

# Synod for a Synodal Church

Catholic Diocese of Memphis Synthesis

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## **Introduction**

The Synod for a Synodal Church opened in the Diocese of Memphis in our diocese's 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary jubilee year on the heels of our first-ever Eucharistic Congress. During his homily in the Opening Mass on October 17, Bishop David Talley urged the faithful in attendance and in all of West Tennessee to remember that we are all part of Christ's body. He envisioned the Synod for a Synodal church as an opportunity to find again the fire of the Good News that many seem to have lost in their way of life. He explained that it is "a loving correction for us... of seeing the Church anew." He explained that as part of the New Evangelization, the Holy Father is seeking for us an experience of "correction in love, listening in love, learning how to live together in love." He encouraged us "together... to find our way again, to speak the truth again, to be the light again," through our participation in the synodal process.

## **Consultations**

Bishop Talley convened a diverse team of leaders from Memphis and the surrounding areas to work with him to guide the process of a series of consultations in accordance with the Holy Father's wishes. These consultations came to be called **Prayer and Discernment Sessions** to emphasize the role of the Holy Spirit in guiding this process. More than just a listening session, Bishop Talley desired a time of prayer and reflection, sharing, and mutual listening experienced in small groups at rural and urban parishes, schools, service sites, and other locations around West Tennessee. These sessions were led by a diverse team of laity and clergy who were trained by diocesan staff. The consultations were led by teams of two facilitators with only two exceptions. These sessions were held in both English and in Spanish.

In order to accommodate those who were not able to attend Prayer and Discernment Sessions in person due to the pandemic, weather, limited mobility, or schedule, an **online, self-guided Prayer and Discernment Session** was also offered. The online session mirrored the same basic process offered at the in-person sessions with the exception of small group sharing. The participants were asked instead to type their responses to each reflection question into an online form.

Bishop Talley tasked staff at Catholic Charities of West Tennessee to conduct sessions with their clientele. Catholic Charities staff also led a session with Room in the Inn, an ecumenical ministry to the homeless of the City of Memphis. One parish also voluntarily surveyed clients at the Memphis Interfaith Coalition for Action and Hope (MICAH). Bishop Talley also tasked his Director of Ecumenical Relations to reach out to non-Catholic Clergy to survey their thoughts on how the Church is living out Her mission today.

## ***Prayer and Discernment Sessions***

Each Prayer and Discernment session followed the same structure. Participants were provided guides as an aid to the process.

### *Opening Prayer, Introductions, Ground Rules*

Sessions began with the *Adsumus Sancte Spiritus* prayer followed by a brief explanation of synodality and the goals of this particular Synodal process. The facilitator then established ground rules for dialogue based on the ones set forth by the Diocese of Galveston Houston.

### *Lectio Divina*

The participants were then invited into an experience of Lectio Divina utilizing Ignatian imaginative prayer. The committee selected the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) at the recommendation of Bishop Talley who cited Fratelli Tutti as his inspiration. The participants were asked to reflect on the scripture passage with the help of the following questions:

- *As you immersed yourself in the story, what or whose perspective were you led by the Spirit to take?*
- *Who are you called to be in this story?*
- *Who is the church called to be in this story?*
- *How does this scripture relate to your life and to the life of your parish?*
- *Where did you see the current state of the Church in this story?*

Following their time of reflection, they were encouraged to share with Our Lord in prayer what they had experienced during the reading and to allow time in silence to receive from the Holy Spirit what the Lord may have to say in response.

### *Small Group Sharing*

Each self-selected small group of 5 to 8 participants had a volunteer timekeeper and a volunteer scribe. Scribes were asked to capture as accurately as they could in bulleted lists what the members of the group shared for each question. The facilitators gave the following guidance for small group sharing:

*The sharing process will take place over the course of six separate rounds. I will describe each of the rounds and then lead you through the process, round by round. For each of these rounds, our role is to simply listen deeply to each person, attending to how the Holy Spirit is moving within oneself, within the person speaking, and in the group as a whole. It is a time of silence to note one's interior movements: thoughts, emotions, and memories. Remember, no one is forced to share, but all voices are valued and appreciated... I'll read the question aloud and then give two minutes to reflect. Afterward, each person will take one minute to share their response to the question... The scribe will take notes from each person's sharing.*

The questions for each of the rounds are as follows:

- *Share with the group one thing that stands out to you from our prayer reflection on the Good Samaritan.*
- *What good things have you experienced or witnessed in the Church that should be enhanced and increased?*
- *How have you experienced or witnessed the Church neglecting or failing an individual or group of individuals and how can this be corrected?*
- *Based on your experiences and what you've learned by listening here, how would you say journeying together happening today in our local Church?*

- *Based on your experiences and what you've learned by listening here. what steps does the Holy Spirit invite us to take to grow in 'journeying together'?*
- *As a final wrap up, we are asking each group to prepare a summary of the highlights of your sharing. Take 10 minutes as a group and share the most significant thing you learned today that you'd like to highlight to the entire group.*

### *Large Group Sharing*

The scribes would record the responses of their small groups for each of the 6 rounds. At the end of the session, each group appointed a spokesperson who shared their highlights with the entire group. After the highlights were shared with the group, the scribes turned in their forms to be reviewed for inclusion in the synthesis.

