

A Synthesis of the Consultation of the Particular Church of Austin
XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops
For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission

Submitted by

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In October 2021, Pope Francis opened the synodal process of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. The Holy Father’s aim with this synod has been to involve the whole church at local, national, and continental levels through a process of “listening and discernment” on the important theme of synodality: “For a synodal Church: communion, participation, and mission.” As the Holy Father opened the synodal process in the Holy See, Bishop Joe S. Vásquez of Austin formally opened the synodal process with a Eucharistic celebration at St. Mary Cathedral on October 21, 2021. The synodal path was launched throughout our diocese with parochial events and gatherings between December 2021 and February 2022. The Synodal Leadership Team, under the direction of Dr. Fredron DeKarlo Blackmon, facilitated five regional consultative meetings with Bishop Vásquez in February 2022.

The objective of the diocesan phase was “to consult the people of God, so that the synodal process may be carried out by listening to all the baptized,” who, as the Second Vatican Council said, “cannot err in matters of belief.” Each parish was invited to host parochial consultative sessions with the Christian faithful that were to be imbued with prayer, reflection, and sharing prompted by the fundamental question of the synod, “A synodal Church, in announcing the Gospel, ‘journeys together.’ How is this ‘journeying together’ happening today in your particular Church? What steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow in our ‘journeying together’?” The significance of the various parish sessions, coupled with the regional sessions with Bishop Vásquez, was to express vividly how synodality should be articulated as a constitutive dimension of the Church.

In addition to the information provided by the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, the diocese provided resources – facilitators, participants, and toolkit guides – through diocesan communication channels not only to help answer the basic question, but also to promote and facilitate consultative sessions in parishes and communities. While participation was sought through two primary means, *parochial consultative sessions* and an *online survey* for those who were reluctant to participate in consultative sessions, information from correspondence to senior diocesan officials was also used.

The online survey was made available to the Christian faithful via links on diocesan social media, parish websites, and bulletins. In addition to in-person consultative sessions, various parishes hosted sessions via virtual technology. Based on the syntheses of parochial and regional sessions, coupled with the diocesan synodal survey, there were approximately 5,020 participants and respondents, respectively.

The consultative sessions and surveys were structured around seven major areas: (1) journeying together, (2) listening, (3) speaking out, (4) sharing responsibility, authority, and participation, (5) discerning and deciding, (6) celebration, and (7) the Holy Spirit. Most syntheses revealed that the perspectives, thoughts, and beliefs of participants were frequently recapitulated or elaborated throughout the areas of discussion. With the purpose of reviewing this information objectively, it is imperative to understand that this information takes into consideration the lived experience of the Christian faithful in Central Texas during an extraordinary time of virulent pandemic. In an effort to convey the fruits of the diocesan phase from the People of God in Central Texas, this synthesis presents the themes that transpired and emerged from the parochial syntheses, the surveys, and the information received by senior diocesan officials.

Chapter 2: Discernment of Collected Contributions

The synodal process in the Diocese of Austin was an opportunity for the People of God to come together in prayer, to listen to one another, and, more importantly, to listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit. While there existed a mixture of joy, hope, and apprehension about the synodal process, the voices of the Christian faithful throughout Central Texas overall expressed gratitude for our diocesan synodal journey. Many people appreciated the opportunity to have been asked by the Church of their thoughts about their lived experiences of the faith, with some people conveying that they had “never been asked by the Church what we thought.”

Major themes or areas of concern that arose from the consultations were (1) the need for more consultative conversations, (2) the effects of the coronavirus pandemic, (3) the importance of encounter, welcome, and hospitality, (4) the re-experiencing of faith and life, (5) concerns for the unchurched and those on the peripheries, (6) the need to publicly proclaim church teaching, (7) appreciation of the Roman liturgy prior to 1970 and *Traditionis custodes*, and (8) the good work of service and outreach ministries. These themes and areas of concern are rooted in the certain reality that Christ reconciles the Christian faithful to the Father, uniting the community in the Holy Spirit and providing the People of God a role in discerning and living more fully the call of God. The advocacy for one another evidences an expression of the participatory nature of how the Christian faithful are qualified by virtue of their baptism and called to serve one another through the gifts received from the Holy Spirit. While some commented that this synodal process was a difficult exercise of being open and forthright, the Christian faithful accepted the responsibility to bring about “the mission of evangelization in the world as a leaven at the service of the coming of God’s kingdom.”

Need for More Consultative Conversations

A significant group of those present documented the vibrancy of the sharing between those who participated in the parochial and regional synodal consultative gatherings. The reflections of people who participated in the consultative sessions expressed how “the Holy Spirit revealed to us that we are not alone in our struggles and gave us the opportunity to become more courageous.” Those who actively participated felt the consultative sessions proved to be a particularly good opportunity to recognize what the Christian faithful could be doing better to be more inclusive and responsive to the spiritual and physical needs of parochial communities.

