



Called to be a Listening Church

Synthesis of the Reports of the Dioceses of USCCB Region VIII

Overview

Region VIII consists of ten dioceses across three states: the Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis and the Dioceses of Crookston, Duluth, New Ulm, Saint Cloud and Winona-Rochester in Minnesota; the Dioceses of Bismarck and Fargo in North Dakota; and the Dioceses of Rapid City and Sioux Falls in South Dakota. The Region has recently undergone a substantial leadership change: since 2020, new bishops have been named and/or installed for six of the ten circumscriptions and a seventh has been anticipating a transition for nearly three years.

The ten dioceses are quite diverse in terms of geography, demographics and cultures. The Diocese of Crookston and the Diocese of New Ulm, for example, are quite rural with populations of less than 8,000 people and 12,000 respectively in their See Cities. The Dioceses in North and South Dakota, in contrast, have urban centers as their See Cities but nonetheless have significant rural areas with extremely low population density, including reservations with communities of Native Americans. The Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis, and to a somewhat lesser degree the Dioceses of Winona-Rochester, Saint Cloud and Duluth, have racially and ethnically diverse urban areas and suburban communities as well as the small towns populated by families

who have been farming the same land for generations. Politically, North Dakota and South Dakota are solidly red, while Minnesota is often described as purple, with its urban areas voting solidly Democrat and its rural counties voting solidly Republican.

Yet, despite the many differences, the responses to the synodal process were similar.

Each of the Region's ten dioceses has submitted to the USCCB a synthesis of its experience participating in the Synod on Synodality. The reports varied in length and structure, just as each diocese created a unique structure with which to promote synodality in the individual circumstances of their local church. Within these unique circumstances and invitations to participate, the overwhelming response of the faithful was positive. Those who participated in the synod events seemed to be grateful for the opportunity to provide input. There appeared a genuine desire to assist Bishop of Rome as he guides the universal Church, as well as a recognition that everyone – clergy, lay, and consecrated – has an important role in the Church.

Additionally, there was unity among the participants in a shared hope to see the Church strengthened. Finally, each diocese saw the synodal process as being helpful in furthering existing diocesan goals, such as assisting in pastoral planning initiatives which had already begun, or even laying a foundation for a future synodal event on the diocesan level. One of the ten dioceses (the Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis) was in the midst of a diocesan synod at the time that the Holy Father had asked for consultation.

Common Themes and Unique Applications

1. The importance of the spiritual context

The diocesan syntheses repeatedly mentioned the importance of prayer and listening to the Holy Spirit during the synodal process. It would be fair to say that this combination of prayer and listening became a hallmark of the many diocesan efforts. Opportunities for prayer and listening not only were key components of the planning process and the synod events, but organizers saw

prayerful dialogue and listening as constitutive of synodality. The synthesis of the Diocese of Sioux Falls noted that as their steering committee began its work: “Two priorities emerged in our early conversations: the first was to consider how we could engage as many people as possible; the second was to consider how to foster a personal experience of prayerful dialogue in a local context that would allow for a deepening of the themes of communion, participation and mission.”

2. The development of communications

All of the dioceses were successfully motivated by the request to facilitate local participation in the Synod on Synodality to broaden diocesan communication channels. Communicating about the synod process usually took a number of different forms, including the more traditional communication methods of articles in diocesan newspapers and parish bulletin announcements. The common conclusion was that the consultative experiences connected with the Synod on Synodality produced learnings in the area of communications that will serve the dioceses in the future.

The Diocese of Duluth saw significant success. They named their synodal process “Let’s Listen” and planned it to coincide with the season of Lent. The “Let’s Listen” events were highly publicized and the secular newspaper in Duluth, the Duluth News Tribune, ran an article with the headline, “Duluth Diocese wants your feedback to help shape Catholic Church.”

3. Methods of consultation

The method of consultation varied by diocese with most dioceses utilizing more than one method. Most commonly, dioceses conducted in-person listening sessions either at the parish or regional level. Small group discussions were often part of the synodal process, sometimes as part of the listening sessions and sometimes as stand-alone initiatives. There were a few experiences of narrower consultations as well, involving, for example, youth, or disaffected Catholics, or those struggling with the Church’s teaching on gender and marriage.

In addition to in-person sessions, the dioceses conducted online surveys in an effort to reach a larger audience, including the disaffiliated who might not be inclined to participate in a Church event, and to encourage participation from those who might still be hesitant to gather in groups during COVID-19 surges. Surveys were created using online programs (e.g., SurveyMonkey) and were advertised via social media platforms (e.g., Twitter and Facebook). Other dioceses utilized online portals as a way for the faithful to submit their comments after the prayer and listening events.

A number of dioceses took advantage of “Zoom” and “Teams” technologies for online gatherings. In the Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis, for example, the increased familiarity with online conferencing technology that accompanied the recent pandemic was used effectively to facilitate a broad consultation of those in consecrated life, including many of the elderly sisters and brothers who are no longer very mobile. The technology was also used for a virtual gathering of survivors of clergy sex abuse, a group that at times finds it difficult to participate in in-person Church events.

One Diocese (Saint Cloud) also included an option for the faithful to meet one-on-one with a trained “Listener” - an approach that was unique among the dioceses in the Region.

Finally, a few dioceses encouraged comments by email or postal mail and received comments via those channels.

Regardless of the method employed by a diocese, the process seemed to be well-received and appreciated by the faithful.

