



Synod 2021/2023
For a synodal Church
communion | participation | mission

Region VI Synthesis

Introduction

Region VI has population and geographic diversity, with large urban Dioceses in Detroit, Cleveland, Cincinnati, and Toledo. Mid-sized Dioceses include Columbus, Lansing, Grand Rapids, and Youngstown. Dioceses that cover a large geographic area, with fewer numbers of Catholics, include Saginaw, Kalamazoo, Marquette, Gaylord, and Steubenville. The Catholic population within Region VI is 3,524,730.

Each Diocese participated in the Synod with diverse teams representing a variety of ministries within the Diocese. Those teams customized their approaches, participating in and providing training and toolkits for facilitators, participants, and note takers. The teams then organized consultations, or listening sessions, both in-person and virtual, and organized by parish, deanery, schools, or organizations.

Additionally, online surveys were available for those not connected with a faith community, or who chose not to participate in a scheduled listening session. All of that feedback was summarized by the team in a diocesan report sent on to the USCCB by the end of June, 2022.

Throughout Region VI, the dioceses utilized many ways to raise awareness about the Synod, including diocesan websites, print media, radio interviews, social media, bulletin inserts, pulpit announcements, communications to Diocesan clergy, Catholic schools, Presbyteral Councils, Deacon Councils, Women Religious, and other constituents. Listening session resources were offered in English, Spanish, and American Sign Language to assist the deaf and hard of hearing. American Sign Language interpreters were available in two of Cincinnati's listening sessions.

Participation Highlights			
Number of in person sessions	1,322	Number of in-person participants	33,647
Number of virtual sessions	35	Number of virtual participants	461
Participants in online surveys	22,915	Number of reports received	876

As part of the synodal process, we were encouraged to take special care to reach out to the peripheries, those who have left the Church, those who rarely or never practice their faith, those who experience poverty or marginalization, refugees, the excluded, the voiceless, etc. Outreach occurred to chaplains at local universities, Catholic Charities, Prison Ministries, LGBTQ family support groups, bereavement support groups, non-Catholics, homebound, those in nursing homes, etc.

In two dioceses, the lay faithful were invited to take one extra step, as a missionary action, to have a one-on-one conversation with someone in their circle of family or friends who has left the church or who falls into one of the marginalized categories. Although the numbers of those reached with this effort appear small, this is precisely the personal outreach and invitation that is required of us to share the Gospel.

Anecdotally, the Diocese of Cleveland hosted a holiday activity for families and a Synodal Celebration of Las Posadas. Highlighting the theme of journeying together was helpful in attracting attention to the goal of the Synod. The conversation starter for holiday gatherings with family and friends was a one-page handout including a QR code that led to an online report form. The same handout was adapted for use during the season of Lent. *Please see Appendix B.*

Similarly, the Diocese of Lansing created a conversation guide that was printed and distributed to all of the parishes. It was also made available for download from the diocesan website. In this particular instance, eight questions were discerned to form the synodal conversations. *Please see Appendix D.*

At the onset of listening sessions, participants expressed skepticism about the value of the process; however, at the conclusion of the sessions, participants expressed gratitude for the opportunity to prayerfully reflect together about their faith journey. Consistently, participants expressed a desire that their Diocese would continue to offer this type of experience in the hope for a more faithful Church. Most coordinators expressed genuine surprise that the Synod listening sessions brought forth such heartfelt feedback – the sessions were not complaint sessions as some anticipated. Rather, the sessions were constructive, and this brought consolation.

As the regional team gathered to pray about, discern, and write the Regional Report, we agreed on the importance of having a listening session as a group, and below are thoughts that were shared from the representatives throughout Region VI:

*What were some of the milestones and/or turning points of the synodal process in your diocese?
Did you experience any difficulties or surprises?*

- People were upset at first – it was bad timing. We came up with a simple process (examen) that would help people remember what they loved about the Church. During the training sessions people had lots of questions and concerns, but after experiencing the examen, they really liked the experience and couldn't wait to try it in their communities. The extended timeline helped and allowed for word of mouth to travel, which led to increased participation.

