



**REPORT ON THE DIOCESAN PHASE OF THE
2021-2023 SYNOD ON SYNODALITY
DIOCESE OF ST. PETERSBURG, FLORIDA**

JOURNEYING TOGETHER

Report on the Diocesan Phase of the 2021-2023 Synod on Synodality

Diocese of St. Petersburg, Florida

I. Introduction: Timeline and Process

In response to the announcement in May 2021 by the Vatican that the Synodal Process, culminating in the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in October 2023, would begin with the Diocesan Phase in each particular Church and in response to the Synodal Preparatory Document released on September 9, 2021, Most Reverend Gregory L. Parkes, Bishop of St. Petersburg, appointed a 13-member team to oversee the Diocesan Phase of the Process, consisting of eight men and five women, including four members of the clergy, one religious sister, six lay ecclesial ministers and two lay disciple volunteers. At their first meeting on September 16, 2021, the team determined that they would not approach the Synodal Process simply as an administrative task but would fully engage in the process of discernment, as requested by Pope Francis.

Bishop Parkes formally opened the Diocesan Phase of the Synodal Process with Mass at the Cathedral of St. Jude the Apostle, in St. Petersburg, on October 17, 2021. Having outlined the process ahead during the prior weeks, the Synod Team gathered for a retreat on October 28, 2021. In November and December 2021, the Synod Team conducted five parish empowerment sessions, to form leaders for the Synodal Process throughout the Diocese: one pilot session for Diocesan staff, plus three sessions in English and one in Spanish for pastors, parish representatives, and leaders of ecclesial movements. These sessions included prayer, catechesis on the topics of synodality and discernment, *Lectio Divina*, small group discussions, large group reporting, and instructions regarding logistics, facilitation of discussion, and the reporting of discussion results.

The Synod Team asked that the parishes in each of the Diocese's nine deaneries (vicariates) cooperate to ensure that at least two Synod sessions be held in each deanery – one focused on prayer and catechesis on Synodality, and one focused on prayer and discernment with small and large group discussion. Individual parishes and other Diocesan ministries were also encouraged to hold Synod sessions of their own, especially sessions targeted for groups who are marginal in the life of the Church and society or who do not typically engage through the structures of the parish. Two

deadlines were provided for submission of results: February 22, 2022 (Feast of the Chair of St. Peter the Apostle) for most parish and deanery sessions and March 25, 2022, (Feast of the Annunciation) for parishes or ministries needing more time to reach groups on the peripheries.

Having equipped leaders in parishes and other ministries with the experience of a Synod session and materials to conduct sessions of their own, the role of the Synod Team transitioned to one of support. This support included encouraging parishes and other ministries to hold sessions for the faithful and others, seeking participation by groups on the margins, attending and assisting at sessions, recommending sessions for Bishop Parkes to attend, launching an online survey on March 2, 2022 (Ash Wednesday) to receive additional feedback, and conducting or attending special events for deacons, for religious, for Catholics who experience same-sex attraction, for family members of the former, for non-Catholic Christians (including a schismatic community), and for those who claim no religious affiliation.

II. Return of Results and Questions Considered

As late as January 2022, it was unclear how much response to the Synodal Process the Diocese of St. Petersburg would see beyond the minimum of 18 sessions coordinated at the level of the deaneries. By March, the response far surpassed that number. Deaneries, parishes and other ministries hosted approximately 156 Synod sessions with approximately 6,480 participants, in multiple languages.

Furthermore, the Diocese received over a dozen letters from individual Catholics and approximately 207 responses to the online survey. Several sessions were held specifically for youth and young adults. Other sessions ensured the participation of specific groups: migrant workers, prisoners, the homeless, the sick and homebound, university students, young adult leaders, healthcare workers, African Catholics, African American Catholics, Native American Catholics, Hispanic Catholics, and Portuguese-speaking Catholics, as well as young children and their parents.

