



Synthesis of the Archdiocese of Baltimore

JUNE 2022



<https://www.archbalt.org/synod/>

Dear Friends in Christ,

Over these past six months, the laity, clergy, and those in consecrated life here in the Archdiocese of Baltimore journeyed together in communion with our Holy Father as we completed the diocesan phase of the Synod on Synodality. Throughout this synod process we engaged in prayer, listening, dialogue and discernment on a fundamental question proposed by the Holy Father: “A Synodal Church, in announcing the Gospel, ‘journeys together.’ How is this ‘journeying together’ happening today in your local Church? What steps does the Spirit invite us to take to grow in ‘journeying together?’”

I am most grateful to all who participated in these important conversations, which took place throughout the Archdiocese of Baltimore from November 2021 through May 2022 in parish and regional gatherings. In addition, many participated in the process online or through a variety of organizations or groups, including those engaged in youth ministry, charitable ministries, and Catholic education. The Archdiocese also sought to hear from those who are no longer close to the Church, especially those who have felt marginalized or alienated. This resulted in 235 reports containing the fruits of many prayerful, thoughtful, and honest conversations.

Those who participated shared what I have personally come to witness in my ten years as Archbishop: the people of the Archdiocese love their parish, love their priests, and love what the Church is doing in service to the Lord and the common good. In a spirit of generosity and a genuine desire for the Church to draw closer to Christ and for its members to draw closer to each other and to Him, participants also shared insights, suggestions and heartfelt feedback that demands our prayerful attention and response.

As the People of God, we are called into a relationship with the person of Jesus Christ who is active and alive in the Church. Having encountered Christ, we respond to his love by accepting the call to a life of missionary discipleship. Nourished by the Eucharist and led by the Holy Spirit, we are to bear witness in the world to what the Lord is doing in our midst. Through this joyful witness, we invite others to share in the fullness of life we have found in Christ, especially those who no longer practice the Faith as well as those who have never really heard the Good News.

Synodality is an integral part of accomplishing this mission entrusted to us by Christ. The synodal process provides the Church with the opportunity to open or renew paths of dialogue. Perhaps the greatest gift the Holy Father has given us is learning Synodality itself, learning ways to listen intently to each other as we share our joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties and, in all of these things, discerning the voice of the Holy Spirit. The synodal process is already enhancing, supporting, and informing existing consultative and collaborative structures, such as the Archdiocesan Pastoral Council, Presbyteral Council, as well as similar structures in parishes, schools, and other ministries.

I have been humbled and deeply moved by the contributions which have been offered, some of which I had the privilege to hear firsthand. This report is a synthesis of the contributions of all who participated in the synodal path provided us by the Holy Father, a path that promises hope for our local Church as we seek to live out our mission. This is the path we must follow if, in God’s grace, if we would attain and strengthen our unity and communion. Let us work together to nurture the growth of the Church by continuing to journey together.

May Spirit continue to lead the people of God of the Archdiocese of Baltimore and keep us always in His love.

Faithfully in Christ,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "William E. Lori". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small cross at the beginning.

Most Reverend William E. Lori
Archbishop of Baltimore

“The Church exists to evangelize. We can never be centered on ourselves. Our mission is to witness to the love of God in the midst of the whole human family. This synodal process has a deeply missionary dimension to it. It is intended to enable the Church to better witness to the Gospel, especially with those who live on the spiritual, social, economic, political, geopolitical, and existential peripheries of our world.”

-Synod Preparatory Document

Introduction

The lay faithful, those in consecrated life, and the clergy of the Archdiocese of Baltimore generously responded to the Holy Father’s invitation to participate in the Synod on Synodality. By doing so, they sought to journey together in a process of prayer, listening, and dialogue, seeking to discern the voice of the Holy Spirit. All of this was placed at the service of the Church’s evangelizing mission given by Christ. Through this process, many sensed that they were being drawn closer to their sisters and brothers in Christ.



