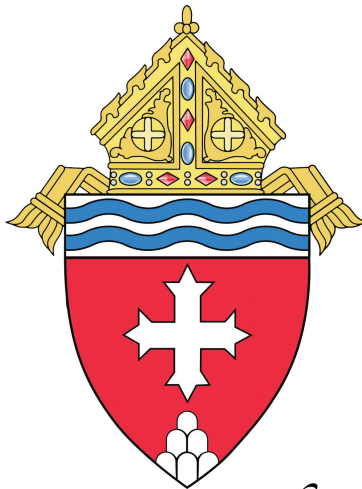




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## Diocesan Synod Report Interim Session Summary

April 2024



Catholic Diocese *of* Memphis

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# Synod for a Synodal Church Interim Session Summary

Catholic Diocese of Memphis

## **Introduction**

Over the course of one week in March of 2024, participants from various parishes in the Diocese of Memphis convened in Prayer and Discernment Sessions in accordance with the Holy Father's wishes for further consultations during the Interim Phase of the Synod for a Synodal Church. Based on the Vatican's request and on recommendations from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, the following processes took place.

## **Consultations**

Buidling on the work of the Diocesan Synodal Team, the decision was made to once again hold Prayer and Discernment Sessions similar in form to the previous process outlined in 2022. Two of these sessions were held in parishes within two of the four deaneries:

- March 21 at a large parish chosen for its proximity to other parishes in the Central Deanery near travel routes.
- March 23 at a predominantly rural parish in our Northern Deanery. This parish was designated for a 2022 synod session, but the threat of severe weather limited the turn out that year.

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

Each Prayer and Discernment session followed the same structure as before. Participants were provided guides as an aid to the process. The general process was as follows:

### *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 with *Romans 12*. The scripture passage was recommended by the USCCB. The following questions were presented to participants to aid in their Lection Divina practice:

- *What word or phrase from the passage jumped out at you?*
- *What memories or experiences came to mind if any?*
- *What emotions did it generate?*
- *What additional Thoughts or insights came to mind?*

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.

After sharing the fruits of their prayerful reading of scripture, the participants had time to share their thoughts and prayerfully listen to each other as they considered the following questions based on the USCCB recommendations:

1. *What **successes** have I experienced in my encounters with Church leaders, Parish Life, or the organization of the Church which **encourage** me to share the Gospel?*
2. *What **distresses** have I experienced in my encounters with Church leaders, Parish Life, or the organization of the Church which **hinder** me from sharing the Gospel?*
3. *How can the church as an organization help all Baptized people share the Gospel of Jesus Christ and live out the Gospel as a community of people?*

### *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 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**

24 people participated in Prayer and Discernment Sessions in March 2024. A summary of the participation follows. The sample represents a small cross-section of our diocese with participation from two of our four deaneries. We were limited in time and resources to provide a full Spanish-only session which is admittedly a strong flaw of the interim sessions. The first session in the urban parish included 14 participants while the session in rural West Tennessee included 10 people.

Additional demographics were not asked in order to insure anonymity of participants, but estimates were compiled based on anecdotal accounts from the facilitator. Representatives from an estimated 8 of the 47 parishes and missions participated.. Participation was significantly 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. One parish pastor participated in the session.

## **Experience of Synodality**

### **Findings**

The following themes were most prevalent in the consultation process divided into “Encouragements” and “Distresses.”

### *Encouragements*

Participants were encouraged by positive experiences related to ministerial involvement, pastoral support from clergy and our Bishops, diversity of giftedness, and small groups.

The most prominent response to the question regarding those successes which encouraged participants to share the Gospel pertained to involvement in **ministerial activities**. Whether people were asked to participate in Diocesan or local parish ministries, participants shared that they felt empowered to help the church and that they grew in their knowledge and understanding of their faith. Participation in **liturgical ministry** was especially impactful. One young adult cited her involvement in music as a youth in high school as very formative. Participants also expressed their positive experiences with **small faith-sharing groups and bible studies**. One shared her experience leading an ecumenical bible study which included protestant and evangelical participants.