Most sessions hosted by parishes or other ministries combined the elements of catechesis and group discussion, and in most sessions, discussion occurred in two phases: first in small groups, and then all together. In small groups, participants discussed a list of questions developed from the ten themes proposed in the Synodal Preparatory Document. While parishes and other ministries

were invited to adapt these questions as needed, especially if the session included many non-Catholics, the standard list read as follows:

1. Who is journeying with you in your spiritual life? Who doesn't have this accompaniment? Who appears to you to be alone on the journey?
2. Do you feel heard or listened to in the Church? What enables or hinders you in speaking up?
3. How is the Holy Spirit working through your parish to draw people to Christ? What opportunities have we missed?
4. How have your experiences with Catholics different from you in opinion, spirituality, or lifestyle aided you in your faith or challenged you in your faith?
5. How is the Holy Spirit drawing us all closer together in communion, participation, and mission? Where is the Holy Spirit leading the Church?

Near the end of the time allotted for discussion in small groups, each group was asked to choose one representative to report before all present what consensus had emerged in their discussion. For this, participants discussed in their small groups two questions developed from the “fundamental question” in the Synodal Preparatory Document:

1. What consensus or common thread emerged regarding what we [the Church] are doing well?
2. What consensus or common thread emerged regarding what the Holy Spirit is leading the Church to do better?

Pastors or ministry leaders submitted to the Diocesan Synod Team summaries of answers to these last two questions, and in some cases summaries of answers to the foregoing questions as well. A member of the drafting subcommittee reviewed all submitted results and prepared a first draft of the Diocesan report. Members of the Synod Team were invited to review this draft as well as all, or a representative subset of, submissions and to recommend revisions to produce a second draft. In mid-May, the Synod Team gathered in-person to develop a final draft for review and publication by Bishop Parkes.

III. Summary of Results

III.A

What follows is a summary of results. Unless especially poignant or insightful, all results reported below appeared in two or more deanery sessions or three or more sessions hosted by individual parishes or ministries. Across all the Synod sessions, in answer to the question “What consensus emerged regarding what we are doing well?” two themes were especially prominent: First, the Church offers an abundance of opportunities to the faithful for prayer and for service. Second, many of the faithful believe that the clergy listen to them and their concerns with attention and care.

Other successes mentioned across sessions include: the generosity of the Church’s charitable works, beautiful liturgy and music, good homilies, excellent Catholic schools, a wide array of opportunities offered for formation, especially for adults and through engaging Scripture, successful ministries of outreach, especially to the homebound, the sense of community, hospitality, and diversity that pervades parish life, the success of small groups in supporting participants to live out their faith, and the inspiring leadership of Pope Francis.

III.B

Answers to the second question “What consensus emerged regarding what the Holy Spirit calls the Church to do better?” were extensive and diverse. Yet, these answers also fell into five sets of themes grouped together based on the frequency which they appeared in the reports.

III.B.1

The first, most prominent, and nearly universal set of themes exhibited two major facets: The Holy Spirit calls the Church to do more in the way of outreach and evangelization, and the demographic most noted by far to which the Church is called to reach is youth and young adults. Many aspects of how the Church engages with the youth surfaced throughout the sessions: how we reach them, support them, and provide them with formation. Other groups to which the Church ought to reach out include, most prominently, non-practicing Catholics and, less frequently noted, the Hispanic community, the grieving, prisoners, the poor, the homeless, the homebound, Catholics who experience same-sex attraction, single people, and non-Catholics. A third facet in the first set

was formation, mentioned both generally and specifically with regard to youth, adults, and families. Like that of formation, many themes appeared both in answers to the first question, regarding what the Church is doing well, and in answers to the second question, regarding what the Church is called to do better.

One proposal that surfaced at least twice recommended approaching faith formation as an intergenerational endeavor at every step, i.e., designing multifaceted programs of formation that provide opportunities for engagement by adults, both single and married, youth, and children separately, as well as opportunities for engagement together as families.

A second proposal concerned a strategy for sustaining youth engagement with Church ministries after they have received the Sacrament of Confirmation. It was recommended that, whereas the focus of formation during childhood is largely catechetical, in preparation for the Sacraments of Initiation, the focus of formation following reception of the Sacraments of Initiation should be on service. The two phases ought to overlap strategically before the reception of Confirmation so that youth come to anticipate and appreciate the opportunities for service that the Church provides to them in subsequent years.

A contrast emerged with regard to how youth and young adult formation was discussed at different sessions. At the deanery sessions, the consensus treated the Church's engagement with youth and young adults almost entirely in terms of concern and need for improvement. However, at the level of parishes and other ministries, just as many submissions expressed pride in the quality of their youth ministry. This suggests that, while the concern appears in almost every deanery, many parishes across the deaneries are addressing the need for youth ministry with success.