The Holy See laid out a process rooted in prayer that sought to listen for the voice of the Holy Spirit in each conversation. From November 2021–June 2022, synodal conversations took place in parishes, schools, religious communities and apostolates throughout the Archdiocese. These moderated conversations centered on Scripture and were guided by questions for reflection following a format provided by the Holy See.

The Archdiocese was blessed to have the participation of its parishes, several high schools, colleges, and universities, as well as priests, deacons, seminarians, those in consecrated life, and those who minister at Catholic charitable agencies, Central Services, and many Catholic organizations. We were also grateful for the participation of our sisters and brothers of other faiths who generously shared their perspectives. Individuals unable to participate in these gatherings were invited to participate in the same process through the special Synod website designed by the Archdiocese. Importantly, efforts were made to invite the participation of those no longer practicing the faith in a sincere effort to listen and to learn.

The honest, heartfelt and instructive comments of those who journeyed along the synodal path were recorded and submitted to the Archdiocese. These conversations resulted in the almost 250 reports reflected in this document. This report attempts to synthesize what was shared in a representative and authentic way.



We look forward to continuing the journey begun during the parish and diocesan phases of the synodal process as our contributions are offered as a contribution to the national and international phases, which will conclude with the 2023 Synod of Bishops convened by our Holy Father. The lessons learned, most especially the process of Synodality itself will be carried forward for the good of our local Church and the fulfillment of our sacred mission.

Communion

A Welcoming Church

Participants in the synodal process in the Archdiocese articulated a recurring vision: a desire for a Church of loving communion and radical hospitality characterized by compassion and mercy. Many see these characteristics reflected in their own parishes and praise their pastors for creating these parish cultures. They point to various programs and ministries that provide opportunities for parishioners to advance this culture of hospitality, while also serving as models for others in the community. Many, including a parishioner from a city parish noted: “The parish feels like a Church family. I feel at peace with the whole Catholic faith when I am participating in my parish. The parish is a true community, with a welcoming atmosphere, a welcoming parish priest, and a diverse congregation.”

Parishioners also highlighted their many opportunities to participate in parish ministries, including those that reach beyond the parish into the broader community. Many shared how such ministries draw them closer together as a family of faith and closer to the Lord. Many stated a desire to return to pre-pandemic conditions that allowed for more opportunities for spiritual growth and fellowship. The faithful spoke of parish dinners, festivals, and celebrations in ways one would describe family gatherings. Many noted the value of small faith sharing groups, and appreciated how the synodal process offered an opportunity for conversations that are typically not afforded those who merely see each other briefly at Mass. It is evident that the faithful of the Archdiocese have a real desire for deeper connection with each other and find spiritual closeness by being welcomed into community. Countless participants reflected similar experiences of their parish as a hospitable, friendly, warm and close-knit family of faith, fostered by caring priests and offering ministries that encourage the participation of the faithful.

While the overwhelming number of those who participated reflected a belief that their parishes were places of communion with Christ and one another, the synodal conversations

also surfaced a number of challenges that reflect a tension built into the Christian life between the call to conversion and the loving mercy of God. Some responses, reported below, reflect this perennial tension.

Catechesis and Formation

Synodal conversations clearly identified a deficient catechesis as one of the leading challenges. Participants expressed a desire to better understand Church teaching, the sacraments, and the liturgy. As a Catholic high school student put it, “So many people are missing that the Eucharist is the Real Presence of Jesus, and in realizing that the Sacraments are really encounters with Christ.”

Many spoke of their need for a better understanding of how the Church’s teaching relates to real world challenges and problems. A substantial number of participants expressed the need for better preaching that shows the connection between faith and life. A parishioner in a near suburb of Baltimore wrote, “I know I left the Catholic Church as a young adult because I had no idea why the Catholic Church had the beliefs and practices that it did.”

