



ROMAN CATHOLIC  
DIOCESE *of* PROVIDENCE

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# DIOCESAN SYNOD SYNTHESIS

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A Report on the Diocesan Phase of the Synodal Process in Preparation for the  
XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops



“For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission”

JUNE 29, 2022

## **Background to Diocesan Phase**

In June 2021, Bishop Thomas J. Tobin appointed two people to serve as contact people for the synodal process, one layman and one laywoman. Praying for guidance from the Holy Spirit, the contact people then formed a committee of 15 people as a broad representative group composed of lay married or single women and men, priests, a religious sister, a permanent deacon, and of these, Catholics who represented different races, cultures, and backgrounds. Each of the committee meetings began by praying the Synod prayer (*Adsumus* prayer). The synod committee met a few times in the fall of 2021 and early 2022 and determined to hold several “gathering sessions” where Catholics in this diocese, and non-Catholics, would be invited to share their perspective on themes relating to the Synod *Preparatory Document* (PD). These would be regional gathering sessions, but parishes were also notified that they could hold their own local gathering/listening sessions, and given resources to aid them in the process via a website. The synod committee also proposed creating and distributing an electronic survey as part of the discernment process for the diocesan phase. Planning began for both the regional gathering sessions and survey with the bishop’s approval.

Our diocesan phase began on October 17, 2021 with Bishop Tobin celebrating Holy Mass at the Cathedral. The diocesan contact people also attended the annual bishop’s meeting with religious major superiors in the diocese on October 26, 2021. The religious superiors present were asked the fundamental question posed by the Vatican: “A synodal Church, in announcing the Gospel, ‘journeys together.’ How is this ‘journeying together’ happening today in your particular Church? What steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow in our ‘journeying together?’”

The Diocese of Providence hosted four regional gathering sessions in English, one session in Spanish, and one session online. All meetings began with the recitation of the *Adsumus* prayer. The five in-person sessions were all held at Churches. The contact people identified locations, in consultation with the chancery and the Synod committee. There was some discussion of hosting gathering sessions at non-Church venues in an effort to reach people who might not normally come to a “Church event,” but the decision to host the gatherings at Churches was made based on availability and with consideration to the pandemic.

Those people who attended the in-person and online Synod gathering sessions were almost exclusively active Catholics who regularly attend Mass. This certainly did not mean that everyone who attended saw the Catholic Faith through the same lens, and there were people present with divergent points of view. To that point, it is interesting to note that many people who shared divergent views sat at the same table as the people with whom they disagree. In these instances, the people spoke about their points of view in a calm manner. As a result of this process of dialogue, it became clear that lay people, priests, and religious need to continue to learn the Catholic Faith to be able to engage in conversation, truly led by the Holy Spirit and faithful to the Deposit of Faith. If Catholics cannot dialogue and debate with each other over matters of the Faith, with a properly formed conscience and seeking the truth in Jesus Christ and His Church, how can they dialogue with non-Catholics about truth?

In some cases, when people advocating for a certain idea would present their opinion, their reasoning seemed to be the result of formation from the broader American culture and not based on formation from the Catholic Faith. One could ascertain that a portion of Catholics who attended these gathering sessions are in the habit of forming their consciences according to the world and political parties as opposed to forming their consciences according to Divine Revelation as authentically taught by the Magisterium. It is worth exploring how the Diocese of Providence can encourage the faithful to form their consciences according to the teachings of Christ and His Church (cf. Luke 10:16; 1 Timothy 3:15).

From the committee members, the diocesan contact people established a sub-committee to coordinate the creation of the survey, with attention to what technology would be used for the survey online. The synod sub-committee proposed arranging questions around the fundamental question of the synodal

process along with the ten themes identified in the *Preparatory Document*. Two people from the sub-committee created the survey with that in mind. Over 1,500 people took the survey. Most survey respondents were Catholics who attend Mass daily or weekly. Still, a fair number of Catholics responded who do not attend Mass at least weekly, and a small percentage of non-Catholics completed the survey as well. Some of the survey questions used a Likert scale to gather data. There were at least two open-ended questions as well: (1) “Who do you think the Catholic Church is not effectively reaching?”; and (2) “In 300 words or less, please tell the Church whatever you wish. This is the place for comments, suggestions, praises, and criticisms.” One surprise to the first open-ended question was that more than half of Catholic respondents believe that the Church is not effectively reaching youth and/or young adults. This comes after a local effort to look at strategies for engaging youth in addition to our local preparation for Synod 2018.

For the other open-ended questions, the respondents were quite varied in their responses. Some expressed admiration for the bishop or the priests, while others expressed consternation. Some respondents expressed a desire to teach the Faith with charity in truth, while others seemed to advocate for opinions which are contrary to Divine Revelation. It was amazing to see how some survey responses, which were literally back-to-back, gave a completely different conclusion to societal questions of the day.