The diocesan pre-synodal gathering was another opportunity to gather together, reflect on the feedback, share and listen, learn from one another, and discern a way forward as a diocese.

- Some of the milestones were finalizing the questions, writing the first draft. Challenges included timing because we were already surveying members of the diocese with Catholic Leadership Institute; offering hope to participants that their voice matters. Surprises: how similar the joys and challenges are across the board. Everyone was so grateful for the opportunity.
- Challenge of not following through in the past; too many transitions in the diocese; turnovers; encouraged by the reports; a good thing for moving forward; help for their new bishop
- Major reorganization of the diocese, lots of anger; held deanery meetings instead of parish meetings; resistance from pastors, some did not share the information; did not reach enough marginalized communities; people still showed up even with weather issues; good numbers, enthusiastic, refreshing process
- Emphasis on prayer through the process (45 minutes); prayer informed the experience, didn't always say what they expected; shifted the process after it started to address people's concerns; power of being heard; shifted from being results-oriented to positive experience of synodality; less concerned about the report
- Adapted resources from Archdiocese of Washington; process may have been a little too complicated for their diocese; piloted during deanery trainings; prison ministry surveys; Catholic Charities 1-page flyer on how people can participate; we don't talk enough about all the great things we do; aggressive timeline especially for pastors; winter weather challenges; 2-hour meetings with a prayerful environment; some parishes chose not to participate
- Formed diverse team representing the populations they wanted to reach; have done surveys in recent years; invited people to have conversations with people they know; provided 8 questions to start; QR code for report form; can also do "self-interview"; conducted some listening sessions; challenges with communications office and pastors not following instructions; not as many responses as hoped for but those received were gold; reworking materials to make available for future use

After the Regional team had this session, we all felt ready to gather thoughts, divide responsibilities, and summarize the themes from the diocesan reports in Region VI.

Discernment of the Fruits and Themes from Region VI

To discern the fruits born from this Synodal process, each team member reviewed all thirteen diocesan syntheses and identified the pivot points. From a statistical perspective, the larger the population, the more likely one is to accurately identify the "central tendencies" or themes. The more predominant a given theme was, the more likely it would truly reflect what the people would view as a key theme/fruit/discernment. However, even points not as predominant may be important to highlight. It is important to note that these themes are not listed in any order of importance. All of them, however, were discerned in many, if not all, of the regional syntheses.

What follows are the collective fruits of the Region VI syntheses as discerned by the committee. First, we will list the positives and joys about the Church today. Then we will indicate

opportunities for growth in the Church today as shared in the listening session throughout the Region.

Where the Church is Doing Well/How the Church is Journeying Together Today

In the narratives and social media of today, and in the publicity that the Church receives from the secular press (as well as “Catholic” sources that either lean right or left), it seems that a major focus is its scandals: sexual abuse, financial fraud, scandals in the seminaries, etc. What is frequently overlooked, or not publicized sufficiently, are the many good things that the Church does. Examples would include works of charity in a wide variety of forms, including hospitals, Catholic Charities, all levels of academic institutions, St. Vincent DePaul Society, Knights of Columbus, missions, ministry in prisons and jails, and generous support of missions around the world. Locally, many people expressed their gratitude for the Church and the sacraments, and for the experience of community that comes from being a member of a parish.

At a local or parish level, many participants expressed recognition and gratitude for programs like Christ Renews His Parish, Cursillo, Project Alpha, Pregnancy Centers, sidewalk counseling and praying at abortion clinics, assisting immigrants, providing adoption options, hospital chaplaincy, food pantries, funeral planning through parish bereavement groups, teaching theology of the body to grade school children in an age appropriate manner, RCIA, retreats, youth groups, youth summer camps, and caring for those in retirement homes or assisted living facilities by bringing them the Eucharist and providing companionship and spiritual care.