There were expressions of disappointment and frustration that more of the Christian faithful did not engage in the parochial and regional consultations. Some explicitly stated their doubts that this synodal process would accomplish anything particularly relevant for the local or universal church. At the first regional consultative session, a person expressed the opinion that there is a variance between what the synodal documents convey and what the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches. In other sessions, some not only expressed disappointment that more people did not participate in the consultative sessions, but also implored that the Bishop to encourage pastors to ensure that this process of consultation would continue in the local church.

Some were surprised and disappointed that more people did not attend synodal consultative sessions, revealing a poor turnout among pastoral council and parish staff members. While some felt that there are many opportunities to come together to listen and share ideas for the benefit of a given parish, there was disappointment that synodal consultations had a low turnout due to lack of interest in some parishes. While some expressed the reasons for low turnout to be because people felt “nothing would change” or “fear of rejection by others due to clericalism.” Others stated that they would not be listened to because they are *just* laity. Overall,

because of the enthusiasm and concerns of those who participated in the consultative process, it has been recommended that the Bishop host regional listening sessions to give the Christian faithful an opportunity to address issues or concerns with the Bishop.

Effects of the Coronavirus Pandemic

The enduring effects of the coronavirus pandemic has been incredibly stressful to the Christian faithful throughout Central Texas. The experiences of many people, regardless of socioeconomic status and ethnicity, revealed that the pandemic both positively and negatively impacted parochial communities and the spiritual life of those communities. A negative point that was shared by many people concerned the perspective that the hierarchy played a contributory role in crippling our “journeying together.” Some felt that the church did not stand up enough for religious freedom to practice the faith and to receive the Eucharist when secular authorities issued mandates to lock-down houses of worship.

While some expressed pandemic hardships and trauma made it hard for people to find the dynamism to engage their parish communities, some families expressed how fellow parishioners provided support to those stricken with the coronavirus. During the crippling effects of the coronavirus pandemic in local communities, people overwhelmingly reported how parishioners came out to support them. Gratitude was expressed for those who helped foster a sense of community and family during a difficult time.

Encounter, Welcome, and Hospitality

As a result of the coronavirus pandemic, a feeling of decreased fellowship opportunities with others was reported. Participants also voiced appreciation for living in community (as opposed to isolation) and the joy of returning to Mass, noting that the restrictions imposed by

secular officials during the pandemic gave rise to a renewed desire of encounter, welcome, and hospitality – regardless of the cultural disposition of the community.

Parishes and people across all cultural groups expressed an understanding that everyone is called to be hospitality ministers – to be hospitable to those at Mass. A largely Hispanic/Latino parish expressed that while people of non-Latin backgrounds often find it difficult to relate to its cultural celebrations, the parochial community has chosen to become even more welcoming to others by taking on religious celebrations with which others are more familiar. Explaining that this is no way diminishes the cultural heritage of the parochial community, it significantly allows the community to invite and welcome more people to God’s table. Parishes of varying socioeconomic status expressed that the synodal process served as a wonderful way to open the door to more involvement and have the church feel more welcoming.

A Re-Experiencing of Faith and Life

Coming out of the throes of the coronavirus pandemic, the Christian faithful reported experiencing a revitalization of spirituality. This revitalization of spirituality came by means of communities participating in live-streamed liturgies, virtual faith formation gatherings, and the People of God engaging with each other through small Christian communities. The Christian faithful expressed feelings of unity in diversity locally and universally – like a fundamental sense of being part of something greater. People reported that the ability to participate has unexpectedly been enhanced for many groups during the pandemic. While the pandemic severely stunted opportunities for communal gatherings, parishes and people became innovative to find creative ways to return. The necessary shift to online meetings provided a greater opportunity for people to participate in meetings that, prior to the pandemic, they were unable to participate in person.

A couple of parochial syntheses identified that the synodal process has been the Holy Spirit's answer to the coronavirus pandemic. From every corner of the diocese, parishes that communicated syntheses identified that prayer and liturgical celebrations, especially the Sunday Eucharist, inspires and guides the parochial community because the Christian faithful are inspired to recognize the genius, gifts, talents, and community the Lord has given his people. People identified that the pandemic brought about an impetus to "let the mustard seed grow – readying a new awakening from the darkness of the pandemic." The centrality of the Eucharist has been a particularly expressive aspect of the re-experiencing of faith and life. The centrality of the Eucharist has stimulated "making space for those on the peripheries by seeking unity as opposed to uniformity."

Speaking for the Unchurched and Those on the Peripheries.

