

Supplemental Guide for Listening Sessions in Catholic Schools

The National Catholic Educational Association invites you to participate in the Synod for a Synodal Church through listening sessions in your Catholic school. This guide supports the modeling of synodality with your students and staff as a supplement to your (arch)diocesan participation in the Synod.



For a synodal Church
communion | participation | mission

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Dear Catholic School Leaders,

The entire Catholic Church is called to participate in the synod “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission!” As Pope Francis calls us to synodality as a Church, we invite you to listen to the students and staff of your Catholic school as part of your local synodal processes. With the support of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) and within the vision of your (arch)diocesan committee on the Synod, we hope you find this supplemental resource to be helpful in your process of listening in your Catholic school communities.

The following pages offer the Synod’s fundamental question and themes in terms applicable to children, young adults and Catholic school staff. Meanwhile, your (arch)diocese has focused parish and community listening sessions to reflect some, but not all, of the ten themes of the Synod. We suggest using this guide alongside your established (arch)diocesan synodal process so that the voices of the children of your (arch)diocese and the staff of your Catholic school are heard within your recording of your (arch)diocesan synodal notes. Conducting synodal listening sessions during Catholic Schools Week, January 30 – February 5, would be a great way to celebrate the ministry of Catholic schools!

We pray you find this journey of accompaniment to be fruitful in your partnership with parents in the Catholic education of their children.



Jill Annable
Senior Vice President of Programs
National Catholic Educational Association

Suggested Catholic School Listening Session Agendas

Being a Synodal Church is a slow and steady process, not a simple lesson plan or staff meeting. However, as we enter into an understanding of what it means to listen and dialogue as a faith community, please use the following agendas as a suggestion for conducting listening sessions with various student and adult groups in your Catholic school community.

The following pages comprise the materials needed for each section of the agendas below.

Preschool through Second Grade Class: Listening Session Agenda (15 minutes in total)

- Opening Prayer (2 min)
- Participant Ground Rules (2 min)
- What is a Synod? (1 min)
- The Essential Question (10 min)
- Core Questions (optional, if time allows)

Third through Sixth Grade Class: Listening Session Agenda (30 minutes in total)

- Opening Prayer (3 min)
- Participant Ground Rules (2 min)
- What is a Synod? (5 min)
- The Essential Question (10 min)
- Core Questions (optional, if time allows) (10 min each)

Seventh through Twelfth Grade Class: Listening Session Agenda (40 minutes in total)

- Opening Prayer (3 min)
- Participant Ground Rules (2 min)
- What is a Synod? (5 min)
- The Essential Question (15 min)
- Core Questions (as time allows) (15 min each)

Catholic School Staff: Listening Session Agenda (40 minutes in total)

- Opening Prayer (3 min)
- Participant Ground Rules (2 min)
- What is a Synod? (5 min)
- The Essential Question (15 min)
- Core Questions (as time allows) (15 min each)



Prayer for the Synod

Together with your participants, pray the Prayer for the Synod.

Prayer for the Synod: *Adsumus Sancte Spiritus*

Every session of the Second Vatican Council began with the prayer *Adsumus Sancte Spiritus*, the first word of the original Latin, meaning, "We stand before You, Holy Spirit," which has been historically used at Councils, Synods and other Church gatherings for hundreds of years, and is attributed to Saint Isidore of Seville (c. 560 - 4 April 636). As we embrace this Synodal Process, this prayer invites the Holy Spirit to be at work in us so that we may be a community and a people of grace. For the Synodal journey from 2021 to 2023, we propose to the following simplified version,¹ so that any group or liturgical assembly can pray it more easily.

We stand before You, Holy Spirit,
as we gather together in Your name.

With You alone to guide us,
make Yourself at home in our hearts;
Teach us the way we must go
and how we are to pursue it.

We are weak and sinful;
do not let us promote disorder.
Do not let ignorance lead us down the wrong path
nor partiality influence our actions.

Let us find in You our unity
so that we may journey together to eternal life
and not stray from the way of truth
and what is right.

All this we ask of You,
who are at work in every place and time,
in the communion of the Father and the Son,
forever and ever.
Amen.