Related to these was the mention of how our senses are stimulated to recognize the presence of God in our lives and in the Liturgy. The beauty of many of our Churches and the beauty of the symbols used in the Liturgy – incense, music, and reverential prayer – give one a sense of the awesomeness of God and an awareness of God’s presence.

The faith community is like a family that grows together and cares for one another, especially during times of difficulty. Participants expressed much appreciation and gratitude for the support they experience in serving the community and praying together. Parish life and social activities foster a sense of community and strengthen personal relationships among members. For those active in their faith communities, these personal connections seem to counterbalance any thoughts or feelings that are contrary to Church teachings. Additionally, having the pastor participate in these events seems to further enhance the benefits to the community.

Many reported a deep desire to know and be attentive to the Holy Spirit, especially the movement of the Spirit in the Church and in their lives. They also felt that the Church has a wealth of resources for spiritual formation, including Scripture study, retreats and spiritual direction. Catholic schools and youth ministry programs were also mentioned as significant experiences with a lasting impact on faith development.

In summary, participants felt that there were many things that we as Church are doing well. The second fundamental question that the Synod asks is how can we, as Church, journey together better? It is to this question that we now turn our attention.

How We Are Being Called to Grow As Companions on The Journey

Create a Welcoming and Personal Environment

There was a very predominant consensus that the Church needs to be more welcoming. That said, there was diversity in what the word “welcoming” means. For some, it means that the local parishes need to find a way to overcome the cliques that can naturally occur over years of sharing in the various ministries of the Church. Such sharing leads to lifelong friendships that can often be at the exclusion of others.

For others it meant that as a Church we need to be more accepting and inclusive of all God’s children: divorced, LGBTQ, young adults and youth, the elderly, the poor, those from different cultures, fallen away Catholics, other minority groups, people with disabilities, the separated or divorced, the homebound, etc. It was frequently heard that these members of the Church feel that they are being judged by others, and as a result, do not feel like they are welcomed in the Church. The result is that many of them leave the Church in search of other faith communities that welcome them and accept them just as they are.

Many ideas were expressed on how to begin to address this problem. Some ideas include providing a ministry that reaches out via personal invitations, identifying members who have the natural gift of hospitality and creating welcoming teams for new parishioners or those who are left out. Also mentioned was assisting parishioners to invite and encourage others to attend Mass and parish events. Another suggestion was to establish ministries that focus on the people identified above to help them to see what the Church truly is, despite flaws that regrettably exist. We need to create safe spaces and foster a greater sense of community – a willingness to listen to the concerns of others and provide pastoral support in a way that is respectful and compassionate – in a way that communicates that God’s love is not exclusive.

Discipleship and Evangelization

Participants expressed a strong desire to be missionary disciples and share their gifts in the Church and in society. There is a lot of good work being done by lay-led organizations and parish groups. The Church on mission, and the faithfulness of Catholic lay people and priests were seen as ways to attract others. Participants also described the importance of relationships with other organizations, such as universities, in advancing the mission of the Church. Finally, the pandemic, in spite of all the challenges, brought about many opportunities for increased collaboration and creativity in reaching out, maintaining relationships and sustaining ministries.

Participants often noted that, in general, the Church must do more to reach out and evangelize to those beyond our present community, which will involve witnessing to the Gospel in word and deed. Although participants believe that evangelization is best accomplished through personal encounters, they often feel ill-equipped or lacking the catechesis to do this themselves. There needs to be special emphasis on reaching out to and evangelizing our youth and young adults as their numbers and participation are drastically declining, and this population is a missing demographic at Mass and in our Church communities.

Participants believe that the Church needs to market more actively, spreading the positive messages about our stories and successes. They also believe that if we want to reach as many people as possible with this messaging, there is a need to use social media more aggressively to accomplish this. Such a practice could indeed bring a more welcoming environment to the Church.