As stated previously, widespread participation was an important part of the diocesan process, particularly in view of the diversity of this local church. People of every demographic – culture, race, age, ideology, and station in life were called to participate in this synodal process. As a result of this clarion call to all peoples, there were concerns voiced by the "unchurched," those who are not in regular practice of the faith, those whose views are considered to be at odds with Church teaching, and those who are concerned about the former. People expressed clearly that the unchurched speak loud and clear, conveying that they feel neither welcome, nor invited. Some parishes were contrasted with others in terms of being welcoming and hospitable by reason of opinions on women's roles in the Church, LGBTQ rights, and reproductive issues. People expressed that when the unchurched and those on the peripheries are marginalized, our communities lose sight of the needs of society. This results in youth feeling ignored and

dismissed, the voices of women being silenced, LGBTQ individuals, their families and friends not feeling loved and welcomed, and varying cultural groups being deemed irrelevant.

While some expressed fear of being rejected or judged because of lifestyle choices, political ideology, opinions on the roles of women in the Church, stances on the LGBTQ community, or feeling rejected by the community for being divorced or single parents, most people understood that there is a need to reach out to those who feel they are not welcome. Regardless of the hardships or struggles of the Christian people, there was a recognition to respond to the needs of all God's people. This also includes the elderly and those with "diverse-abilities." A space to respond to the unchurched and the marginalized in a manner oriented to Jesus Christ is imperative if the local church is serious about encounter, accompaniment, and journeying together.

Publicly Proclaim Church Teaching.

Some participants felt that the Church needs to be clearer in articulating Catholic teaching. Parochial syntheses, and communications sent directly to senior diocesan officials, expressed that taking a societal stand on abortion and LGBTQ [issues] are sometimes difficult due to the social repercussions that often result to those who hold to what the Church teaches. Some people, particularly young people, expressed that leaders sometimes lack the conviction to uphold Catholic teaching. Just as people expressed a desire for the hierarchy to take a stand against those who publicly support abortion by withholding Holy Communion, people also identified the need for an environment where those who are not in line with Church teaching (same sex marriage, cohabitation, abortion, etc.) might be appropriately pastored by the Church and encouraged to be faithful to what the Church holds to be true.

Roman Liturgy Prior to 1970 and *Traditionis custodes*

A concern voiced by some concerned the celebration of the Roman Liturgy prior to the reform of 1970 (the Latin Mass), and more traditional postures and gestures associated with popular piety. Concerns about perceived pressures on the Latin Mass were expressed largely through correspondence received by diocesan officials and the parochial syntheses. Some stated that, for them, the Latin Mass inspires reverence, worship, praise, and thanksgiving. Some expressed dismay about *Traditionis custodes*, the apostolic letter issued *motu proprio* by Pope Francis which – from their perspective – unfairly restricted the celebration of the Latin Mass. While there were those who appreciated the Latin Mass for the ability to receive Holy Communion while kneeling, the experience of what was termed traditional “sacred liturgy, sacred music, use of Latin, incensing, and *ad orientem* as a means for our sanctity and salvation,” the consensus was that every liturgy – the Latin Mass and the *Novus Ordo* – should be celebrated with the utmost beauty and reverence. Consultation with members of the local presbyterate suggested examining further the draw to the Latin Mass by those born after 1970.

Service and Outreach Ministries

Participants and respondents conveyed that service and outreach ministries provide the Christian faithful with the ability to proclaim the Gospel by deed and example. Some parishes that submitted syntheses conveyed that outreach to neighbors in need was a significant focus for their parochial communities. In other parishes, parishioners reported that outreach efforts could be much better. The work of the Knights of Columbus, the Knights of Peter Claver, the Katolická Jednotá Texaská (Catholic Union of Texas), and the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul has been fruitful for outreach in parochial communities. The Christian faithful are able to participate in the mission of the Church to proclaim the Gospel by outreach programs for those

dealing with grief, homelessness, pro-life activities, and poverty. People expressed a desire to expand opportunities to connect with and participate in shared outreach ministries with the other ecclesial communions and non-Christian faith communities.

Chapter 3: Conclusion

As we have concluded the diocesan phase of the synodal journey for the 2023 Synod of Bishops, we recognize this process to be an opportunity to reflect on the work of evangelization and discipleship. We hope these opportunities of journeying together, encountering and accompanying each other, listening, and sharing will impel us to bring the truth of Jesus Christ and the Gospel to the faithful.

We held our Pre-synodal gathering on March 12 at St. Louis King of France Parish in Austin to celebrate the synodal journey in our diocese thus far. Bishop Vásquez convened the Christian faithful for an opportunity of shared prayer giving thanksgiving to God for the local church's participation in the synodal process. After Morning Prayer, we reviewed the themes that emerged from synodal conversations. Findings were subsequently presented to the Presbyteral Council on March 15 at the Diocesan Pastoral Center.

As we reflected on the feedback received from the consultative process across the diocese, we finalized this diocesan synthesis that represents the fruits of the listening and discernment of the People of God in Central Texas. This synthesis has been made available via the diocesan website, www.austindiocese.org.