III.B.2

The second set of themes likewise exhibited two major facets: failure to listen and poor communication. Despite how widely participants across the Diocese said that they felt that clergy listened to them attentively, results indicate that some clergy have much room to grow in their practice of listening. Regarding communication, in several cases, participants simply asked clergy or parish staff return their phone calls. Communication is also lacking among parishes in the Diocese and among different groups or ministries within the same parishes, as well as with the Bishop and his Pastoral Center staff (Chancery staff).

III.B.3

The second set illuminates in some ways the third most prominent set of themes: a lack of sense of community and of sense of unity in the community, a lack of opportunity for discussion, fear of speaking up, and judgmentalism. Although several submissions expressed gratitude for the synodal process, others judged it insufficient and requested both more frequent opportunities for dialogue and opportunities for dialogue on controversial issues. Multiple submissions explored what motivated fear of speaking up: Such reasons included fear of being misunderstood, fear of being dismissed, fear of being judged, fear of reprisal, and fear that dialogue will yield no change. Topics of liturgical music, styles of worship, and traditional piety likewise surfaced frequently but with little consensus. Multiple participants expressed hurt with regard to the recent changes to availability to the Latin Mass (Mass according to the 1962 *Roman Missal*). Gratitude was expressed to Bishop Parkes for pastorally permitting the continued celebration of the Latin Mass, in conformity with the Holy Father's most recent *motu proprio*.

III.B.4

The fourth most prominent set of themes included a lack of engagement with Scripture, a lack of engagement in ecumenism, the need for vocations (in some cases, a specific need for Spanish-speaking priests was mentioned), a need for greater attention to the role of and leadership opportunities for women, and the need for greater pastoral sensitivity for and outreach to Catholics who experience same-sex attraction. The last two concerns surfaced frequently and often in conjunction with the threat of judgmentalism.

Homosexuality and the role of women appear to be topics of acute controversy, which strain communal life of parishes and other ministries, and likely require attention through synodal practice at multiple levels of the Church. Letters received from individuals reinforce this point. Many sessions indicated that women do not feel that the Church listens to them, and one deanery session noted that “women often feel silenced.” Catholics who experience same-sex attraction often noted the pain and alienation they experience in the wake of negative interactions with clergy, fellow parishioners, and classmates in Catholic schools, as well as their struggle with questions regarding whether and how to continue to practice their Catholic faith. In relation to points of controversy, many submissions recommended that the Church develop the capacity to “meet people where they are.”

III.B.5

The fifth and final set of themes included: the need for more opportunities for the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and more opportunities for engaging through small groups; the need for greater clarity in setting forth, and deeper appreciation of, Catholic moral and social teaching beyond the pre-eminent issue of abortion; the need for pastoral sensitivity with Catholics who are divorced or divorced and civilly remarried; the problem of clericalism; and the threat of polarization in the Church. Related to the last topic, some sessions explicitly linked the threat of polarization to a widespread fear of speaking up or speaking forthrightly and to distrust of institutions generally. A comparison of notes from the different sessions indicates that distrust of institutions appears across the ecclesial and political spectrum.

III.C

In comparison with the overall results, some themes were more distinctive of specific targeted groups. For example, the Hispanic community placed special emphasis on the need for unity in the Church, especially across divides of language and ethnicity. They also noted the need for more Spanish-speaking priests. The migrant community requested that Church leadership give greater attention to their specific needs, such as pastoral care, education, and advocacy regardless of legal status, as well as support for families “so that they can witness to our faith and be able to evangelize.” African American Catholics drew attention to the problem of racism in society and in the Church. The homebound expressed a desire for more outreach to them, as well as pastoral care for persons who are grieving. Among sessions that targeted the youth, expression of desire for a greater sense of community was somewhat more pronounced.

The session for students at the University of South Florida (USF) generated distinctive answers to both the first and second questions developed from the “fundamental question” of the synodal process: USF students assessed positively the Church’s structure, liturgy, openness to others, diversity, and consistency. Regarding where the Church is called to do better, they noted the need for more formation and greater accessibility, the need to overcome judgmentalism in the Church, and a desire for a greater degree of courage, clarity, and compassion on the part of ecclesiastical leadership in setting forth the teachings of the Church on morals, and other hot topic issues.