### *Wrap up and closing prayer*

The facilitators ended the session by thanking everyone for their time and leading the group in the Our Father. They were asked to record any observations from the session and turn them in with the Scribe Forms.

## **Review, Discernment, and Synthesis**

A sub-committee of two men (including the main author) and two women (one of whom is bilingual English/Spanish) convened over the course of 5 weeks to review each of the scribe forms for each session and online submissions and prayerfully reflect and discuss the following for each session:

- *Main Points – What were the main points that came up in the session?*
- *Points of Convergence – Where did the groups/individuals appear to find common ground?*
- *Points of Divergence – Where did the groups/individuals differ?*
- *Points of Originality - Points that strike a chord, inspire an original point of view, or open a new horizon.*
- *Minority Report - The voices of those who are not often heard and integrate what we could call the "minority report?"*
- *Positive and Negative Experiences - Not only positive experiences but also challenging and negative experiences in order to reflect the reality of what has been shared.*
- *General Experience - The experience of the local gathering, including things like the attitudes of the participants, and the joys and challenges of engaging together in discernment.*

Once compiled, the fruits of the subcommittee discernment were gathered and given to the main author to draft the Synthesis document. Drafts were submitted to Bishop Talley and members of the committee for review before the final document was submitted to the USCCB.

## **Participation**

In all approximately 400+ people participated in Prayer and Discernment Sessions in February through March 2022. A summary of the participation follows. The sample represents a very large cross-section of our diocese with participation from members of each of our four deaneries.

Although all were invited to participate in the parish-hosted sessions, the consultations were missing contributions from the Vietnamese, Korean, and Filipino communities due to a lack of participation in the parish-based sessions. The Catholic Ministry with Gay and Lesbian Persons elected to hold a session with their own facilitator rather than a trained facilitator from the Synod Committee. Numbers from the session were not reported, but responses submitted were reviewed in the same manner as the responses from the other sessions. A separate session was not facilitated for Clergy and Religious, but all were encouraged to attend one of the parish-hosted Prayer and Discernment Sessions.

### ***Parishes***

Pastors of all 47 parishes and missions were invited by Bishop Talley to volunteer to serve as host locations for the Prayer and Discernment Sessions. 11 parishes agreed to serve as host sites, representing all 4 deaneries (Central – 4, Western- 2, Northern 3, Southeastern – 2). 6 of the host parishes are considered Urban or Suburban, and 5 of the host parishes are considered Rural Parishes. Two of the sessions were held in Spanish with an approximate attendance of 55 participants. One of the host parishes is a historically African-American parish where they hosted 30 participants. Representatives from an estimated 18 of the 47 parishes and missions participated, totaling approximately 275 participants.

### ***High Schools***

In addition to parishes, invitations were offered to the three area Catholic high schools to participate. Saint Benedict at Auburndale High School allowed our facilitators to hold sessions during the lunch period for extra credit. Approximately 60 teens participated in the sessions. An estimated 80% of those students are Catholic.

### ***Colleges***

Three area college ministries also participated in Prayer and Discernment Sessions. The University of Memphis, a public, four-year state-run research institution; Rhodes College, a private Presbyterian-affiliated four-year college; and Christian Brothers University, a private, Catholic, Lasallian, four-year institution; all hosted Prayer and Discernment Sessions. Approximately 45 people participated in the college sessions.

### ***Catholic Charities/Room in the Inn***

Two guided sessions were led for guests of Catholic Charities of West Tennessee and Room In the Inn. 22 clients participated in the session for Catholic Charities. Room In the Inn included 6 participants.

### ***Demographics***

Additional demographics were not asked in order to insure anonymity of participants, but estimates were compiled based on anecdotal accounts from facilitators. Participation was slightly higher for women than men. The age of participants appeared to include a larger portion of retirement age and older participants, middle aged participants had less representation, while young adults in their 20s and 30s consisted of the smallest portion.