In addition to the meeting with religious, the gathering sessions, and the survey, the contact people also attended a Bishop’s Pastoral Council meeting and one of his Presbyteral Council meetings. A small number of Catholics shared their perspective on synodality with the contact people by phone, email, or in-person. These conversations offered the opportunity for one-on-one dialogue.

In the following analysis of the diocesan phase of the synodal process, this synthesis outlines the feedback received from the various outlets which respond to the fundamental question, with consideration of the ten themes listed in the Vatican’s *Preparatory Document*. The conclusion answers questions posed by the ten themes for this diocese, with a few suggestions for local consideration.

### **Prayerful Discernment of Feedback Received**

Once members of the Catholic faithful heard the theme for the upcoming synod in the fall of 2021, there was some interest on the topic. The diocesan contact people received initial phone calls and emails expressing anything from enthusiasm to concern regarding the theme of the Synod in 2023. Certainly, there was mixed feedback offered. A number of clergy, religious, and laity saw this synodal process as a way to promote heterodoxy, whether they were in favor of heterodox opinions or opposed to them. This sentiment likely impacted their participation in the process. Not everyone who participated in the synodal process shared this optimism or concern, but a fair number did, particularly on the survey.

Cardinal Mario Grech made a clarifying statement in an interview with Edward Pentin in the *National Catholic Register*. In an interview dated October 6, 2021, Cardinal Grech stated: “Listening to the People of God, therefore, does not mean adjusting to heterodox opinions, but recognizing the voice of the Holy Spirit within the whole of the baptized. In this way, synodality is not the Protestantization of the Catholic Church.” It is clear, based on divine revelation, that the Holy Spirit would not lead the Church to form heterodox opinions, since He is the Spirit of truth: “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth. ...” (John 16:13, RSVCE). It seemed that fascination with the prospect of this Synod on Synodality being a tool for changing Church teaching detracted from, for some people, the main goal of the synod: to prayerfully discern how we are journeying together toward the face of Christ as a local Church. Overall, the process itself was illustrative of areas of cohesion regarding communion, participation, and mission, as well as, potential areas which the faithful can grow in communion, participation, and mission.

Additionally, some people shared the perspective that: the Catholic Church must capitulate to the world or it will cease to exist. Other people shared the exact opposite perspective: if the Catholic Church capitulates to the world, particularly on moral issues, then it will continue to lose members. Clearly, St. Paul

had something to say on this topic: “Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:2). When these sentiments were shared, they tended to be more directly stated in survey responses than in face to face conversations. However a number of Catholics did share these sentiments at the gathering sessions or through phone conversations with the contact people.

### Synod Gathering Sessions

The four in-person synod gathering sessions in English and one in Spanish were held in different regions in the state of Rhode Island. One session was held online, as mentioned previously. Generally, the host parishes provided food and table discussion facilitators. The sessions were led by the diocesan contact people. Each session began with the opening *Adsumus* prayer. Then, a brief overview of the evening and how it fit into the diocesan phase of the synodal process was shared with attendees. After the overview, attendees were given two questions to respond to. The first question asked attendees about their positive experiences with the Catholic Church. The second question asked them to consider challenges the Church faces today, and, ways that the Church can grow in communion, participation, and mission. Attendees were given time to write out their responses. Then they discussed their perspective at their small group table. Finally, attendees were invited to share with the rest of the people present their responses to each question.

For the most part, participants spoke with charitable candor at each session. It was wonderful to have people of various ages discuss topics related to the Catholic Church, many of whom had never met previously. The majority of the young adults present, who shared their perspective, expressed that they valued Orthodoxy and the Extraordinary Form of the Mass. Other adults’ responses varied, particularly in whether or not they valued the Extraordinary Form. One older gentleman commented (paraphrase): “I grew up with the Latin Mass, I don’t really understand the fascination with it.” A parishioner from one of the parishes that offers the Extraordinary Form invited the gentleman to attend.

Most of the attendees were born into a Catholic family, and raised with the Catholic Faith. A few people had stopped participating in the Catholic Church, but, had since returned to regularly attending Holy Mass. Some people who had drifted away from the life of the Church were drawn back through invitation. Other people were not raised in a Catholic family, and yet, as adults they decided to become Catholic. At least one convert cited the Eucharist as the reason she became Catholic. Some people mentioned attending Mass every week with their families when they were growing up. A small number of people commented on how their non-Catholic Christian parent was a good role model for them in what it means to be Christian. However, others commented on the good Catholic role models they had growing up, including, uncles who were Catholic priests.

One woman mentioned she enjoyed going to Catholic school, but her family couldn’t afford it any longer, so they sent her to public school. There was some discussion in the gathering sessions over better financial support for Catholic schools. Other attendees at the gathering sessions shared their positive experiences with learning in Catholic schools. Some people mentioned the positive impact of their parents handing on the Catholic Faith in the home. One young adult man shared that watching his pastor serve others inspired him. A Catholic woman, who had been away from the life of the Church, commented on how Catholic staff at a local hospital inspired her to return to the Church. By asking the first question about the positive experiences with the Church, the attendees were able to consider ways we can grow as a Church in communion, participation, and mission.