Moral Teaching

Many Catholics are confused over the moral teachings of the Church. They see much inconsistency from the top down on what is morally right. Polarization and inconsistent messages from bishops and priests are divisive and confusing. While we are a pluralistic Church composed of many cultures and diverse thoughts, our moral compass should be consistent. A contrast seems visible to many that while some believe the Church is too conformed (secularized) to the world, others think it is too harsh on the rules, showing a lack of empathy.

To facilitate moral teachings, many participants identified the need to improve homiletics, expressing frustration over poor homilies, devoid of relevancy to the real world, or failing to address challenging issues that confront our society in a pastoral manner. To overcome this, participants recommended that those charged with giving homilies, receive training on how to deliver homilies that more effectively speak to real life issues. There is also a need to pastorally help people understand how frequently morality and politics are connected.

Liturgy and the Sacraments

Participants significantly referred to the Liturgy as lacking in being able to reach people effectively. Many are puzzled and anxious over some who seem to be going back to what are perceived as pre-Vatican II Liturgical practices. The people are lost as to why these options are being used.

The result is that the Eucharist, a source of unity, is also a place of division. There are concerns about what music is used; whether there is sufficient belief in the Real Presence; how to express a sense of reverence; and the revival of some practices that pre-date the Second Vatican Council – the Leonine Prayers, the use of Latin, and the 1962 Missal, for example. Some no longer attend Mass if they believe they cannot participate fully and actively in it. Others may go elsewhere in search of Mass that they believe is more reverent.

Participants are hungry to grow in their faith/spirituality, prayer, and the sense of the sacred. The Synod has highlighted the necessary skill of "discernment of spirits," and a means of how to do that. There is a deep appreciation for the sacraments, and some anxiety about how much they will be available with the decline in the number of priests. Because of this concern, the possibility of the ordination of married men and women was frequently heard as a suggestion.

The Priest Vocation Crisis and Lay Involvement In Overseeing Administrative Roles

There is also great concern over the declining number of priests and the Church needs to address increasing priestly vocations. Participants are aware of the many tasks that fall to our priests. Canon Law requires the pastor to be responsible for the temporal and spiritual needs of the parish. Nevertheless, participants believe that for priests to engage in the sacramental and spiritual needs of the people more broadly and effectively, there is a need to relieve them of the many administrative duties of their role. The laity believe strongly that there are many who

would be ready, willing, and able to help in such endeavors. Finally, Church leaders need to do more to invite, empower, trust, and recognize the contributions of the laity.

People Skills Development for Priests and All People Engaged in Ministry to Others

Related to the previous theme is the need for our priests who lack effective listening skills to receive training to feel more confident and comfortable with this part of ministry. Participants mention a frustration with priests not being open to input or providing pastoral feedback, with compassion and empathy. In addition, participants listed the need for all those engaged in ministry to develop effective communication and feedback skills. Participants again stated that the laity have many untapped gifts. Having a means to discern those gifts and then leveraging them could be quite beneficial in advancing the mission of the Church. Finally, in today's world, and in line with a Synodal approach, the participants identified a growing need for collaboration. Another concern was the need for adequate training and orientation for new priests and new pastors. The transition in parishes can sometimes be difficult for both community members and leadership.

The Role of Women in the Church

Of all the issues that came to the surface, this topic was perhaps one of the most predominant and controversial. The Church is seen by many in the world today as patriarchal in structure, resulting in a model that minimizes the contribution of women. Indeed, those women who are called by the Holy Spirit for advanced leadership roles and are qualified, should be given every opportunity to do so. Examples to assist them in achieving this would be to enable them to have access to theological education that is only available in Seminaries.