In the context of the need for better formation, many expressed challenges in family life: difficulty sharing the faith with their children, divisions in the family, marital problems especially in the early years of marriage, and the underlying stress caused by busy schedules. There were calls for support and formation related to the vocation of family and marriage, including through effective and faithful marriage preparation, whole family catechesis and more robust adult faith formation. They believed that such support benefits married couples, their children and the wider community.

Black Catholics

The synodal conversations also highlighted the continued need for the Church to address the sin of racism, within the Church and in society. Some cited Archbishop Lori’s pastoral leadership on this issue, referencing his two Pastoral Letters on racism, the building of a new Catholic elementary school in Baltimore, and the response of the Church in the wake of the death of Freddie Gray while in the custody of the Baltimore Police Department. But there were also renewed calls for the Church to acknowledge its role in perpetuating systemic racism and in creating more avenues for acceptance of Black Catholics and support for Black Catholic



parishes in the Archdiocese. One Oblate Sister of Providence said, “Giving thanks for past progress and recalling the definite steps the Church has taken to improve mistakes regarding racism...we dream of the time when all will be truly welcomed, respected and accepted. We desire a Church that will manifest a loving attitude toward all.”

Hispanic Catholics

While many highlighted the blessing of cultural diversity in our local Church, others called attention to ongoing challenges. One such challenge is the evangelization and pastoral care of the growing number of Spanish-speaking Catholics in the Archdiocese. Many expressed a need to welcome them into the Church more fully, to integrate them in ways that do not unintentionally create “parallel parishes” with separate liturgies, activities, and programs. Synodal conversations among the Hispanic community in one city parish revealed, “It’s hard for us, Latinos, to integrate ourselves into the broader culture. We do not feel accepted. We have seen that there is no unity in our parish.” A more rural Hispanic community noted in their synodal conversations, “a lack of formation and integration processes for Hispanic adolescents and young people after Confirmation” and suggested “family renewal, spiritual formation for parents [so they can] receive the Eucharist together with their children.” Others cited as barriers to communion with this growing segment of the Catholic population the need for more liturgies and communications in Spanish.



Judgmentalism

Active Catholics often shared their concern for family members who have left the Church. Many believe they stay away because they felt judged or unwelcome. As one suburban parishioner put it, “[they] feel judged or they disagree with the teachings so have left.” Some synod conversations pointed to Church teachings on sexuality and the moral life as barriers while other participants encouraged clearer teaching on faith and morals.

LGBTQ+ Catholics

Participants expressed a need to accompany those Catholics who identify as LGBTQ+ and their loved ones. Some seek greater clarity on Church teaching and a change in how the Church communicates that teaching. Others said the Church is perceived as being judgmental

and unwelcoming. Still others suggested that many have left the Church or refuse to enter the Church due to these perceptions. Parishioners in a suburban pastorate expressed a desire for the Church to be “more inclusive” of same-sex attracted Catholics and others struggling with issues related to sexuality and gender. They also stated a desire for the Church to offer help to parents regarding “how to discuss homosexuality, gender change, and identity.” Some participants spoke of ministries in their parishes designed to make same-sex attracted individuals feel welcomed, loved, and embraced by their parish communities and called for similar approaches at every level of ecclesial life.

Politics

Participants spoke of the need for the Church to bring the message of the Gospel to the public square when fundamental human rights are threatened. Some observed that no major party’s political platform aligns entirely with the Church’s teaching. Others noted that these teachings should not change to conform to current societal trends. Others said that presentations on and discussions of some social teachings are seen as partisan and divisive. They further observed that such divisiveness sometimes creeps into parish communities as well as families, to their detriment. Overall, participants spoke of the lack of consensus on many social and political issues in the broader culture and their desire for a greater sense of unity in the Church as well as a deeper understanding of the Church’s social teaching to help them navigate divisions in society.