The responses to the second question were more varied. This is where the participants were invited to identify challenges which the Church faces today. Some of the people commented on how the incidence of sexual abuse in the Church has left them feeling hurt, or their family members or friends feeling hurt. At least one person commented on how Church closures have left him or her feeling devastated. A small

number of people made comments relating to the idea that the Church needs to be welcoming to LGBTQ+ people. A few people commented on the need for more/better adult faith formation, bible studies, etc.

A small number of people identified division within the Church as a significant concern. Some commented that they believe there are bishops who speak and do things in opposition to Pope Francis (This concept came up in the survey as well). One person commented on how the content of homilies could vary quite a bit from one parish to another, and from one geographical region to another, throughout the world. One person commented that we have very poor shepherds. Others gave praise to priests and bishops. It is interesting to note that at one of the gatherings, a young adult expressed the idea that the Church has “abdicated leadership on morality to secular society.” Presumably this was a reference to the hierarchy, in the reference to “the Church.” He went on to lament that the Church has been too wishy-washy on Church teaching, and that has allowed the “poison of Satan” to enter the Church. The next person who spoke commented that the Church is too rigid, too clericalist. While these two opinions do not necessarily contradict each other, they seemed to be within the context of the gathering session. This raises an important insight: two Catholics in the same room, at the same time, could see a particular topic in a different way. This theme occurred in the survey as well. It was fascinating to have one person respond, and then immediately after, the next person offer a different perspective on an issue.

Some people at the gathering sessions commented on the need to be more welcoming, in general. A few people commented on the need for greater hospitality, welcoming all people. Another person commented on how he or she believed that the Church needs to do a better job welcoming divorced people. One person commented that it was his or her pet-peeve when priests leave Mass without acknowledging those people in attendance. One person commented on racism in the Church. The Church in his or her opinion also ignores the poor and marginalized. One man self-identified as a former priest, who had left the priesthood and got married. He shared that he felt hurt by a lack of outreach afterward. When many of these heartfelt perspectives were shared, again, it seemed that participants referenced “the Church” without clarifying who they were talking about. In other words, it could be implied that the references to “the Church” were references to priests. It seems that most people, whether they felt marginalized or not, valued the opportunity to speak their opinion and to be heard.

The equation of “the Church” with the ordained priesthood is something the Diocese of Providence needs to consider moving forward. When someone states: “the Church needs to do a better job supporting Catholic schools,” as someone did at a gathering session, all Catholics should recognize that this statement applies to them, not just to priests. When someone says “the Church” needs to do a better job welcoming people into the life of the parish, it is a reference to everybody. When someone says “the Church” needs to teach the Catholic Faith with clarity, it is something that all Catholics should aspire to do, recognizing the Magisterium is the official teaching office, guided by the Holy Spirit. The Second Vatican Council stated:

But the task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. This teaching office is not above the word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on, listening to it devoutly, guarding it scrupulously and explaining it faithfully in accord with a divine commission and with the help of the Holy Spirit, it draws from this one deposit of faith everything which it presents for belief as divinely revealed (*Dei verbum* 10).

The reference to “the Church” is not equivalent to the Magisterium. However, there did not seem to be a widespread understanding that the Magisterium has a unique role in interpreting the Deposit of Faith, as reiterated at the Second Vatican Council.

A small number of people at the gathering sessions suggested that there should be women ordained to the priesthood and/or married men should be allowed to receive Holy Orders. A few people expressed

concern that women were not being heard or not being invited to participate in the life of the Church. One person commented that priests should be ready to ask lay leaders to help, and the pastor should be ready to form them. A few people commented on the need to form catechists to teach the Faith.

Overall, the responses to the second question about perceived ways that the Church can grow in participation, communion, and mission today were quite varied. If someone were to have deeper conversations with each of the attendees, there would definitely be disagreement on key issues in the life of the Church today. Does leaving dialogue parameters open-ended and giving the impression that everyone’s opinion has the same weight help to build communion, participation, and mission? Could it be that the effort at listening to people without correcting error exacerbates the problem of poorly formed consciences which are not formed according to the teachings of Christ and His Church (cf. *Gaudium et spes* 16; *Dignitatis humanae* 14)? One pastor expressed concern that the synodal process would lead to further division. Catholics were getting the impression that this was an opportunity to change Church teaching, and when that doesn’t happen, he was concerned that more people would feel unheard and potentially leave the Catholic Church. We run the risk in Rhode Island that people equate “listening” to “you do what I want you to do.” Perhaps Cardinal Grech’s point in the interview cited above is a key takeaway. How will clergy, religious, and lay catechists know where there are deficiencies in catechetical formation if we don’t have conversations with others about the Catholic Faith?

