



# SYNTHESIS OF THE SYNOD ON SYNODALITY

*The Roman Catholic Diocese of Metuchen  
New Jersey, United States of America  
October 2021 - June 2022*



DIOCESE OF  
METUCHEN

*Prepared by the Diocesan Committee for the Synod on Synodality*



# DIOCESE OF METUCHEN

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## OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

Dear brothers and sisters,

We recently completed the diocesan phase of the Synod on Synodality, which opened worldwide in October 2021. I am grateful for members of our diocesan Evangelization, Pastoral and Schools Offices for implementing a consultative process that offered a variety of ways for people from across the diocese to participate. By and large, participants testify to an experience through this process that brought joy and hope for renewal of the Church and of society.

By walking together and reflecting on our shared journey, our diocese has experienced a process that allowed for authentic listening to one another and to the Holy Spirit. This report is a synthesis of thousands of comments made at numerous listening sessions (both in-person and virtual), through online questionnaires and with one-on-one interviews. Pope Francis reminds us that the purpose of the Synod “is not to produce documents, but to plant dreams, draw forth prophecies and visions, allow hope to flourish, inspire trust, bind up wounds, weave together relationships awaken a new dawn of hope and learn from one another.” Therefore, this report is not a strategic plan but a summary of recurring themes for us to reflect on and learn from as we continue our journey as a diocese. My sincere gratitude to all who participated in the synodal conversations.

This report, along with those from every Diocese, will be sent to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops for synthesis into one national report. In the coming year, the reports received from every region of the world will become a working document by the Vatican. With an eye on greater participation at the diocesan, national and global levels, a final working document will be presented and discussed at the General Assembly in Rome in October 2023.

Thank you for taking the time to read this report and the thoughts of your fellow Catholics in the Diocese of Metuchen. Please consider how the Holy Spirit is calling you to use your gifts to participate in the mission of the Church. As we begin the work of discerning how to respond to joys and sorrows outlined in this report, let us pray in the words of the *Adsumus* (Prayer of the Synod): Holy Spirit, “teach us the way and how to pursue it.”

With renewed best wishes, I remain

Yours in Christ,

Most Reverend James F. Checchio, JCD, MBA  
Bishop of Metuchen

## INTRODUCTION

The Synodal journey began in Rome on October 10, 2021 when Pope Francis opened the “Synod on Synodality” with the celebration of the Holy Mass, which Bishop James F. Checchio, Bishop of the Diocese of Metuchen, concelebrated as one of the two Bishops invited as delegates for the United States. The theme of this Synod is For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission.

In communion with the global Catholic Church, the Diocese of Metuchen opened the local phase of the Synod on October 16, 2021 with a Solemn Opening Mass at the Cathedral of St. Francis of Assisi. Prior to the Opening Mass, Bishop Checchio held a meeting for Parish Ambassadors to explain the purpose and timeline of the synod and the listening session process. The Diocese of Metuchen serves the people of God in the four counties of Middlesex, Somerset, Warren and Hunterdon in New Jersey and is comprised of 90 parishes and approximately 637,000 Catholics.

Bishop Checchio appointed Allan Caballero, Director of the Office of Evangelization, and Rev. James De Fillipps as the contacts for the Diocese of Metuchen in accordance with the Vademecum on the synod issued by the Vatican. A Diocesan Synod Planning Committee was formed with Jennifer Ruggiero, Secretary, Secretariat for Family & Pastoral Life, serving as the Chairperson. Soon the committee began the journey of planning and conducting local meetings as part of the diocesan phase of the Synod, which included increased prayer, a series of listening sessions and opportunities to more intentionally listen to the Holy Spirit.

The Committee prepared a Synod website and materials for Synod Listening Sessions, including a Host Resource Guide, a Facilitator Guide and a Participant Guide. These resources, which were made available to parishes and ministry groups across the diocese, were developed to help plan a listening session process that is consistent with Pope Francis’ call to “Journey Together as a synodal Church.” Given the pandemic, the Committee also ran several virtual Facilitator Training Sessions to prepare parish and ministry leaders for effective, spiritual conversations.

At the end of January, a 40-hour Eucharistic Adoration was hosted in a parish in each of the eight deaneries of the diocese as a way to help people to spiritually prepare for the synod process by prayerfully reflecting on the questions put before us by our Holy Father. The focus on prayer and on the Eucharist was an intentional step taken so that the process would not be parliamentary in nature but rather a process of heartfelt listening to one another and to the Holy Spirit. Unfortunately, a surge in Covid-19 cases caused a delay for the in-person listening sessions but, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the sessions were rescheduled and conducted in each deanery (inter-parish) and in parishes and schools throughout the diocese from February through May. Each session began with the *Adsumus Sancte Spiritus* prayer, followed by brief instructions about the synod process and ground rules for spiritual conversations. Participants then gathered in small groups and were asked to reflect on the fundamental question about “journeying together” and six core questions outlined in the Vademecum, to help stimulate discussion. An Online Synod Questionnaire was also made available for those who were unable or hesitant about participating in-person.