## **Experience of Synodality**

Despite invitations to pastors/clergy months prior to the event as well as regular email and social media communication to the general public, few who participated in the Prayer and Discernment Sessions knew beforehand what the main purpose of the synod was. Of those who had heard of the synod, there were some who arrived prepared with lists of concerns about the current state of the church and were eager to share and/or debate if given the opportunity to do so. A minority of those participants expressed skepticism that the Synod would have an impact on the church. Others desired immediate action on items they believed were important to the church.

The experience of Lectio Divina was a notable part of the Prayer and Discernment process for the facilitators. All expressed how the prayerful reading of scripture and reflection on the Good Samaritan appeared to ease the transition from everyday life into a more prayerful and peaceful atmosphere for listening.

Another aspect of the prayer and discernment sessions that stood out as especially helpful to promote listening was the period of reflection time before the 1-minute time limit for sharing one's responses. Many participants expressed at the end of the sessions how much they appreciated the opportunity to say what was on their heart in a place where they felt safe enough to share. Everyone who participated in the Prayer and Discernment Sessions appeared to be pleased with the opportunity to be a part of the Synod, and many expressed a desire to hold more Prayer and Discernment Sessions on the future. Those who participated in the Spanish sessions were very vocal in their appreciation for the chance to be heard.

## **Findings**

The following themes were most prevalent in the consultation process.

### *Community*

Community was by far the most common topic that arose throughout the process. People in every session expressed a desire to connect on a more personal level with each other, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic. In a time of racial, economic, political, cultural, and moral unrest the participants expressed a longing for increased interactions with each other in the context of their church community especially time spent outside of liturgy. They recognized not only the emotional need to be with each other, but also a spiritual one. As one online respondent noted, "The Devil wants us to feel isolated and alone." One college student emphasized that we need to "share life together during the week, not just on Sundays."

### *Hospitality*

Another idea expressed within the community theme was the need for better hospitality at parishes. The laypeople who participated had mixed experiences with this topic. Some ethnic minorities, recovering addicts, spouses of mixed-faith marriages, divorced individuals, and people who identify as LGBT expressed feeling outcast and unwelcomed in parishes. Those who felt unwelcomed encountered a priest, a deacon, or a layperson in the pew who made them feel as though they did not belong. There were also minority reports by those with physical handicaps who experienced little to no help with accessibility issues at their parishes.

Others expressed genuine appreciation for the love and acceptance they received. One immigrant shared how appreciative they were receiving love and support from their parish community. One mother, an adult convert to the faith, told a story of how she continues to bring her teen who struggles with gender identity to church because of the caring atmosphere of her parish; whereas, she would never have considered taking her teen to her previous denomination for fear of ostracization. One parish in particular lauded their efforts to reach out acceptingly to others, recognizing the church's need to be a beacon in the community to all who are seeking hope. Many laity involved in the sessions recognized that they had a responsibility to reach out to others more. They acknowledged the need to take initiative to make parishes more welcoming, to discuss with their pastors how they might be more involved, and even extend hospitality beyond the church building. As one participant shared, "count no one as unimportant."

### *Dialogue*

One of the central components to the experience of community was the desire to seek understanding through others' experiences. Participants expressed their concerns over growing polarization, tribalism, and cultural tendency to see people as "other." Although more predominant in secular culture, participants also shared witnessing these phenomena in the Church. One minority report highlighted the need for a safe place to ask questions about the Church without fear of judgement when they stated, "Don't disenfranchise the seeking," encouraging the laity to "journey with someone." Another asked, "How do we address the anger and resentment marginalized individuals experience every day?"

### *Small Parishes*

Another noteworthy minority report came from groups at smaller parishes. They expressed how their small size allowed the parish to more easily identify those in need, fostered greater intimacy among their members, and enabled them to embrace demographic changes in their area. They were grateful that their smaller parishes remained open when many dioceses across the United States are closing or consolidating parishes.

### *Pastoral Care*

Participants shared positive experiences with the church meeting their needs in times of trouble. One in particular shared how affected they were when their parish comforted them through the illness and loss of a spouse. Another participant recognized that their parish "didn't need a program help to me" when their community stepped up to help them as they were experiencing personal loss and economic challenges. Others noted an increase in the need for pastoral care for many different groups of people. Mental health and addiction support were cited most often as well as pastoral care for those experiencing the loss of a loved one.

### *Catechesis and Faith Formation*

Another very prominent theme that arose in the Prayer and Discernment Sessions was the need for continued growth in Catechesis and Faith Formation in the Church.

### *Strengths*

Participants identified RCIA as a strong program in our parishes. Catechesis of the Good Shepherd was also highlighted by many as an excellent means of forming young people.