¹ The original version of the *Adsumus Sancte Spiritus* can be found on the Synod website.

Participant Ground Rules

Catholic schools are places of community. As is true in all sensitive discussions in your classrooms and staff meetings, it is recommended that norms or ground rules are established for productive and respectful dialogue. We invite you to use your regular process of prayerful framing for such dialogue, especially for those in early elementary classrooms. Additionally, the following guidelines from the USCCB may be used to establish the ground rules for your listening session with young adults and staff.

Respectful Communication Guidelines

- R: take RESPONSIBILITY for what you say and feel, and speak with words others can hear and understand
- E: use EMPATHETIC listening, not just words but also feelings being expressed, non-verbal language including silence
- S: be SENSITIVE to differences in communication styles
- P: PONDER on what you hear and feel before you speak
- E: EXAMINE your own assumptions and perceptions
- C: keep CONFIDENTIALITY
- T: TRUST the process because we are not here to debate who is right or wrong but to experience true dialogue

Remember to give your full attention to each other and listen to the voice of God in your hearts. Listen for understanding by taking to heart what other people share. As we share, individuals will speak, one at a time, without interruption, while others listen. Everyone will have a chance to speak and if you like, you may choose to pass.

From *Intercultural Communication: The Mutual Invitation Process* found in: USCCB, *Building Intercultural Competence for Ministers: Bilingual edition*, Washington, D.C., 2014.





General Secretariat for the Synod of the Bishops



The Suggested tools for reflecting, sharing, and responding to the questions of the Synod

The following are some tools for reflecting, sharing, and responding to the questions of the Synod. Some of these tools are particularly suitable for children, youth, and people who prefer approaches that are simple and easy to relate to.

Narrative approach: Telling or writing one's own faith story and journey with the Church

One's life story. People can be invited to tell their story, their view of faith, the way they have sought to take their place in the Church. During the diocesan or national synthesis, care should be taken not to read these stories as simple testimonies, but to hear what paths they open up for the local churches.

A text that drives exchanges. We can invite a small group of people to write a joint text; then other groups of people react to this text and comment on it from their own daily lives. This way of doing things can be applied to hearing one another's life stories, which can be shared with groups of other people. All these words can also open the eyes of other Christians on the mission of the Church and its capacity to "reach everyone."

Finding the right words. Participants can be invited to say what the Church evokes in them, or to name the words that designate what it takes to "walk together with Jesus" (a possible translation of synodality), and then which words are opposed to "walking together"; they can then be invited to explain why they evoked this or that word. The participants can then choose which words are the most significant and the most apt to convey the group's message.

Using images and artistic creation

Communicating through images. Presented with various images, people are invited to find those that best capture what walking together in the Church means to them. Participants can then share why they chose that particular image. On the basis of these exchanges, a joint text can be written.

An individual or shared artistic creation. People are invited to draw an image of the Church in which they walk together, and they are asked to comment on their drawing. People can also make an artistic creation together, as a way of visually representing the Church or their place in it. In any case, once the work has been created, participants are invited to share about what they have created; their comments can then be transmitted as well as their creative works.

Writing together. Participants are invited to write a story, a poem, a prayer, a psalm, or a song on the theme of “walking together with Jesus” or “walking together in the Church.” This piece of writing may be intended to update selected passages from the Gospels or the Acts of the Apostles. What they write can be passed on as it is. It can also be proclaimed during synodal celebrations (for example, if it is a song, it can become a dance for the synodal celebration).

Acting it out. A group of participants can write a short play that expresses what it means to “walk together” in the Church, why it is important, why it is difficult, etc. This story can then be acted out and performed at a Synodal assembly.

Scriptural approach

Gospel sharing. The Word of God inspires and enlightens our journey together, giving us food to share with one another on the way. Participants are invited to comment on the attitudes of the characters and to react to them; they may be asked if a particular gesture or word of Jesus reminds them of, or sheds light on, something in their daily lives. We can then look for how a particular Gospel passage renews our way of living in the Church. For example, we can read Mk 10:46-52, observing the attitude of the different characters, what it evokes of the Church as we know it, and then how Jesus allows the excluded Bartimaeus to walk forward with everyone. We can likewise pray over Luke 24:13-35, seeing Jesus transform the disciples’ disappointment into missionary joy and dynamism on the road to Emmaus, as he made their hearts burn within them, walking with them on the way.