#### Synod Survey

The survey was an excellent tool for gathering perspectives from the faithful. We also opened the survey up to anyone, non-Catholics as well, and received a small number of responses from non-Catholics, even a few non-Christians. The diocese spread word about the survey, inviting people to participate, through many of the regular channels for spreading information. It is interesting to note that some people expressed the desire to use more tools for spreading the word, but didn’t seem to recognize themselves as a source of spreading the word about the synod process. This point was illustrative for how we spread the word about events and even how we evangelize here in the Diocese of Providence. When people are excited about something, they typically tell others about it. That is a good way to approach evangelization, with the lay faithful participating in the sacramental economy of the Church, united with their shepherds. Perhaps we can consider as a diocese ways of forming lay Catholics to recognize their role in “spreading the word,” particularly, as it pertains to their baptismal responsibility to bring the Gospel out into the world.

Slightly more women took the survey than men. The majority of survey respondents identified as white. While there was a survey offered in English and Spanish, it would have been good to find more ways to let people know about the survey in Spanish and encourage participation. It is interesting to note that just over 10% of the participants were under the age of 35 and about 20% were under the age of 45. About one third (33%) of survey respondents were 65 or older, the largest demographic that participated according to age. Most of the survey respondents were married, some were single, and a small percentage of clergy or religious took the survey. One interesting statistic was that about 80% of the respondents attended Mass either daily or weekly. That means that 20% of respondents do not attend Mass at least once a week, a fair number of people who might be considered “on the margins.”

The responses were quite varied. In the open-ended questions, some people lamented the work of Pope Francis. Others, expressed disdain that all the bishops and priests are not like Pope Francis, in their estimation. It is interesting to note that in most cases such as these, the survey respondents didn’t offer specifics. For example, one person stated: “Love my pastor but the diocese and bishop need to change their ways. Be more accepting and more like pope Francis.” A follow up question, in a dialogue, might be: “how is Pope Francis more accepting than the diocese and the bishop?” With a survey, it is tough to know exactly what the respondent has in mind. Another mother indicated a different view about the pope: “I wish Pope

Francis would articulate his answers better so not to confuse and mislead people. Speaking as a Catholic mother, it is hard enough to raise children and guide young adults in this broken world, without the [Vicar] of Christ causing more confusion and leading our youth astray. Lord have mercy!” A follow up question for this mother might be “How do you believe Pope Francis is misleading people?” If nothing else, any responses regarding the work of the pope, bishops, or priests highlighted the great responsibility that these members of the clergy have today, leading the people of God in this hierarchical Church.

Due to the widespread access to news media, the internet, radio, and more – Catholics have access to what popes, bishops, and priests say every day. This is certainly unprecedented in the life of the Church. For example, there were no “in-flight conferences” two hundred year ago, so Catholics around the world were not awaiting what Pope Pius VII would have said in a press conference on a plane. This reminds everyone to pray for our clergy, and all religious or lay women and men in leadership positions – that they will seek the truth and lead others in the truth of the Gospel, speaking the truth in love (cf. Ephesians 4:15).

While the pope, bishops, and priests were one point of contention across survey responses, another point of disagreement was how to engage with the world today. Some people clearly stated that they believed the Church needs to change, to be more like the world, as noted above. This is fascinating because the principle, in and of itself, that the Church must change to be more like the world, is antithetical to what Jesus taught (cf. John 17:13-23). Others lamented, in their estimation, that the Church was becoming too much like the world. It is evident that many Catholics need to form their consciences about moral teaching.

One of the committee members who reviewed the survey results commented that, “Respondents to the survey felt very free to voice their opinions. On the face of it, they were quite open and honest, and in fact, downright frank. This is one indication that among those who participated in the survey process, the anonymity of the survey ‘worked’ to remove inhibitions of communication.” Because the survey allowed for open sharing, the results demonstrated areas of the Faith where there are shared perspectives, but also where Catholics can benefit from more formation.

Roughly 10% of survey respondents indicated they believe the Church should ordain women to the priesthood or diaconate, and some indicated they believed married men should be allowed to be ordained to the priesthood. It is interesting to note that most often when someone cited a reason for ordaining women to the priesthood, the reasoning was based on “equality.” No one seemed to call into question the fundamental reason the priesthood is reserved to men alone: Jesus’s choice of men to serve as apostles, and the choice of men to be their successors. One is left wondering how many people advocating for women’s ordination know the Church’s position and reasoning behind this teaching? Members of the faithful could benefit from reading *Inter insigniores*, *Ordinatio sacerdotalis*, and *Mulieris dignitatem*.

One key surprise from the survey came in response to the survey question: “Who is the Catholic Church not effectively reaching?” A large number of survey respondents stated that they believed the Catholic Church is not effectively reaching youth or young adults. Here would be another area where it would be beneficial to ask people specifically what they are referring to. Certainly, the statistics in the US seem to point to a great majority of youth who stop practicing the Catholic Faith within a few years after receiving the Sacrament of Confirmation. However, when someone says “the Church” is not effectively reaching youth and young adults, it is unclear how many people recognize that they are members of “the Church” and are therefore also not effectively reaching youth. Some people stated beliefs that Church teaching on sexual morality led to youth leaving the Church, while others indicated the exact opposite: due to lack of clarity about Church teaching some youth have stopped practicing the Faith.

