister to those struggling with same sex attraction. From the listening sessions, there is the recognition that the work towards vocation should start in our own families, for is within the families where vocations are planted and nurtured⁵. The Bishop, priests, deacons, directors of religious education, youth ministers, parents and catholic schools must work together in order to create and sustain a culture of vocations through the diocese.

Another major theme that emerged from the listening sessions was an assessment of the activities that build up the spiritual life of the faithful. Many reflected on how the celebration of Mass and the other Sacraments, Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, spiritual retreats, and evangelization activities serve both to build up individual and communal relationships with God and with each other. Additionally, catechetical efforts, particularly walking together with those in RCIA, serves as a place of encounter and growth. In order to further these relationships, there is a desire and renewed interest in faith formation at all age levels, with emphasis on family catechesis, and a place to gather and to encounter each other in our shared unity and diversity of experience. The desire is to encourage and support parents in their roles as the first catechist of their children.⁶ There is also the realization that many parents and families lack time due to work and school commitments. This results in an inability to participate and receive parish-based catechesis and formation.

There is also a renewed desire to be evangelizers and to reach out to our brothers and sisters who are not journeying with us. There is a desire to aid and assist persons to reorganize personal priorities to focus on God, to renew and foster a greater understanding of the Church, to love and reverence the Eucharist and the Sacraments, and to renew a sense that the Eucharist is the source and summit of the Christian life⁷.

As a local Church we journey together in service to others both inside and outside the physical boundaries of the local parishes. Within the parishes, service takes the form of ministries in which many parishioners contribute their gifts and talents to the service of each other and the Church. Many also reflected on the good work taking place where parishes participate in various forms of social outreach and service to the most vulnerable

⁵ Cf. Lumen Gentium 11.

⁶ Cf. CCC 2225- 2226

⁷ Lumen gentium, 11; cf. CCC 1324.

and in need⁸. While many efforts are made in the area of social concern, the pandemic brought to light the need to continue to work towards access to education, immigration, care of the elderly, care for the disabled, and to reach out to those in the peripheries. Listening sessions also revealed that a small number of parishioners feel they do a large share of the work. This leads to a desire to see greater participation. There is a sense that there can be burn-out of the small percentage of parishioners who do participate, and frustration in not being able to satisfy the needs of others, especially the most vulnerable.

To maximize efforts in the area of service, there is a desire to unify ministries so that they can be mutually supportive to better reach and serve our communities. There is also the need to renew, develop and foster lay leadership, to avoid burnout of those most involved and bring new life and reinvigorated the ministries. Central to this desire is the recognition that “the laity have an active part to play in the life and activity of the Church, their activity is so necessary within church communities that without it the apostolate of the pastors is generally unable to achieve its full effectiveness.”⁹ There is also a desire to have leadership that matches parish demographics. There is the hope to engage with the local community through outreach to those in need, working in collaboration with other denominations and organizations to better serve the increased needs brought by the pandemic and recent natural disasters in our diocese.

As we remember the experiences of journeying together, another major aspect is “intentional fellowship” meaning intentional encounters with others, either through parish wide sponsored events and/or opportunities for parishioners through diverse ministerial offerings. This brings people together and builds community not just within the parish but extended to the larger community especially among our youth. Many of the parish conversations included times of thinking back to how things were before the pandemic and reflecting on where we are today. There is both joy and longing as we find a significant difference between the variety and frequency of opportunities available for fellowship and community building before the pandemic and after, as well as the numbers of people attending Mass and various events. In order to address this situation, there is a recognized need and desire to reinstitute many of the programs and events that were put on hold during the pandemic, as well as to reach out to our brothers and sisters who still have not come back to Mass and parish activities.

In order to have intentional gatherings for fellowship there is a general desire to be more welcoming and encouraging of existing parishioners while also doing more outreach to those not journeying with us. We need to identify and act upon opportunities for fraternity, fellowship, care of others as community, and to foster Christian life. At the same time,

⁸ Cf. 1 Corinthians 12, 5

⁹ Apostolicam Actuositatem, 10

there is the recognition that we can continue to be sensitive to the needs of others as individuals and as members of the Church.

The synodal process has brought to light a desire for unity, engagement, understanding and helping each other. It served as a medium to reunite those who have been separated due to restrictions placed by governments on gatherings with the goal of mitigating health concerns during the pandemic. There was also great support of the diocesan response to the COVID crisis, especially in the area of access to the Sacraments, especially Mass, beginning again with safety protocols on the first weekend of May of 2020.