Apart from the sessions, responses to the online survey exhibited similar themes. Different from the foregoing, there were expressed desires for greater attention to widows and widowers, and for more opportunities to participate in the Mass according to the 1962 *Roman Missal*. Both online survey results and letters received from individuals were more likely to address controversial issues than were the Synod sessions. This is likely an unanticipated effect of the method employed to gather results. In both the discussions in small groups and the summaries of whole sessions, participants were asked to report what consensus emerged among them. The process of seeking consensus likely filtered out most extreme opinions and mitigated attention to the most divisive issues. Although controversial topics may be addressed more directly by future synods, such pursuit of consensus is nonetheless an essential part of listening to the Holy Spirit in discernment and synodal practice.

IV. Further Reflections

Having presented the results of Synodal Process above, three points call for further reflection before moving to a conclusion. The first concerns what the method of gathering reports of consensus reveals. To some extent, this method moderated some surprising or provocative opinions, such that most of the concerns reported may have been anticipated. However, the method indicates the relative weight or prominence of the concerns upon which consensus was achieved in the hearts of the faithful.

With regard to how the Church is called to improve, it is valuable to know that the responses naturally fell into different sets: The first set of concerns includes, on the one hand, the Church's outreach and evangelization and, on the other hand, the demographic groups which the Church is called to address, most prominently youth and young adults. The second set includes practices of listening and communication – themes especially identified for attention in the Synodal Process by the Synod of Bishops in Rome. The third set includes issues of culture in the Church: community, unity, opportunity for and openness to discussion, and the problem of judgmentalism. Knowledge of these naturally distinguished sets of concerns among the faithful equips the Church to approach them in an order most conducive to unity and according to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Second, several of the concerns above, especially of the third set, are best addressed through the sustained practice of synodality in parish life. Such practice must be combined with renewed

commitments to listening and to disciplined responsiveness on the part of clergy and parish staff. Both of these points appear among the intentions of the Synodal Process initiated by the Holy Father Pope Francis: renewed commitment to listening and a renewed style of synodality at all levels in the life of the Church.

Third, in the preparation of this report, a question arose among some members of the Synod Team drafting committee concerning the meaning of the prominent theme of outreach, specifically, what is the relationship between “outreach” and “evangelization”? In some cases of the appearances of these terms in the submitted results, the two appear to be synonymous. In other cases, each seems to indicate a different aspect of the Church’s mission. The question is at once interpretive and theological, so a theological consideration may serve to illuminate the relationship between them.

The Church exists to evangelize, both *ad intra* and *ad extra*. Evangelization makes it possible for a person to encounter Jesus Christ. To foster this encounter, the evangelizer must encounter the evangelized, i.e., must meet the other in a manner that is radically open to seeing the other and to listening to the other as God sees, and God listens. The one who evangelizes thus sees Jesus Christ in the one evangelized. To be encountered in this way prepares the one evangelized to receive the message of the Gospel and, in turn, to encounter Jesus Christ in His Church.

“Outreach,” as the term appears in the submitted results, seems to indicate this essential aspect of evangelization. Christians are called to speak of Christ, and also to encounter others as Christ does. At times, one of these elements is emphasized, and at other times the other. The two concepts of outreach and evangelization thus emerge in the results as linked by the subtle theme of encounter.

V. Conclusion

This report represents just a snapshot of the Diocesan Phase in the Diocese of St. Petersburg, Florida of the 2021-2023 Synod on Synodality. As the USCCB and Pope Francis and the Synod of Bishops in Rome have said, the report is simply an instrument of much more important processes of discernment and synodality underway in the Church – processes that begin in the hearts of the faithful and that unfold in families and small groups, in parishes and dioceses, and at the level of episcopal conferences, their associations by continent, and the Universal Church. Regarding this report, Most Reverend Gregory Parkes, Bishop of St. Petersburg, together with his local church,

prays that it may serve to illuminate what the Holy Spirit speaks to the faithful of his Diocese, for their benefit as well as for the benefit of the Church in the United States of America, the Church in North America, and the Universal Church. Through this Synodal Process and all the synodal practice of the Church, may the Holy Spirit guide us ever more deeply into the life of Jesus Christ.”