A fair number of survey respondents said that “the Church” is not effectively reaching members of the LGBTQ+ community, the unchurched, and some mentioned traditional Catholics. Some good follow up questions might be: why do you think that is? What can the Catholic Church do differently to more effectively reach people who identify as LGBTQ+, or the “unchurched,” or traditional Catholics?

Again, the survey responses were quite varied. In some cases, this indicated the need for more catechesis, and likely kerygmatic proclamation of the Gospel, encounter with Jesus Christ, and a call to conversion. Additionally, many Catholics could benefit from conversations about what the Church authentically teaches about matters of faith and morals. Some people have concocted an image of Jesus in their minds that is not consistent with Scripture and Tradition. Occasionally, survey responses seemed to mirror US political party lines, more than a direct reference to a specific teaching of the Church. What can bishops, priests, and deacons do to facilitate and encourage conversations about important moral topics without giving the impression that the teachings can change? In reference to ecumenical dialogue, Vatican II made the point that: “Nothing is so foreign to the spirit of ecumenism as a false irenicism, in which the purity of Catholic doctrine suffers loss and its genuine and certain meaning is clouded” (*Unitatis redintegratio* 11). In other words, it is not helpful in ecumenical dialogue to pretend like doctrinal differences do not matter, where the actual meaning of Church teaching gets overlooked or obscured to the point that it is unintelligible. This type of dialogue will not bear lasting fruit, because it is not oriented toward the truth, which, guided by the Holy Spirit, calls to conversion. This sentiment also applies to Catholic dialogue partners who disagree about a Church teaching. Any effort at dialogue must be ordered toward the truth that will set us free (cf. John 8:32).

#### Meetings with the Bishop

The diocesan contact people attended the annual religious superiors meeting, they attended a bishop’s pastoral council meeting, attended one of his administrative council meetings, and they attended one of his prebyteral council meetings. Of these meetings, at the ones which occurred before March, the attendees were asked the question: How is the Church journeying together. After that, attendees were given information about the survey responses, the synod gathering feedback, and they discussed the presentation from the diocesan contact people about the diocesan participation in this phase of the synodal process.

The diocesan contact people (one laywoman and one layman) very much enjoyed the opportunity to meet with the religious superiors in October 2021. The tone of this meeting was very positive. Even though some of the religious shared points of concern, there was not a hopeless atmosphere. One sister commented on the reality that religious have a built-in opportunity to journey together through community life. A religious priest commented on the poor state of knowledge of the Faith amongst school children and adults. Another religious priest commented on state of unwed parents bringing children to parish religious education or Catholic schools, and the challenges involved in inviting them to encounter Jesus Christ. A religious brother mentioned that many youths need someone to listen to them, a thought which could be at least one element in what is necessary for ministering to youth in the Diocese of Providence. A different religious brother commented on the need to renew religious education in general (in schools and in the parish). One religious sister commented on the state of her community, which continues to dwindle. It was difficult for her to wrestle with that, and yet, she found opportunities for community. She recommended having parents and children coming together for faith formation opportunities and other Catholic gathering events. One religious priest shared with the group his experience of collaborating with immigrant populations and the joy it has brought him. These are just a few comments shared by the religious superiors present, and the consistent commentary seemed to focus on the need to improve evangelization and faith formation (religious education) for adults, youth, and children.

The bishop’s pastoral council met in March 2022. In addition to the contact people, a seminarian committee member also attended. This council, comprised of laywomen and laymen, religious, priests, and deacons was also quite positive about the concept of the synod. At this meeting, one of the priests asked how we can use the diocesan phase of the synodal process to help with evangelization. Another person commented that this synodal process would be an opportunity to reach young adults. A few people



throughout the process indicated that sentiment, but it is unclear how they believed this process would reach young adults. One woman commented that women in general want to be heard and to make decisions. She believed women are less and less visible in the Church. A female theologian commented on her love for Tradition but remarked about how people taught her children to question Tradition. One person saw small Christian communities as a source for building unity in the Church. One person commented that in his or her estimation, many people want the Church to change, and they are not looking to change themselves. This is a point for further reflection. Since conversion is a lifelong process, as God’s grace conforms us to the image of Jesus Christ (cf. Romans 8:29), it seems that all the faithful must embrace that process of conversion. Another woman, on that note, commented that references to “Church teaching” can be confusing. That makes it sound like the Church makes up teachings, and that they can change. She preferred the term “Divine Revelation,” since that more appropriately indicates that God revealed something that the Church teaches. These teachings are therefore immutable. The meeting was an enjoyable experience, and the pastoral council spoke positively about the synodal process.