Another result of the conversation is that realization of what has come to light is that the “goal” of our journeying together, rather than creating a new vision or pastoral plan, is to be present with one another, to listen and learn with each other, and to grow closer to the Lord and His Church. Therefore, the synodal process has fueled a desire for more opportunities to come together to listen to each other in kindness and openness and to find ways to continue to journey together. There is a desire to grow in communion, participation and mission, recognizing that all of the members of the Body of Christ have something to contribute. We entered into conversation with the idea that “synodality is at the service of the mission of the Church, in which all members are called to participate. A Synodal church is a participatory and co-responsible Church.”¹⁰

People found in their conversation that authentic dialogue between all the members of the People of God is to be grounded in faith and lead by the Holy Spirit to foster proper discernment. All are invited to speak with courage and parrhesia, that is, in freedom, truth, and charity¹¹ and to listen with an open mind and heart. After we listen to each other, we are called to dialogue together to find ways we can accompany each other as we seek to grow in holiness. Listening and speaking within the Church always means first listening and speaking with God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—in prayer. We listen, dialogue, and pray together so that we can hear the voice of the Holy Spirit, but we must overcome feelings of isolation, unworthiness, discouragement, inadequacy, insecurity and distrust to be able to reflect and recognize what needs to change in order to grow as a Church, not just in membership but in Faith.

The listening sessions also pointed out that a real challenge to dialogue is our current social and political environment. It is increasingly difficult to see each other as God sees us and to listen to each other. As a result, we must find ways to focus on listening to God and in turn to be able to listen to each other. Dialogue depends on courage both in speaking and in listening. We recognize dialogue is not about engaging in a debate where one speaker tries to get the better of the others or counters their positions with arguments, but it is about

¹⁰ Preparatory Document, 30 (V)

¹¹ Cf. Preparatory Document, 30 (III)

expressing whatever seems to have been suggested by the Holy Spirit as useful for communal discernment. At the same time, we must be open to accepting whatever has been suggested by the same Spirit in other people's positions, "for the general good" (1 Corinthians 12:7).

Another major theme was the work each of us must do to bring about unity in our own time and place. God brings us into unity with one another as He draws us into union with Himself: "God does not make men and women holy and save them merely as individuals, without bond or link between one another. Rather has it pleased Him to bring men together as one people, a people which acknowledges Him in truth and serves Him in holiness."¹² Therefore, we need to be bridgebuilders to facilitate the coming together of different cultures and generations. As Pope Francis has said, "Our Christian identity is belonging to a people. Without the Church, we are not Christians." (Mass at Santa Marta, May 15, 2014). There is a desire to gain knowledge and appreciation of cultural and generational differences, and to learn what we do not know about each other. The recognition is that we must do what we can to help strengthen our communion with one another as we are made by Christ into his one, mystical body.

Conclusions/Next steps

In listening to the voice of God and each other, as a Diocese we feel the Spirit is calling us to:

- Renew the love and reverence for the Eucharist and the Sacraments and to foster greater understanding of the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist.
- Create a culture of vocations within the families throughout the diocese in partnership between the ordain and the lay specially those working with families and youth.
- Be bridgebuilders between cultures and generations to facilitate the building of the Body of Christ.
- Strengthen faith formation across the board (family catechesis, adult catechesis, youth formation, young adult ministry).
- Renew, develop, and foster lay leadership in order to have leadership that is representative of the parish demographics.
- Take steps to improve communication, with each other, between the diocese and the parishes, and among parishes.
- Provide more opportunities to come together to listen to each other in kindness and openness to find ways to continue to journey together.

¹² Lumen Gentium, 9

The information that emerged from the synodal consultations will be used in a number of ways. Among them are the following:

- The information will be shared with parishes to show everyone the picture of the local Church as it emerged through various conversations.
- The information will be used as a basis for pastoral planning within the advisory boards of the Presbyteral Council, College of Consultors, and the meeting of the Deans.
- The information will also be used to help direct future planning within the lay-advisory boards of the Diocese, such as the Diocesan Finance Council.
- The working group of the Synod Diocesan Team will serve as the core for a future consultative body in collaboration with Bishop Olson.
- Parishes will be encouraged to begin important meetings with times of Adoration and prayer. Beginning the listening sessions with Adoration and prayer focused the conversations and assisted people to first listen to God and then to each other.

In conclusion, the diocesan phase of the synodal process offered an opportunity for the entire diocese to reacquaint ourselves with each other. The pandemic created separation between persons and communities. There is a great desire in our diocese to reunite, particularly in the celebration of the Eucharist.

The process offered an opportunity to truly listen to others. The process revealed that people love the faith, love Jesus Christ, and desire to share that faith with others. There is a real desire to bring people back to the Church. United with Bishop Olson, the clergy and laity of the Diocese of Fort Worth have used the synodal process to listen to God, to each other, and to continue to walk together in faith.