Members of the Hispanic community praised the efforts of St. Andrew's School of Evangelization to form parish leaders. The Cursillo movement was also mentioned as an especially impactful program.

### *Learning the Faith*

Many expressed a desire for a stronger proclamation of the kerygma from the church, citing an increased secular influence in our world. As one person put it, "The Church should be influencing culture. Not the other way around." Participants recognized the need for more Bible studies and small faith groups to learn the role of the Church in our day to day lives, grow in our faith knowledge, and deepen our relationship with God. Formation topics that emerged during the sessions included Christian love, mercy, tolerance, dignity, sin, repentance, communion, liturgy, and worship. Many of the groups discussed the recent Pew research study regarding 70% of everyday Catholics' lack of belief in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. There was also a strong call for resources and programs for parents to better form their children. Participants consistently discussed the need for greater Biblical literacy among Catholics. There was a noted lack of organized formation programs for adults at the parish and diocesan levels.

### *Sexuality*

Although the particular thoughts and sentiments pertaining the issue varied, nearly all the sessions emphasized the need for the church to deepen her understanding and better explain her teachings on the topic of sexuality, especially given the cultural and political landscape in the US. Theology of the Body was often mentioned as an asset to the church's teachings. Aspects of sexuality such as same-sex attraction, gender identity, equality, complementarity, and marriage were all discussed. While a small minority called for a radical reinterpretation of these issues, others called for continued reinforcement of the Church's current teachings. This was the most divisive issue overall in the sessions. Participants also called church members and clergy to exercise more compassion for those who may not fall into the social sexual norms, especially those who identify as LGBT.

### *Clergy*

#### *Priests/Deacons*

Participants across the board expressed both positive and negative experiences with our clergy. Participants recognized the tensions priests/deacons face when carrying out their vocation. They consistently desired their pastors to be more available, visible, and involved in parish life but recognized the inevitable time conflict between administrative and pastoral duties. The faithful are asking for our priests/deacons to be compassionate servant leaders and effective teachers of their congregations. Those in the minority who had experienced negative interactions with priests expressed a desire for priests to balance the adherence to the dogmatic teachings of the faith with care for the emotional needs of their parishioners. In other words, they expressed a desire for priests to speak the truth with empathy, creativity, and compassion.

Participants also called for the laity to offer more support to priests. One of the priest participants echoed this desire while also highlighting his wish for parishioners to recognize his priestly role as father. He shared about his experience of parishioners leaving after Mass without saying hello

as comparable to children visiting their parents' house for dinner and leaving without saying goodbye. Both priests and laity saw the need for us to embrace the parish as more of a family.

### *Bishops/Hierarchy*

Although feedback concerning our local Bishop was overwhelmingly positive, a significant number of people expressed concerns about the hierarchy and the Conference of Bishops. They called for greater clarity, unity, and consistency in the church's teachings. Minority reports indicated that people felt as though the bishops needed to keep pastors and public figures more accountable for their words and actions regarding hot-button issues stating, "Church leaders need to take a stand against societal ills and cultural sins." Other minority reports, however, called for more compassion and humility from our Bishops. While some lauded Pope Francis for his efforts to reach out to the margins, other minority reports expressed concern and confusion surrounding what they perceived as conflicting statements on matters of faith. In minority reports, people still expressed concern over some US bishops' responses to the priest abuse crisis and feel as though more still needs to be done to protect young people. It is worth noting that these criticisms were not addressed toward the actions of the Diocese of Memphis.

### *Spirituality*

Participants often spoke of spirituality in positive ways during the process. The faithful shared overall positive experiences of prayer. Groups identified Women's and Men's Mornings of Spirituality, the Eucharistic Congress of 2021, Magnificat Day, Lenten Missions, Stations of the Cross, First Friday Adoration, and Perpetual Adoration as bright spots in their spiritual lives. They expressed a desire to expand offerings and participation at parishes in small faith groups, praise and worship services, eucharistic adoration, and retreats. The need for spiritual direction was a noteworthy discussion point from minority reports, especially among college students and young adults. A vocal minority also expressed concerns about the recent prohibitions and limitations surrounding the Traditional Latin Mass citing its beauty and reverence as valuable to the Church.

### *Youth*

#### *Perception*

The experience of young people in the church was also one of the most discussed themes of the Synod. The general population communicated ongoing concern about dwindling numbers of young people attending Mass and getting involved in parish life. They are considered an underserved population yet are deemed very valuable to the Faith. Concerns were expressed that besides parish youth groups very little formal formation is offered to teens after Confirmation at a time when they are most vulnerable to worldly pressures. Participants shared concern that they are not receiving enough proper formation and that families need more resources in this area. They desired to see more young people serving different functions related to the liturgy including lector and extraordinary ministers of the eucharist, in addition to acting as altar servers. Participants in rural sessions discussed the need for more resources towards formation, outreach, and youth participation in parish life.