The contact people met with Bishop Tobin’s administrative council at the end of May 2022. Again, there was a variety of laywomen and laymen, priests, etc. At this meeting, the contact people discussed the results of the survey and the gathering sessions. Members of the council gave feedback and asked questions. Then, the contact people met with the bishop’s presbyteral council the first week of June 2022. The goal of this meeting was again to report back the results of the diocesan phase of the synodal process. The priests present shared some of their own experiences with the synodal process. Many of the priests present shared their thankfulness to the diocesan contact people for the work in coordinating the diocesan effort.

#### Other Opportunities for Participation

A number of priests, deacons, religious, and lay people participated in the diocesan phase of the synodal process in other ways. Some groups took the initiative to hold formal gathering sessions either online or in-person. At least one parish held two gathering sessions and submitted a report. Other people participated by writing emails or letters and sending them to the contact people. Some individuals participated by sharing their perspective on how the Church is journeying together through phone conversation. The contact people and committee members also had face to face conversations with people about the synodal process.

The parish report that was submitted positively points to the various ways the Diocesan offices participate in the corporal works of mercy. However, the report laments the reality of clerical sex abuse, and its lingering affects on members of the Church. Additionally, the report advocates for ordaining married men and women to the priesthood. The topic of being more welcoming to LGBTQ+ was discussed, perhaps as a way to welcome youth to participate in the life of the Church.

A group called the Companions in Mission met to discuss the synodal process. The group of women self-identified as having adult children who feel judged by the Church and an emphasis on “rules.” They discussed the ten themes laid out in the *Preparatory Document*. Observations they made include the following: we must “be open and listen to all”; they want homilies that deal with difficult topics – in addition to abortion – racial injustice, and care for common home; lay people need to be reminded of their baptismal responsibility to participate in the mission of the Church; They encouraged parishes to send a survey to parishioners as a way to get them more involved, by feeling listened to. They also emphasized the need to preach about discernment and most importantly, about love.

Another group of teachers, priests, brothers, and other lay people met several times for online listening sessions. They initially discussed the history of the concept of synodality. Early on, they discussed possible questions they would like to see asked as part of the diocesan phase of the synodal process. One Latino woman commented that we need to do a better job reaching families and youth. She added that

retreats in Spanish would be a good opportunity to listen to the attendees. Another woman commented that youth could be used to welcome parishioners to participate in the synodal process. The group discussed other ways of communicating about the synodal process, including, a reference to what another diocese was doing for their synodal process.

One of the priests involved in that online gathering initiative shared his own perspective in a letter sent to the diocesan contact people. He shared that he saw this new emphasis on the concept of “synodality” being rooted in a much more ancient ecclesiological *axis*. The priest shared that he believes a “listening campaign” is very timely, and something our diocese could benefit from along with a discernment process. He sees benefit of drawing from the synodality found in diocesan parishes where they identify as Hispanic, Latino, or of Spanish origin. The priest also pointed to the work of Joseph Cardinal Cardijn and the Young Christian Worker movement as an example of synodality.

One layman wrote an email stating “My first-hand observation is that Pastors are shorthanded, overworked, and burning out.” He went on to propose priests inviting the laity to participate more actively in the mission of the Church. Perhaps it is not so much the pastor giving a wide-open invitation to serve, but pastors and diocesan staff inviting people as individuals to serve in some capacity with the Church’s mission, identifying the gifts that Catholics have. He stated, “Spending quality time in personal interactions makes all the difference when focusing on the heart.” He recognized his own need to spend more time interacting with parishioners but saw this as something that all the faithful can improve upon in this diocese. He reminds us to practice what we preach as Catholics, attempting to respond to the call to holiness, and to recognize the spiritual foundation of the process of our sanctification.

A leader in one of our Spanish speaking communities spent some time discussing his experience of being in a parish that serves both English and Spanish speaking parishioners. He shared that the English-speaking parishes could benefit from more kerygmatic retreat – leading people to encounter Jesus Christ. He also questioned: what do we do for parishioners after they have been “baptized in the Holy Spirit?” We need to have formation afterward, rooted in the teachings of the Church. He said that in his estimation, Spanish speaking Catholics are not as concerned with changing Church teaching. Their formation includes: the kerygma and call to conversion; teaching how to pray; teaching how to read the Bible (Lectio Divina); and teaching how to give a talk on the Bible to others. This is part of their discipleship formation that other parishes could benefit from employing, in his mind. One item for the diocese to consider, with all of this, is how to form a team, or teams, to give kerygmatic retreats. Certainly, the subsequent formation is necessary as well to invite people to participate more in the sacramental economy of the Catholic Church.

Another man, identifying as 78 years old, asked the Church to consider days of general absolution as a way of welcoming people back. He added the caveat that those receiving general absolution should first promise to follow the teachings of the Church afterward. A priest wrote a letter concerned over the state of catechesis in the diocese, particularly considering the Covid pandemic – with less children receiving the religious education that they need to grow in their relationship with God. He recommended focusing on the faith formation of parents, so that they could then better hand on the Faith to their children. This is consistent with the 1971 *General Catechetical Directory* (no. 20).