Awareness of the synod, along with its significance, objectives and how people can participate, was raised through the following means: the diocesan website, articles in *The Catholic Spirit* (the official newspaper of the diocese), video messages from Bishop Checchio, podcasts, emails to pastors and parish ambassadors, pulpit announcements and inserts in the parish bulletins.

To promote participation by as many of the people of God as possible, we conducted outreach to the following groups: chaplains at the local university, leaders in the Hispanic community and members of the local charitable organizations who minister to the elderly, the homeless, the poor and immigrants. In some cases, it was difficult to meet with people as a group so one-on-one interviews were conducted. Various ministries and groups were invited to hold their own listening sessions, such as clergy and religious, high school students, youth and young adults, Catholic School principals and teachers, Courage and other LGBTQ groups and those in the women's prison, the homeless shelters and those who utilize the food pantries. Several online Listening Sessions were also held.

The Diocesan Synod Planning Committee compiled all of the Listening Session Reports along with the online questionnaires (over 3000 pages). Committee members then met to summarize the responses, which were then synthesized into this report. For the majority of the Listening Sessions a sign-in sheet was used to collect demographics of those participating. Approximately, 1800 people participated from across the diocese.

## **PARTICIPATION**

The diocese has numerous consultative bodies in place such as the Diocesan Pastoral Council, the Presbyteral Council and Parish Councils. These groups allow us to hear from the lay faithful on a regular basis. However, the overall number of participants at the in-person Listening Sessions was less than we had hoped. This may have been due to the looming Covid-19 pandemic, winter weather conditions and/or a lack of understanding of the purpose of a synod. Skepticism and indifference based on a previous diocesan synod experience may also have played a role.

Many of the participants who attended in-person sessions raised concerns about the synod questions, themselves, which they described as “ambiguous” and “difficult to understand.” Most participants enjoyed the synod process but found the language inaccessible. Many of the online respondents were confused or frustrated by the questions as well but did not feel limited by them and freely expressed themselves.

Below is a brief snapshot of some of the larger groups that participated in the diocesan phase of the synod. The words participant and respondent are used interchangeably throughout.

### **Hispanic Community**

In recent years, there has been a rapid growth of the Hispanic population across the country as well as locally and now 26 of the 90 parishes in the Diocese of Metuchen intentionally serve Hispanics with Holy Mass, the other Sacraments and other pastoral ministries in Spanish.

The Office of Hispanic Evangelization held eight Listening Sessions for the Spanish-speaking community with 245 people participating (67% women and 33% men) approximately 81% of participants were between the ages of 30 and 64. Having a good percentage of younger participants in this group is an encouraging sign. Three of the Deanery Listening Session were bi-lingual.

Many in this group suggested that “consecrating oneself to the Holy Spirit is the surest way to partake in the treasures of God’s salvation.” They also lamented that not speaking the English language and lack of biblical knowledge hinders them from fully participating in the mission of the Church. The majority agreed that integration of cultures in worship and the parish community is most important to them.

### **Online Respondents**

A total of 128 online questionnaires were received. Approximately 66% were women and 33% men and 94% reported as Caucasian. Nearly 100 % of respondents attend Mass at least weekly with about 18% reporting that they attend Mass at several different parishes.

### **Catholic Schools**

**Principals:** A virtual Listening Session was held for 23 Catholic School principals. They were earnest in their desire to find solutions and approached the questions from that perspective. The principals knew that they would be facilitating their own sessions at their schools and may have been preoccupied by that. In the end, they were extremely pleased with the session and grateful to have participated. They hope we continue to have these discussions.

**Teachers:** Listening sessions for teachers were held in 17 of the 23 elementary schools and both of the diocesan high schools. Approximately 422 teachers participated across all four counties in the diocese. The results reflect a combination of perspectives.

- Some answers were given from the perspective of parishioners in a number of parishes; others reflect school life only; and, finally, there is a combination of school/parish relationship that may only reflect a specific school/parish dynamic.
- There were many references to the Church moving too slowly and being seen as too strict or harsh, but not mentioning particular examples. The overriding assumption was the important role that the pastor must play in leading the parish and setting the tone. There is a strong desire to see the pastor provide a welcoming environment for all, especially youth; and, he must provide well-delivered homilies that reach all.