While women play an important role in the Church, the visibility of that seems lacking. To many, despite Pope John Paul II's definitive declaration that the priesthood is limited to men only, many expressed a social justice need to ordain women to the priesthood and to the diaconate. This causes many to leave the Church, calling the Church "out of touch" with the realities of today. This is a key issue that will need to be addressed at the Synod.

Transparency, Communication, Feedback and Instilling Trust in the Hierarchy

These terms can have many meanings from the comments made and topics discussed. In view of the many scandals that have challenged the Church, participants believe that transparency on financial matters, and on sexual abuse charges must be in place. The scandals seem to have caused a serious lack of trust, which goes in both directions between clergy and laypeople. The unveiling of each new case in the media reminds the members of the Church just how difficult it is to maintain trust. More openness and transparency would help to counteract these messages and begin the difficult healing process.

In addition, whenever discussions are to be held, where laity input in a synodal manner would be beneficial, leadership should seek that input before a decision is made. Once the feedback is considered, and after a decision is made, it is important to explain that decision. This process will demonstrate a listening Church and instill trust in the hierarchy. Presently, many expressed

being surprised by the invitation to speak their mind during the listening sessions, which suggests that it is an uncommon opportunity.

Involving the laity in the decision-making process can be done in a variety of ways, with members of various councils in dioceses, parishes, schools and other Catholic organizations. Participating as council members can serve as opportunities for formation and evaluation. Transparency is practiced by sharing meeting minutes, publishing monthly budgets in parish bulletins, preparing annual reports and conducting routine audits. Communal discernment has taken place through prayer, study, shared meals and other gathered events. The Victim Assistance Coordinators, independent review boards and reporting hotlines are also in place to support victims of abuse and ensure allegations of abuse are properly investigated and appropriate actions taken.

LGBTQ

Participants at every listening session, without exception, stated that the Church needs to find a way to include these individuals in the life of the Church. There was much division, not so much on inclusion, but rather on how to do this while at the same time being in conformity with the divine and natural law teachings of the Church.

Formation and Catechesis

This theme captures a plethora of input offered in listening sessions. Faith formation applies to all the lay faithful but in a special way to young adults, who may not have the rudiments of the faith, and to all parents so that they can truly be the “first teachers of the faith” to their children. As mentioned previously, there is also much room for catechesis on the Liturgy and liturgical practices. Often people cited that there are other areas where they need catechesis, including divorce, the mechanism of seeking a declaration of nullity of a marriage, abortion, sexual morality, and on what the mission of the Church is. Participants cited all of these areas as being critical to the future of the Church and the advancing of its mission. As mentioned under the Moral Teaching theme, perhaps such catechesis and formation can partially take place in effective homilies. This is a very complex need, requiring numerous approaches, specific to an intended audience.

Centrality of Prayer

Another prominent theme was the importance of having a centrality of prayer. While respondents discussed various forms of prayer given to us by the Church, there was a clear focus on the Eucharist as the Source and Summit of prayer life. Connected to this, there was a craving for Adoration and for the silence that is attendant to Adoration with one participant stating, “every parish should have a time when the Blessed Sacrament is available for Adoration.”

There were repeated comments concerning the need for silence. “We need to learn how to listen to God when he speaks to us... It is about teaching people to remain in the silences of life.” Participants desire additional guidance on the various forms of prayers. “Many felt they have not been properly prepared to engage in an active life of prayer and lack understanding of how to relate the power of prayer in our ‘everyday’ lives.”

Synodality As THE Manner of Growing and Moving Forward in the Mission of the Church

Finally, we return to where we started. Almost every diocese in the region reported a great potential value in the collaborative, discerning and Spirit-led endeavors of the meetings held in their dioceses. The predominant emotion expressed was appreciation for the opportunity to reflect together in prayer on their experience of God, and their experience of the Church.

Participants also expressed their hope that their diocese would continue to invite them to reflect on and share their experiences and hopes for a more faithful Church. Additionally, most coordinators expressed genuine surprise that the Synod listening sessions brought forth such heartfelt feedback and were not complaint sessions as some anticipated. The sessions were constructive, and this brought consolation.