We received a statement from our local Rhode Island Catholic-Jewish Dialogue group. They pointed to the Vatican II document *Nostra aetate*, and the conversations, dialogue, and friendships that have grown in Rhode Island since its promulgation. The group members stated the following in their letter: “With antisemitism on the rise, we, the members of the Rhode Island Catholic-Jewish Dialogue Group, urge the Synod to strongly reaffirm and more actively promote Jewish-Christian understanding, according to the principles of *Nostra Aetate*, in churches, seminary formation, and religious education.”

A senior priest wrote a letter stated that his Church is open to all, but he did not believe other Churches are open to all. He said the Church needs to “Get off our bandwagon on Abortion and focus on

forgiving and accepting. Imagine what would happen to our world if we had a ‘Forgiveness walk’ in DC or ‘all are welcome walk’ in DC.” He attached letters from other laypeople to his letter. One person commented, “Pope Francis is the ideal cleric who ... is an example to us to do the same through generous actions toward every single human being regardless of status, race, or life style.” He or she then recommended that the best way to evangelize is by example, by living the Ten Commandments, most especially the greatest commandment to love one another as Christ has loved us. Another attached letter, presumably written by a husband and wife, stated that what they liked about the Church was the Eucharist, amongst other things. They recommended listening more, particularly to the marginalized, as a way of making better communities.

Another concerned gentleman, who attended one of the in-person gathering sessions, wrote a letter to express concern that the Diocese of Providence would follow the German Synodal Path. He used the Church as a ship analogy, pointing to Theology as the rudder which steers us in the right direction. “To abandon our faith / theology is to be led by the ‘spirit of the world,’ to our destruction. Those who seek to save their lives by following the winds of ‘the world’ will lose them.” Again, it is fascinating to note that the Catholics who wrote these letters likely disagree on interpretation of Divine Revelation.

One local college professor who teaches at a non-Catholic university sent a copy of her research on the contribution she believes neuroscience can have on Church teaching. She sent in the copy of the journal article with an attached letter, stating that she has “one foot in and one foot outside of the church.” One of the contact people had a follow up phone conversation with her about her academic research, her experience of abuse by a peer at a Church event, and the harm caused by members of the Catholic Church to her Huguenot ancestors. The perspective she shared is that the Church should consider how the human brain interacts with outside factors in relation to moral issues.

Other people sent in letters regarding specific issues. Some wanted to see the Church be more welcoming. One gentleman stated, “I desire that Traditional Latin Mass continue without restriction and not be abrogated in any way,” citing Pope St. Pius V’s *Quo primum* as a reference as well as the work of St. John Paul II and Pope Emeritus Benedict’s *Summorum Pontificum*. Overall, the phone interactions, letters, additional meetings, and other participations in the synodal process were positive in tone. However, again it is interesting to note that from the vast interactions with priests, deacons, religious, and laity, there did not seem to be widespread agreement on how to approach the key issues of the day. To the extent that people were able to wrestle with the truths of Divine Revelation and dialogue about significant issues the Church faces today, one could construe the dialogue as a positive addition to the synodal process. To the extent that people believed that the Church can alter Divine Revelation, against what God has revealed through Scripture and Tradition, those interactions left some remaining questions.

### **Conclusion – The Ten Themes**

In conclusion, the overlying themes from our local diocesan phase of the synodal process will be discussed in reference to the ten thematic questions listed in the Synod’s *Preparatory Document*. There are some synodal structures already in place and other areas in which the local Church can grow.

#### **The Journeying Companions**

As a result of this diocesan phase, it seems evident that many people reference the hierarchy when they refer to “the Church.” A few people commented that the faithful need more voices, particularly from priests, asking them to participate in the mission of the Church. Some people expressed concern that members of the LGBTQ+ community are being left on the margins, but most people did not clearly state what they meant by that. This is one area that could be further explored. The members of the faithful need the teachings of Divine Revelation on human sexuality and the moral topics that flow from Divine

Revelation – marriage between one man and one woman, abortion is the taking of innocent human life, using contraception to avoid children is a grave sin, etc. Members of the faithful need someone calling them to participate in the corporal and spiritual works of mercy as well. To the extent that the clergy are not in agreement on these matters, it will further lead to division and confusion within the Church – since lay people get a different message in homilies, in the confessional, in spiritual direction, and from other forms of Catholic media.

#### Listening

In reality, the bishop has men and women on his various boards, people involved in advising him. The bishop’s various advisory boards consist of priests, deacons, religious, men and women. It is not clear how many members of the lay faithful are aware of that in the Diocese of Providence. Anyone in leadership positions in our local Church – priests, deacons, religious, laywomen and laymen – can consider more opportunities for listening to other members of the faithful. Listening does not imply changing Church teaching. It does, however, show respect, even when one disagrees with someone. Are there ways we can better listen to women, to various racial groups, and people of diverse cultures in this diocese? Do we always listen to, care for, and respect people with special needs in our parishes? Who are some other groups of people we need to engage with in dialogue (ie. The homeless, homebound, etc.)?