(Cf. Note of the Centre Sèvres on the Voice of the Poor)

What is a Synod?

Pope Francis has said, “the purpose of this 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 dawn of hope, learn from one another, and create a bright resourcefulness that will enlighten minds, warm hearts, give strength to our hands” (Preparatory Document, #32).

What does the word Synod mean?

Synod is a Greek word (*synodos*) meaning a meeting or assembly. The two Greek words that make up synod are syn meaning together and hodos meaning way or journey.

What is the Synod of Bishops?

A helpful short definition of the Synod of Bishops is a gathering of bishops that:

1. fosters closer unity between the bishops and pope.
2. provides counsel to the pope on matters of faith and morals, and discipline of the Church.
3. studies questions concerning the Church in the world (c.f. Code of Canon Law c. 342).

Voting in the Synod of Bishops is limited to bishops present at the synod gathering. However, clergy, men and women religious, theologians, catechists, canon lawyers and lay experts all participate in the synod gathering with bishops by providing their counsel.

What is Synodality?

Synodality and the synodal process are not a gathering or meeting of bishops, nor are they the administrative arm of the Church. Rather, synodality is the path and process of the Church as communion. It is the communion of all the baptized who are listening to each other, dialoguing with each other and praying together to hear the voice of the Holy Spirit as we all seek holiness and proclaim the gospel. Synodality involves clergy,

religious and laity listening and speaking, praying and discerning together and placing the hopes and concerns of the People of God at the foot of the bishops, who, united with the pope, decide matters of faith and morals in order to preserve the faith and strengthen the Church throughout the world.

What is different about this Synod?

This synod is unique for two reasons. One, the Holy Father is asking that the entire Church participate in this synod. The faithful, clergy and religious are invited to pray, listen and talk together with the bishops before the 2023 gathering of bishops in Rome. In our archdiocese, we will pray, listen and talk with one another through parish listening sessions and archdiocesan listening sessions.

Second, this synod is a unique gift for our local Church. It is a gift of time – a chance to take a step back and reconnect with our parish communities. It is an opportunity to invite people not only back to Sunday Mass but also to parish life. This invitation to parish life starts with listening – listening to each other’s joys, hopes, sorrows and anxieties. Listening to each other is the basis of dialogue, friendship and community life. This synod is not about changing doctrine or church structures, but rather encountering each other as brothers and sisters in Christ in a post-pandemic world.

“This Synod offers us the opportunity to be with each other, to invite our family and friends back to the faith, to listen to each other’s joys and sorrows, and share our hopes and dreams for our parishes.”

—CARDINAL WILTON D. GREGORY

Adapted from The Archdiocese of Washington.
Available <https://adw.org/about-us/resources/synod/>

The Fundamental Question

A Synodal Church, in announcing the gospel, "journeys together." The fundamental question of this synod reflects the ways we journey together as a Catholic faith community, in our parishes and also in other communities of the Church, such as our Catholic schools. The synod also reflects on how we journey together with those outside our faith tradition.

Though the fundamental question, as listed below as a subset of questions, may be difficult to explore with your youngest learners, we invite you to ask one or more of the questions below and to take notes on what you hear. Furthermore, you are invited to use any of the ten theme questions on the following pages as you see fit for your classroom and school communities. You may find the first question of the list is best for the youngest participants and the last question is the most complex for adult participants.

- ☐ When and how have we grown together as a class? As a school community?
- ☐ How do we listen to one another, speak up about topics that are important to us and “journey together” as a class? As a school?
- ☐ How is “journeying together” happening in our Catholic school?
- ☐ How has the Holy Spirit invited us to “journey together” as a school? As a Church?

Listening Session Notes:

For each of the following themes, the bulleted questions grow in complexity. You may find the youngest voices relate to the first question in the list, and adult staff to the last question of the list. When taking notes of your listening session, indicate which question was asked.