In general, many saw the Synod as an opportunity for honest self-examination and rebuilding trust. Some also felt the synodal process could be a powerful tool for growing the Church and engaging the wider community. As stated in one diocesan report, there is a “great deal of energy to be harnessed into a potential force for evangelization.”

What is the Holy Spirit Saying to Us as a Regional Team?

As mentioned in the introduction, as a regional team, we held a listening session, and below are some additional thoughts shared from the representatives throughout Region VI which are helpful for the Conclusion:

What seems to be resonating in the conversations and what is the Holy Spirit saying to us through the voices of the group?

- Attitudes shifting from “We've done this before” to “this was different”; goal shifting from results (let’s get this done) to sharing a positive experience that will continue; lack of resources led to a lot of creativity; lack of accountability led to poor communication and participation; information was not being shared.
- People are really dedicated to this process; how do we share this experience with others; how do we repeat this; this was like “free therapy”.
- The Holy Spirit was very much at work throughout this process; even those who have been hurt sometimes stay in spite of their past experiences.
- Great diversity in participants; great enthusiasm and hope; people want it to continue.
- Variety of processes but similar conclusions; skepticism of participants were overcome; the difference being listening to one another rather than being talked at; synodality is very attractive.
- The timeline led to concerns that they would only reach the usual suspects; lack of young people in parishes; we need to have more intentional outreach.
- Listening is the best evangelization tool; we tend to overcomplicate things; is there another word we can use instead of synodality?

What 2 or 3 emerging actions is the Holy Spirit calling us to as Church?

- Balance listening with doing/action; challenge is that people don't want more meetings; how do we create the foundation / structures that will allow us to continue to be a synodal church in a way that is constant and consistent?
- Listening increases people's vulnerability, relatability and leads to transparency on both sides; people have left the church because they feel the church has not done enough to apologize for abuse; how do you address that?
- Unless faith is firm, you will not be firm; people with profound faith are capable of doing great accompaniment; the spirit of joy – openness, mercy – is very attractive; Holy Spirit is in control; trust in God; positive outcomes in spite of the challenges faced.
- Logo of Synod shows the bishop in the midst of the people and is a great image; we all have gifts to offer the church; God is calling us to trust the Holy Spirit who will guide our journey; if we do, they will know we are Christians by our love.
- Agreement that we are all over the place and yet one Church; we can listen and learn from one another if/when we are open; idea – create an agenda for parish council together after a good amount of prayer time.
- The bulk of the pastoral energy in parishes is for the people in the pews; we say “go” but most of what we do says “come”; we need to go out; are there things we can recreate for sending forth?
- It is important to have more collegiality at the episcopal level; we can see it is possible to have diversity, and it is actually a good thing.
- Strong emphasis on belonging; “big tent” vs “selective few”; may not have happened 30 years ago; encouraging.

Conclusion

Based on the themes expressed in this regional report, there are many positives highlighted by the Church's members. Unfortunately, these are often minimized or overlooked in favor of areas needing help. Participants advised that it would be good to market these positives to make them more visible. Broadly, repeatedly, and clearly publicizing the actions and outcomes of the Synod will go a long way in helping the people to develop a deeper sense of trust in the hierarchy.

This synthesis reveals a vast treasure trove of positive steps that Mother Church can take to grow, to spread the message of salvation and to help form and enrich all her members in the faith so that they truly will be able to be a priestly, prophetic, and kingly people to all.

The Church prays for the success of the Synod in Rome. We pray that the collection of feedback, guided by the Holy Spirit, will lead the endeavors of Church leaders. Publicizing the actions and outcomes of the Synod will go a long way in helping the people develop a deeper sense of trust in the hierarchy. We look forward to hearing about the fruits of the Synod and to learning the next steps in Journeying Together as a Church.