4. Opportunities for expanded participation and leadership development

Two dioceses specifically mentioned how the synod process created an opportunity to call forth volunteers to collaborate with diocesan leadership and that the call was positively received and bore much fruit. As mentioned above, the Diocese of Saint Cloud had designed a process for one-on-one listening and issued a broad invitation for “Listeners.” Over 100 people came

forward and were trained as “Listeners” in the areas of “understanding the synod, and building skills and techniques for effective individual and group listening ... [and] how to invite sharing, maintain respect and order and acknowledge the contributions of participants.” This process produced great fruit as the “Listeners” facilitated both one-on-one and group listening events and collected over 2,200 reports from group sessions and 452 reports from one-on-one sessions.

That was consistent with the experience that the Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis had in the course of its recently concluded Archdiocesan Synod. Specifically, during its local Archdiocesan synod process, 1500 individuals stepped forward for training from the Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis to serve as “parish ambassadors” to educate, invite, and pray for the synod at their parishes. Some of the parish ambassadors also served as process managers and table facilitators during the parish consultation phase of the process.

5. Information and suggestions gathered

While the approaches taken by the dioceses of Region VIII to the request for consultation were as varied as the resulting diocesan syntheses, a few broad topics did emerge as consistent areas of concern for all, or nearly all, dioceses in the Region.

Chief among the areas of common concern was the perceived decrease in the number of youth and young adults who are active in their faith. Some dioceses noted the lack of youth and young adult participation in the synodal process itself as indicative of the issue, and further commented that without the presence of youth and young adults and their insights and suggestions it will be even more challenging to develop effective strategies to engage them in the future. A few dioceses stated that creating “welcoming parishes” would be one way to attract young people, especially young families. Related to the concern about lack of young people in our parishes and the need to minister to young families, nearly every diocese mentioned the importance of faith formation and equipping parents to be the primary educators of their children. Toward that end, it was noted that some parishes are having success in implementing a life-long or family formation model that encourages multigenerational catechetical sessions.

Liturgy was another broad topic mentioned in numerous reports. Several dioceses reported that the synodal process surfaced a strong desire from the faithful to learn more about the Mass and additional opportunities to strengthen reverence for the Eucharist. A desire for better preaching and more relatable homilies was also noted in many of the diocesan reports. The synodal process also brought to light some ongoing tension regarding the liturgy. The report from the Diocese of Fargo summed up the tension this way: “Many, whether attending the *usus antiquior* or the *novus ordo*, expressed concern regarding a perceived abandonment or mistreatment of those attached to the older form of the Mass. Some recognized that a proper respect for ecclesiastical authority’s duty to carefully govern the various needs and desires of individuals and those of the wider Church is necessary. Others expressed the feeling that they had been ‘abandoned’ by their spiritual fathers. It was clear from the responses that the experience of *Traditiones custodias* was deeply wounding for some.” The vast majority, however, of those providing input throughout the Region made no mention of that tension.

The need to be more inclusive and accepting was yet another broad theme in the diocesan reports. Some reports talked about the need to be more culturally inclusive, especially of Black Catholics and members of the Latino community. Several reports mentioned the importance of accepting members of the LGBTQ+ community and noted that the Church’s stance against same sex marriage and “intrinsically disordered” language appears to be one reason youth and young adults are leaving the Church. Nearly every diocesan report mentioned the need to be more inclusive of laity, especially women, and the importance of their contributions in leadership roles in the Church. Some reports mentioned the synodal process surfaced among the faithful a desire to see further and broader discussion of the Church’s requirements for ordination.

Finally, given that most of the dioceses in the Region have devoted substantial time and resources in the last five years to addressing issues arising from the abuse of minors by clerics and church personnel, it should not be surprising that the need for healing and reform was identified as a significant priority. As was stated in the synthesis of the Diocese of Saint Cloud: “The general category of transparency was mentioned over and over again: Transparency in the sex abuse crisis, transparency in making difficult decisions, transparency in financial matters, transparency in admitting when something goes wrong, transparency in planning, transparency in

leadership. Transparency brings accountability which many people feel is lacking in the Church. To be a trustworthy Church, transparency is going to need to be an essential component in every level and aspect.”

6. Common challenges and next steps

It was not uncommon for dioceses to encounter members of the faithful who were skeptical of the synodal process. Building trust, between clergy and laity, and between the all the Christian faithful and the hierarchy was, and continues to be, a key foundational component for synodality.

Additionally, the call to reach out the margins was a challenge. It was much easier to engage Church-goers than it was those on the margins, especially those who may still consider themselves Catholic but are no longer connected to a parish or Catholic community and those who are disaffiliated with the Catholic Church. Engaging youth and young adults also proved a challenge, though some success was found in holding listening sessions in conjunction with other planned gatherings such as a diocesan youth rally or hosting an event on a college campus.

The synodal process, while focused on the issues that Pope Francis has identified for discussion in the Universal Church, was also a way for dioceses to focus on the local church and collaborate with other Catholic entities. The Diocese of Duluth, for example, recently partnered with the College of Saint Scholastica (a Benedictine college located in the diocese) to further analyze the results of their process to inform the establishment of new initiatives on the diocese. From the Diocese of Duluth synthesis, “The Diocese of Duluth will continue to remind everyone that synodality is about process, not just the product. The outpouring of sharing during Let’s Listen shows that synodality is a muscle in need of more exercise in the local church, regardless of formal process.”

Several dioceses mentioned a renewed call for collaboration between clergy, laity (staff and faithful), and members of consecrated life.

Conclusion

Overall, the synodal process in the Region was well-received and laid a foundation for continued collaboration and synodal listening. Every diocese has plans to keep up with the process according to their own needs, circumstances and resources. For example, the Diocese of Rapid City is currently in a strategic planning initiative that now includes a synodal process. An ongoing synodal approach to the needs of a diocese or parish will require effort and intentionality on the part of laity, members of consecrated life, and clergy. It also will require new thinking in regards to how we reach out to young people and to those on the margins, as our current structures and communication methods do not seem well-equipped to engage these groups.