Participants cited the **encouragement and support by clergy, especially Pastors** as a motivation to share the Gospel. Those who had positive and supportive clergy in pastoral matters were viewed in a very positive light. Participants in the rural church applauded the pastor’s work to encourage participation in civic events and ecumenical ministries as emboldening and empowering them to share the Gospel with others. One participant in an urban parish stated that she has participated in various diocesan ministries as a volunteer and felt encouraged by the Bishop’s request for her involvement. She shared that her efforts were met with resistance from Pastors years ago, but that she is now encouraged by her current work.

Participants praised our **Bishop's visibility** on social media and his visits to celebrate Mass at their parish as edifying. One participant was especially encouraged by the Bishop's support of the women's apostolate community which she is forming. Another appreciated the diocesan hospitality ministry for people who identify as LGBTQ as encouraging. Additionally, the establishment of a Sanctity of Life committee was mentioned by one of the members as a positive experience.

Another point of convergence regarded the **diversity of giftedness of the people** in the church as an asset. One person was quoted as celebrating the fact that we have "street people" and wealthy people, Black People and White People, etc... "this must be what heaven is like." However, perspectives diverged when the diversity of theological viewpoints was discussed. More on that topic is discussed in the following section.

### ***Distresses***

Participants' distresses were more focused on certain areas, namely poor catechesis, lack of pastoral response from priests, and confusing or divergent thinking on the part of church leadership.

Participants cited the release of *Fiducia Supplicans* as a distressing event on two fronts: 1) the changes made to our understanding of blessings led to **confusion** on the part of many Catholics who desire further clarification from priests and Bishops, and 2) many members of the church who identify as LGBTQ were distressed at the **response** of many Catholics in opposition to the document. This was highlighted in the context of discussions surrounding a perceived **ideological divisions** within the church. Regardless of where participants expressed their ideas, participants expressed confusion and further marginalization as a result.

As with the previous prayer and discernment sessions from 2022, participants recalled painful interactions with priests stemming from what was perceived as "**legalistic**" or **unsympathetic responses** to requests for sacraments or help. One participant shared that they witnessed a priest sending away a woman and her child who were asking for assistance from the church only to joke about it later. Other experiences related a priest's **unwillingness to work with** them in cases where church law would prohibit their request. In those cases, some participants felt wounded by the way in which their requests were rebuffed. It is worth noting that many of the wounds cited were years-old. Although these wounds were not recent, the fact that their pain and distrust persists years later illustrates how devastating these interactions can be.

Participants related to the groups how much they lament the **poor state of catechesis** in the Church stemming from the last 30 – 40 years. They mentioned how much concern they have for their peers, their children, and relatives who left the Church not realizing what She believes and teaches. They also cite their own experiences with poor catechesis as a reason why they and their peers do not feel comfortable sharing the Gospel with others.

### **Conclusion**

Overall every participant expressed that they enjoyed the experience. In their highlights, they expressed how by listening, they understood more about each other and that they also felt valued by the listening of others. One participant observed how the process in the Prayer and

Discernment Sessions validates the dignity of the other, quoting Dr. Anthony Lilles when she shared, “the art of accompaniment is often listening another into existence.”

Participants also expressed disappointment that more people did not participate and lamented that many pastors made no mention of the Synodal sessions from the pulpit. Although they left feeling good about each individual being heard, they expressed concern about the confusing time they experience in the church. They discussed their uncertainty about when and how the Church will come together on these different viewpoints on matters of faith and structures within the church. They talked about their concern about how the process was being portrayed in the media as well. Their concerns were buoyed by the joy and hope they experienced being together and learning from each others’ stories. In a time when information travels fast, it can be difficult for us to accept the prayerful pace of discernment that the church must take to understand where the Lord is calling the Church. More prayer and reflection from the Church will continue to be necessary to overcome the sense of disquiet and increase the peace and joy we also feel.