### **Youth & Young Adults**

#### **Catholic High School Students:**

Student listening sessions were held at both high schools. There were approximately 180 representatives from all four grades in each school. The schools collaborated and wrote new questions that would be more applicable in high school.

The responses paint a picture of a Church with dwindling numbers that is trying to find ways to bring more people back to the faith. Students feel that we need to make changes quickly if we



are going to save the Church, which is seen as strict, harsh and not inclusive. There were no specific examples given. When asked about the highlight of their life in the Church, most students refer to reception of sacraments or experiences as leader on retreat. From this session, it became clear, that there is a need for more opportunities to help the youth develop a personal relationship with Christ.

### **Youth Groups:**

The participants (approximately 60) in the youth group listening sessions commented that youth group is a place where they can find community, support, friendships and opportunities for service. They shared their greatest challenges as meeting new people, peer pressure, the toxicity of social media, struggles with mental health, finding their purpose and bullying. They expressed a desire for the Church to be more welcoming to all, especially those identifying as LGBTQ+. They encouraged clergy to be more accepting and to avoid judgmental attitudes. The teens expressed the need for more discussion on topics such as same-sex marriage, abortion and women in the Church. They also expressed an appreciation for communication from the Church through social media and desire more outreach in this way.

### **Young Adult/College Students:**

There were approximately 16 participants in this session, all active in Church ministry. This session stood out from the others because of its joyful feeling. There was a strong sense that the Holy Spirit was present in the listening session, and a strong guide in the lives of the participants. This synod process did not seem to be unusual for them, there seems to be strong communication and respect for one another. The synod session inspired them to continue to do more outreach.

## **REFLECTION QUESTIONS**

On the pages that follow, a brief summary is provided for each of the reflection questions, which includes the themes that emerged most consistently throughout the synod process and the responses collected. “Quotations” indicate direct quotations from participants.

### **Fundamental Question: How is “journeying together” happening in your parish today?**

Participants expressed that “journeying together” happens in their parishes through the Holy Mass, active ministries and fellowship opportunities. There is an overall sense, however, that the pandemic and the related restrictions has had a negative impact on the parish communities in some cases causing strained relationships and a feeling of abandonment. While some parishes were extremely creative with keeping parishioners connected by offering online and parking lot Masses, others were less successful in maintaining a sense of community.

Participants voiced the importance of “in-person” Mass and the Eucharist. The main concern is that many parishioners left because of the pandemic and now, with the re-opening, are not

coming back. With the pandemic, we have found that technology can assist us in spreading the Gospel; however, it cannot take the place of personal interaction.

Challenges to “journeying together” unrelated to the pandemic include the parish leadership (pastor) and people feeling excluded such as parishioners identifying as LGBTQ and divorced Catholics. There is a strong desire for more spiritual growth experiences and more opportunities for Eucharistic Adoration. They also expressed the need for deepening the sense of community and rebuilding evangelization by forming new groups and inviting/engaging new members, such as the youth, young families and especially those on the fringes.

### **Core Question 1: Called to Listen – How does God speak to you through those in your parish and others in your life?**

Participants explained that they hear God speak to them through the Sacred Scriptures, the priest’s homily, the Sacraments and through those who serve in support ministries such as bereavement groups. God also speaks to them through the letters and video messages from Bishop Checchio. Participants conveyed that they hear God speak through the actions of holy people and there is a need for more lay witnesses of the faith.

The synod process, itself, is one of active listening and those who participated appreciated the opportunity to have small group, spiritual conversations, while listening for the voice of the Holy Spirit.

There is a need for more hospitality for newcomers and for those from different cultures. There is an overall feeling that parishes do not provide space for listening to those who are marginalized or are socially excluded. “A voice in need knows no conditions.”

Concerns were also expressed that the institutional Church is losing younger members who may claim to be spiritual but do not want to identify with an institutional church. The youth appear to be interested in service as a way of expressing their faith but little is being done to encourage them to commit themselves to the Catholic community, which they see as very law-bound rather than caring and pastoral.

The discussion revealed two opposing positions with one group pushing for change while others insisting on more traditional perspectives (those who prefer the Latin Mass, for example).

### **Core Question 2: Speaking Out –What enables or hinders you from speaking up in your parish and society?**

In general, if the pastor is approachable and accessible, parishioners feel encouraged to speak up. Often parishioners feel more comfortable approaching the deacons of the parish with suggestions. Parish Pastoral Councils also enable different voices to be heard. Some parishes use surveys and suggestion boxes to encourage parishioners to share their ideas.