#### Speaking Out

It is tough to quantify how free people felt to share their perspectives. But from the experience of the gathering sessions, the survey, and the other forms of contact: it seemed people in this local Church felt free. One takeaway in regards to this is that when people feel comfortable to dialogue with one another, even when outlandish or impossible ideas are shared (ie. Going against Divine Revelation), the dialogue partners can learn from the experience. It does not seem beneficial to always leave things unanswered. Dialogue partners should be able to share the truth and call to conversion of mind and heart. Instructing the ignorant is one of the spiritual works of mercy. What are some additional ways that priests can invite lay people to share their perspective, inviting them to do so in a charitable manner, seeking the truth?

#### Celebrating

Most of the people who participated in the diocesan phase of the synodal process attend Holy Mass regularly. For them, the Mass has a bearing on their day to day life. The faithful seem to value active participation in the Liturgy – but that phrase from Vatican II means different things to different people. The original context in *Sacrosanctum concilium* points to “*actual* participation.” This focuses on inward transformation in response to the Holy Spirit who is leading in the process of conversion to Jesus Christ, to God the Father. The local Church can consider ways to discuss the sanctifying effect of Mass, what that means, what it means to be a saint, and most importantly, the sacrificial nature of the Mass. If one fails to see the Mass as a sacrifice, that person will likely fail to respond in offering his/her life as a sacrifice in response to Jesus Christ who first offered Himself to us (cf. Romans 12:1). There is a local young adult initiative where they come together for Benediction with contemporary Christian music and Gregorian chant. This is an example of young adults with diverse backgrounds journeying together.

#### Co-Responsible in the Mission

It seems lay people are involved in the mission of the Church, in various ways. But there is room for growth here. Some lay people would like to see their pastors more actively invite them to specific tasks within the Church’s mission of evangelization. Most times, this sentiment flowed from concern for the well being of pastors and desire to participate in evangelization. In the past, conversations with Eastern Catholic

priests have resulted in them expressing admiration for the bishop. We can explore more opportunities for dialogue with Eastern Catholics.

#### Dialogue in Church and Society

Parish pastoral councils and the bishop’s various councils serve as opportunities for dialogue with members of the faithful who attend these meetings. There are several other ministries and men’s or women’s groups that offer the opportunity for dialogue. For dialogue with non-Catholics, there is the Jewish-Catholic dialogue group mentioned previously. There are likely other groups and associations involved in formal ecumenical dialogue, but they are less well known. This is something that the diocese can grow in – involvement in ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. One challenge to realizing this goal is that formation is needed for the faithful to be knowledgeable and confident in the teachings of the Catholic Church. There are other initiatives at both the diocesan and parish level where Catholics work together with non-Catholics to serve the common good, particularly with the corporal works of mercy.

#### With the Other Christian Denominations

The diocese has an appointed priest who has regularly met with representatives from other Christian denominations in the past. However, the pandemic altered some of that. In terms of the synod survey, the non-Catholics who responded generally commented on some reason they were not Catholic (ie. Church teaching, poor example of Catholics, etc.). Again, Catholics are called to participate in ecumenical dialogue. But how much fruit can that dialogue bear if Catholics don’t know their own Faith well enough to talk about it? Could the false irenicism warned about at Vatican II cause further scandal?

#### Authority and Participation

Generally speaking, Catholic laity in this diocese recognize that bishops and priests have a level of authority that they do not have. Some people want to share in that leadership. Others want the clergy to do more in exercising their leadership. It might be helpful to have a healthy ongoing dialogue about apostolic succession, the ways lay women and men can exhibit leadership, and how do all Catholics participate in the mission of the Church? Perhaps conversation surrounding charismatic gifts is necessary.

#### Discerning and Deciding

The bishop and pastors make decisions, through prayerful discernment, and in consultation with advisory bodies. Not very many decisions are made by one individual where these advisory boards are in place. However, more parishes have yet to form pastoral and other councils. This is something to continue to address as a diocese. The diocese has financial transparency with statements about where the money from the annual appeal goes. Do all lay people know about this? Religious superiors make decisions. Laywomen and laymen make decisions for various groups in the diocese.

#### Forming Ourselves in Synodality

One way to train people in synodality is to train them in how to dialogue. We can teach active listening and how to dialogue with charity. Apologetics, using the Socratic method, is a helpful method for engaging in conversation with people whom you may or may not agree with. You ask clarifying questions to make sure you understand the other person’s point of view. This can help dialogue partners to learn from each other. Does it help anyone to give the impression that all opinions have equal weight, especially if some tend to directly appeal to revealed truth, things that the Incarnate Word of God Jesus Christ revealed, and others do not? This is something for bishops, priests, deacons, religious, and laypeople to consider. To form ourselves in synodality is to commit ourselves to the truth, in charity, guided by the Holy Spirit.