- ☐ In our class, how do we spend time together? How do we ensure no one is left out?
- ☐ In our school, with whom do we “walk together”? How do we ensure all students are included?
- ☐ How are we called to grow as companions on a journey?

Theme 2: Listening

- ☐ Why is it sometimes difficult to be a good listener?
- ☐ What are some limitations in our ability to listen, especially to those who have different views than our own?
- ☐ What might be missing when we ignore certain voices?

Listening Session Notes:

Theme 3: Speaking Out

- ☐ How and when do we say what is important to us?
- ☐ What helps us to speak up courageously, candidly, and responsibly in our school?
- ☐ What helps us to speak up courageously, candidly, and responsibly in our Church and the community?

Listening Session Notes:

Theme 4: Celebration

- ❑ What feelings or emotions do we have when we celebrate with one another during prayer? When receiving the sacraments? (Note: You may wish to focus on a particular sacrament that was recently celebrated by your students or in your community).
- ❑ How does the liturgy (i.e the celebration of all-school Mass) inspire and guide the mission of our school?
- ❑ How do we promote the active participation of all the faithful in our school liturgies? How does this lift our hearts and minds to the Sacred Mysteries?

Listening Session Notes:

Theme 5: Sharing Responsibility for our Common Mission

- ☐ How do we help one another at school? How does our school help those who are in need?
- ☐ How does our Catholic school help us each to be a missionary disciple?
- ☐ What areas of mission are our school neglecting?

Listening Session Notes:

Theme 6: Dialogue in Church and Society

- ❑ When and how do we talk and listen to one another in our classroom? In our school?
- ❑ What are the places and opportunities for important conversations among us in our classroom? In our school?
- ❑ How should these dialogue experiences help us to gain mutual understanding and respect for differences of beliefs, experiences, opinions and world views?

Listening Session Notes:

Theme 1: Ecumenism

- ☐ How and when do we share with one another the differences in our family's traditions and beliefs?
- ☐ What relationships does our school have with those of other Christian traditions?
- ☐ What fruits have we drawn from walking together with those of other Christian traditions?

Listening Session Notes:

Theme 8: Authority and Participation

- ☐ How do we work together as a team in our classroom?
- ☐ In what ways are we co-responsible for one another in our class? In our school?
- ☐ How can we foster a more synodal approach in our participation and leadership in our school?

Listening Session Notes:

Theme 9: Discerning and Deciding

- ☐ How do we make a big decision? How does prayer help us when we make a big decision?
- ☐ How is our decision-making process inspired by the Holy Spirit?
- ☐ How do we listen to others when we make a decision in our class or in our school? How can we grow in communal spiritual discernment?

Listening Session Notes:

Theme 10: Forming Ourselves in Synodality

- ☐ Why are we (both adults and children) always learning new things?
- ☐ How does our school form us to be more capable of “walking together,” listening to one another and together participating in our mission?
- ☐ What formation is offered to foster discernment in a synodal way?

Listening Session Notes:

Next Steps

We are called to be a Synodal Church. The notes you collect will inform the discernment of the local and global Catholic Church, and the process of being a listening Church has just begun! Continue to pray the Prayer for the Synod with your classes and school community. Keep Pope Francis and all leaders of the Catholic Church in your school prayers as they prayerfully discern what has been heard in this process of synodality. Reflect on what you have heard by modeling listening with students and staff and discern how this can impact the ways we journey together as Catholic schools in the coming months and years.

Where to Send Recording Notes

Each (arch)diocese has a designated contact and committee for the synod. Your listening session notes should be sent to the (arch)diocese for the development of the (arch)diocesan report.

If no synod contact has been named in your (arch)diocese, please contact the USCCB Synod Team at synod@usccb.org for further direction.



What to Include in Your Notes

Demographics of those who participated in your listening session, including the number of participants, the ages of your participants and any other applicable demographic information.

The **Context/Setting** of your listening session, most likely a school classroom.

The **Methodology** used, simply that you used or adapted the National Catholic Educational Association Supplemental Guide for Listening Sessions in Catholic Schools.

The **Topics / Themes / Questions / Recommendations** that arose in your listening session. Your local (arch)diocesan contact will direct you with further guidance on the format of your notes.



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