Many expressed that the fear of being ignored, rejected, judged or shamed by the pastor and/or others in the parish who are involved in administration hinders them from speaking up. Some

expressed a hesitancy to speak up because they do not know whom they can trust. Clericalism was also noted as a problem.

Concerning speaking up in society, most participants are hesitant to discuss faith matters due to the society's "cancel culture" and the fear of being attacked or ostracized. Many blame this on "watered down" teachings and mixed messages brought on by Catholic politicians who claim to be devout but support things opposed by the Church, such as abortion, without repercussions. In addition, since the country is currently so politically divided, having conversations about faith outside of church often alienates people.

Here again, the responses are divided with some expressing strong feelings about Catholic teaching and others saying the Church is too rigid and "out of touch." Many also expressed that polarization within the Church is a threat to unity. Many participants expressed a deep sadness because family members and especially children have left the Church.

Numerous participants pointed to "outdated" and "offensive" language used by the Church to refer to those who identify as LGBTQ, such as "same-sex attraction" and "disordered." They describe this as hurtful and exclusionary and the use of these terms hinders people from speaking up candidly. While some respondents indicated that they thought that the Church is out of step with the world with regards to gender issues, more expressed a desire to make sure that those identifying as LGBTQ feel included in the Church and be better treated by the Church and its members.

### **Core Question 3: Sharing Responsibility for Our Common Mission – How are the baptized members of your parish able to participate in the mission of the Church to proclaim the Gospel?**

Participants had difficulty commenting on this theme because many did not understand the meaning of "common mission." At one of the listening sessions, the group defined an "active Catholic" as someone who attends Mass, receives the Sacraments and is involved in ministry. He or she is someone who ties faith to everyday life, ministers to others and evangelizes. Participants largely agreed that the Church could be strengthened from greater clarity on the mission itself.

Participants shared that having fellowship, community gatherings and ministry opportunities in the parish fosters participation in the mission of the Church. This is also the case where pastors are welcoming and inviting. Being part of a parish ministry or serving in a particular role in the parish helps parishioners feel more a part of the mission to spread the Gospel. Participants expressed that communication is key in helping parishioners understand what the Church's mission is and how the laity have a role in sharing in it. Everyone seems to agree that we can proclaim the Gospel most effectively by the way we live our lives.

Aside from the pandemic, which greatly hindered participation in the mission of the Church, other factors also prevent involvement. While there is a wide array of opportunities to participate in the mission of the Church, only a small percentage of people get involved. People have very busy lives and being active in the parish is not a top priority. Many young parents have



left the Church. Many of those who bring their children to religious education to receive the Sacraments do not practice the faith themselves and so there is no reinforcement of Catholic practices. In many cases, parents have no personal relationship with God, and children have no faith role models. Often, grandparents fulfill this role by providing a good example and by encouraging participation in religious education. There seems to be a breakdown of the family as the “domestic church.”

Synod participants identified the need for ongoing formation and catechesis both for themselves and for others. They expressed a deep desire to have a better understanding of fundamental Church teaching on the Eucharist, Sacraments, morality and social justice. They felt like a deeper knowledge would assist them in dialoguing with others who are disaffiliated, marginalized or unchurched.

“We need to attract people to Church with truth and beauty, joy and kindness, offering something that is not of this world.” “Often times, people are unaware of their own giftedness and feel they have nothing to give.”

#### **Core Question 4: Discerning and Deciding – How does your parish use methods of listening and consultation to make decisions?**

Participants expressed that Parish Councils, surveys, listening sessions and town hall meetings are effective methods of consultation with parishioners in making pastoral decisions. However, in numerous cases, these measures are not in place and the governance perceived as “top-down” with little parishioner involvement. A good number of participants were unaware of how decisions are made at the parish. Most agreed that the parish secretary/administrative assistant is truly the “hub” of the parish. Respondents noted that a change of pastor can significantly change the parish community and the experience of the parishioners, sometimes leading to “parish shopping.”

Numerous comments were made about the role of women in the Church and the need for their voices to be heard concerning governance of the parish. Some participants suggested that women should be able to serve as permanent deacons or have other leadership roles.

#### **Core Question 5: Celebration –How does your prayer life and the celebration of the Sunday Mass inspire and inform your personal decisions?**

Overall, the participants expressed that the quality of the priest’s homily is a very important part of the Mass and can be an effective way to inspire them in their daily lives. Homilies need to be relevant to people’s lives, addressing current events and issues. A recurring concern was difficulty understanding the priests who have English as a second language. Participants also lamented homilies that are devoid of content or are unengaging. The quality of the music ministry is also essential.