### *Teens*

Teens who participated in the Prayer and Discernment process were very forthcoming in their discussions with their peers. A common thread was their desire to learn and be mentored by priests and other adults in an environment where they could “discuss the intimidating concept of God.” They identified their own need for a safe place to ask questions without feeling stigmatized by them. Many felt as though the church passes judgement on those trying to work out their sins, placing too much blame. Some sensed a perception of the church consistent with the thought that “if my behavior is bad, you think I’m a bad person.” They asked for the church to “replace obstacles with hope.” As one teen shared, “tell people more about how Christ changes their lives.” They discussed the need for people in the church to meet others where they are when sharing the faith. They also highlighted the importance of feeling part of a community, and they identified the Liturgy as a way of bringing people together.

### *College Students*

The college students who participated showed a continuation and maturation of what the teens shared. They emphasized the importance of community, urging the church to share life together not just on Sundays, sharing both joys and sufferings. They see community as an opportunity to walk in authenticity and accountability, and even challenged each other, “don’t just journey with people who are easy to love.” Similar to the teens, they expressed a need for intergenerational discipleship with mentors who believe and follow Catholic Church teaching. They shared that this discipleship starts with their own families and friend groups.

There was also a common desire for deeper formation. They shared that it leads to a deeper knowledge of themselves and deeper communion with others. One group related that it seems as though youth 14-18 years old are simply told what not to do. They advised the church to encourage young people to “run towards the good.” They recognized the importance of teaching the transcendentals of truth, beauty, and goodness as a means to do so.

There were two minority reports worth noting. When discussing the hierarchy, some of the college students alluded that, “disunity among church leaders causes confusion among the flock.” One participant also described ecumenism as the “pursuit of compassion.”

### *Social Justice and Service*

The church’s commitment to service and social justice was highlighted in every session. Participants gave recognition to the Church’s ongoing charitable work in the community through parish social ministries, Catholic Charities of West Tennessee, Knights of Columbus, Saint Vincent DePaul, Dorothy Day House and Catholic Heart Work Camp, as well as Catholics’ involvement in ecumenical outreach such as MICAH and Room In the Inn. They also recognized that the work of the church must continue to grow in this area. When sharing about their reflections on the Good Samaritan, one college student asked, “How can the church prevent the beating from even happening?” Participants in the urban areas of the Diocese urged more involvement by the laity in helping to prevent crime, poverty, and addiction. They discussed the need for more help for those with medical and mental health needs. Health needs were especially echoed in the more rural sessions as well. One participant noted that legal help is needed for those in the community with limited resources. More than one group urged the church to

remember to take care of the needs of her parishioners in addition to those in the broader community.

### *Catholic Charities and Room In the Inn*

Guests who receive direct serves provided by Catholic Charities are invited to a weekly morning prayer time. They shared that they have very little experience with clergy outside of volunteers who participate in the morning services. They shared that they are often viewed with suspicion in churches but feel very welcomed as though they belong at Catholic Charities. Although 90% of the visitors are not Catholic, they find that their spiritual needs are being met there. One guest referred to Catholic Charities as “their church”. The sense of belonging is also evidenced by the former visitors who are no longer homeless who come back for coffee and fellowship. One regular visitor who is no longer homeless often transports others to and from services with her own vehicle. The guests recognized the good work being done and highlighted the need for more services for mental health. They also expressed a desire for more churches to be open during the day as places to pray.

### **Conclusion**

It has become clear to those who synthesized the findings from our Synodal journey that the church is hungry for relationship and understanding. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, people in and out of the pew have been seeking a greater connection. We long for the company and affirmation of other human beings, and we desire a deeper knowledge of Christ in his Church. Community and formation were the strongest, most consistent desires expressed in the discussions. We long to grow in relationship with our Lord through a loving relationship with our families, our fellow parishioners, our friends, and the poor. We seek the truth that the Church professes and the mercy and compassion which she offers.

We recognize that the laity must take on more responsibility for spreading the love of the Father by the way we treat others, our service to the poor and marginalized, and by the Truth we profess in our teachings. There is a greater call for our leadership to unite behind these ideals and to deliver a clear and consistent vision for what it means to be Christian in the current age. Together, we are being called to a life of prayer, discernment, and action guided by the Holy Spirit embraced by our clergy and our laity in service to the Father and through an intimate relationship with Jesus Christ.