PARTICIPATION

Participants expressed a clear desire to participate in the life of the Church. Some participants, as noted above, expressed their appreciation for their many parish ministries that enable them to participate in the life of the Church, beyond attending Mass. They noted how these ministries allow them to engage with their pastor and other parish leaders. Participants

at one small suburban parish said, “We knock it out of the park” by performing corporal works of mercy. They went on to highlight the service of the Knights of Columbus, while emphasizing the need to invite greater involvement and participation by others in the parish. In a regional synod conversation, one table noted how laity have been “empowered” at their parish, citing opportunities for involvement in the liturgy, social outreach, and bereavement ministry as grace-filled opportunities for lay participation in the life of the Church. A report from discussions at a large suburban parish noted, “[Parishioners] have great memories and experiences of the Church in their lives. They commented on the many opportunities [they] have to serve others; even those outside of the community.”

Laity

The laity further expressed appreciation that the Church actively sought to hear from them by initiating this synodal process. Many also indicated how much they appreciate it when their pastor seeks their opinions or expresses genuine personal concern for them and their families. They feel that they are valued, and their opinions are important.

While expressing optimism for ongoing opportunities to engage with parish leaders and with each other, some synod participants shared a desire for greater listening to the laity by those in positions of authority in the Church. They noted that too often they have felt “invisible” when it came to discussing their hopes and their observations and concerns for the Church.

One barrier to participation, observed by some, is that the Church remains too “clerical” and that too often decision-making is still occurring at all levels of ecclesial life without the involvement or sincere consideration of enough of the lay faithful.

Some participants who were members of existing consultative structures within the Church (Pastoral councils, finance committees, corporators, boards, and other such advisory entities exist at the parish and diocesan level) noted the importance of these bodies in making their voices heard by pastors and bishops responsible for decision-making, reflected a need to ensure these bodies are operating effectively, consistently and collaboratively and that their existence, purpose and membership are known to the laity.

Synod conversations highlighted a growing desire on the part of laity to be more involved in decision-making surrounding various administrative issues, such as management of parish finances and facilities, but also about the liturgy, including the kinds of music offered during Mass. While noting their love for their parish and for the liturgy, they expressed a desire for greater ministerial roles for laity so they can better serve the Church by utilizing their gifts and by caring for people sick and dying, those estranged from Christ and the Church and those preparing for marriage.

Women

There was a decided emphasis on the part of many synod participants to honor, invite and utilize the unique gifts of women in the life of the Church. Some acknowledged the number of leadership roles held by women at the Archdiocesan level (Chancellor, Superintendent of Schools, Executive Director of Advancement, Executive Director of Human Resources, and many boards, including the Archdiocesan Pastoral Council) and at the parish level (Pastoral Associates, Parish Councils, Finance Councils, Principals, and Directors of Religious Education). Other voices noted the exclusion of women from ordained ministry. Parishioners of one suburban parish expressed a desire for information to understand better how women can serve in the Church. “We need help understanding for ourselves and helping others understand why women seem to be limited in what they are allowed to do for the Church.”

Clergy

Synodal conversations articulated a concern about the number of priests and the impact of the shortage of priests. Many expressed concerns for the health and well-being of their priests, commenting that priests are being asked to do too much, and urging that more administrative tasks be given to lay employees, so that priests could focus on pastoral duties. Some expressed concern that priests frequently are assigned to multiple parishes, leaving parishioners to feel neglected and priests to feel overburdened and unable to care adequately for the spiritual needs of their flocks. These concerns led to discussions about the Church allowing priests to marry, allowing married deacons to be ordained to the priesthood, and expanding ministerial and administrative roles for consecrated men and women. Throughout these conversations, it was evident that parishioners overwhelmingly view their priests with respect and affection and many sought to offer solutions that would allow priests to focus more time and attention on pastoral and ministerial duties and less time on administrative functions.

COVID-19 Pandemic

Another barrier to participation noted by many was the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. They lamented that it separated people from their parish, their pastor, their fellow parishioners and, most notably, the Eucharist. Many expressed gratitude to their parishes and the Archdiocese for efforts to allow parishioners to maintain engagement with their parishes through livestreaming of Masses, outdoor liturgies and “drive-up” Reconciliation. Many said that they discovered how much they missed their parish, their priest and their Mass once they could not be together during the pandemic and offered suggestions for reaching out to those who have not yet returned, including personal invitations from fellow parishioners. Some felt the pandemic has had a lasting impact and observed that many parishioners have not returned. The lack of volunteers for parish ministries post-pandemic was also commonly noted.