In addition, participants appreciate when people behave with reverence in Church (including how they dress), recognizing the true presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Most of the

participants also commented that Mass and Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament enhance their personal prayer life. Many expressed a desire for more Adoration opportunities.

Due to the pandemic, people were able to visit other parishes by viewing live stream Masses. In some cases, this was an opportunity for them to compare the quality of the liturgy at their home parish with that of other parishes.

There is a desire for spiritual growth through more Scripture study opportunities. In addition, we should be more mindful of parishioners who are living with disabilities and invite them to share their unique gifts with the parish community. In some cases, physical barriers impede the involvement of those with disabilities.

### **Final Question: Holy Spirit – From your small group sharing, where have you heard the Holy Spirit?**

Over all, the participants enjoyed the small group sharing experience and shared a desire to do more small-group faith sharing so that they can be inspired and learn from the experiences of others. There was a strong sense that the Holy Spirit was present during the Synod Listening Sessions, prompting people to speak respectfully and candidly

### **Summary of Major Themes**

The following are major themes, which surfaced across all groups and in response to multiple discussion questions. These are not in any particular order.

- Positive and negative effects of the pandemic: The pandemic required a measure of creativity to keep parishioners connected, for example, live-stream and outdoor Masses. The pandemic also created wounds, such as a sense of abandonment, that need healing.
- The threat of polarization within the Church: The participants were divided into two main groups: those pushing for change and those with traditional views who want more clarity on Church teachings.
- The need for more inclusion, welcoming and pastoral outreach to groups who feel marginalized: This includes, divorced Catholics, traditional Catholics, those with disabilities, ethnic groups, LGBTQ, youth and young adults, the poor, homeless and immigrants.
- A desire for the Eucharist: Much of the joy in being Catholic lies in experiencing the Sacraments, especially receiving the Eucharist, which many missed during the pandemic. As we enter this period of Eucharistic Revival there will be more opportunities for formation on the Eucharist as well as Adoration.
- The need for clarifying the “mission” of the Church and the role the laity have in sharing in that mission: There seems to be a lack of understanding of what it means to evangelize and missionary discipleship.
- The yearning for more faith formation: There is a desire to discuss not only what we believe as Catholics but also why we believe it and how we can live what we believe.

## CONCLUSION

In his wisdom, Pope Francis has asked the whole Church to consciously imitate the listening style of Jesus by participating in the “Synod on Synodality.” In general, those who participated in the Synod Listening Sessions appreciated the opportunity to take part in spiritual conversations where active listening took place. The synod process allowed participants to share and to actively listen with an open heart to others and to the Holy Spirit. Although some expressed uncertainty about whether or not the process would bear any fruit, most participants reported feeling a sense of joy and hope as they left their listening session. Many expressed that the sessions produced generous and warm encounters prompting a desire to use the synodal process with small group discussions on an ongoing basis as a way to renew the Church and society. One sign of hope was the enthusiastic participation in the synod process by our Catholic School communities.

“A synodal Church walks forward in communion to pursue a common mission through the participation of every one of its members.” Vademecum

**Communion:** As Church, we are members of One Body of Christ. The importance of a strong faith community was expressed repeatedly and cannot be overstated. If our differences cause divisions, leave members out or push members away, our mission will be hindered.

**Participation:** The active participation of youth, young adults and young families is not what it could be in our parishes. All individuals, including those on the peripheries, need to be invited and welcomed to the table. Providing life-long faith formation opportunities will help connect what we profess with how we live our lives. A well-formed, diverse and vital faith community will attract others.

**Mission:** The Church needs to help people to better understand the Church’s mission of evangelization and what their role is in sharing in that mission. Offering opportunities for deeper encounters with Christ and personal faith renewal to help form missionary disciples is key. The synod process was a good first step.

At a time in our world that is wrought with violence, conflict and division, the Synod process provided a template for how to sit in the presence of each other, brothers and sisters, as people of God and members of the Body of Christ, to share joys, hopes and sorrows and to reaffirm the good and to reimagine what could be better in a post-pandemic world.

## Demographic Breakdown

These numbers represent the groups, which collected the data using sign-in sheets, as well as information collected on the on-line questionnaires. Please note that there were several sessions where this data was not captured and those sessions were not included in the tabulations.

Age	Percent
<18	18.5 %
18-29	2.5%
30-64	53.5%
65+	25.5%

Gender	Percent
Male	30.21%
Female	69.79%

Ethnicity	Percent
Caucasian	57.7%
Hispanic	39.7%
African American	0.4%
Asian	2.2%



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