Sexual Abuse Scandal

The scandal of clerical sexual abuse was also cited as a barrier to participation, with many noting family members and others who left the Church because of the lack of trust created by revelations of widespread abuse by clergy and other ministers of the Church. Participants expressed confidence that the Church has put into place reforms, policies and practices that seem to be effective in addressing and preventing abuse in the life of the Church. Others acknowledged continued feelings of anger and disappointment over learning of past abuse in the Church and said that it remains an obstacle to their involvement in the life of the Church. One synodal conversation articulated that “Many people of all ages need healing from the sex abuse tragedies...[including] the younger generation, those who stopped coming, those who continue to participate and engage in their faith.”

MISSION

It is evident that the laity, as well as the clergy and religious who participated, share a concern for the Church’s ability to effectively evangelize, most especially those who are presently estranged from the Church. This was most clearly expressed in their concern that their children or family no longer practice the faith and a desire to address this sad reality.

Youth and Young Adults

In nearly every conversation, though, one issue was prominent above all others: the need to attract young people and young adults to the Church. Many parishioners noted current efforts to do so in their parish, while acknowledging that more needs to be done to remove barriers that currently exist between young people and the Church. Parishes and parish structures are often seen as excluding young people. Participants noted that parishes rarely invite young people to take positions of leadership but those parishes and movements that engage young people as co-responsible for the mission of the parish see greater youth and young adult involvement.

Young people who participated in the synodal process—including those in high school and college, as well as young adults who attended parish conversations—offered insights into some of those barriers for young people that reflect those in the broader culture outlined in the aforementioned section on communion. Participants in one synod conversation with young adults articulated hopes for a Church that “is artistic, intellectual, encourages creativity and exploration...that is caring and embraces the fullness of life...and where everyone knows that they are loved by God.”

The synodal report from conversations at a local Catholic university revealed that young people enjoy attending campus liturgies where, unlike their parishes, “there is a sense of community, and they feel a part of that community.” The report also notes that campus liturgies are more attractive and inviting than those of their parishes, and observes one reason

for this is that “the students have the opportunity to be the ‘main actors’ and organizers.” Students attending a Catholic high school cited a desire for young people to be more involved in ministry and for preaching to be “more positive...more relevant to their lives.” Others said that the liturgy is “boring” and suggested there be more availability of Sunday evening Masses.

Service and Outreach

Catholic Charities and the Church’s many other charitable efforts were highlighted as effective and valuable avenues for evangelization and transformation in the wider community. Many expressed appreciation for the opportunities to express their faith while contributing to the common good and serving those most in need. Others expressed gratitude for the Church’s social justice work in areas such as race, the environment, immigration, poverty, and healthcare.

Many participants cited examples of their own parish’s efforts to be an evangelizing parish, noting ministries to those impacted by poverty, violence and a lack of access to quality healthcare, education and employment opportunities. A parishioner in western Maryland said, “My local church, the parish I attend, has been a refuge and safe harbor for me and my wife and by extension to our children who are now adults...We can see Christ in all members of the parish.”

CONCLUSION

The responses gathered by the synod process and synthesized in this report demonstrate the wide array of needs and pastoral challenges and call for ongoing prayer and discernment in our local Church. These responses also show a clear willingness on the part of the whole of the people of God to journey together as we exercise co-responsibility for our common mission: to announce the Gospel to the world. We hope that the participation of our local Church of Baltimore will be a helpful contribution to the synod process that the Holy Father has inaugurated. As we continue to journey together, we entrust our need to the tender care of Mary Our Queen and Mother of the Church.



ARCHDIOCESE
of BALTIMORE