

Synthesis of Synod Process

Atlantic Region

July 11, 2022

1.0 Introduction

Overall, in Atlantic Canada, the synodal journey was fruitful but challenging. Attempting to gather people in the midst of a global pandemic and skepticism for the synod process provided some challenges. Despite these challenges the resulting contributions provide much insight and opportunity.

1.1 Nova Scotia

The Archdiocese of Halifax-Yarmouth opened the process with an Assembly of the People of God. A general session explored the core themes of synodality with the people. The next day synod teams from all parishes gathered to learn and contribute to a process of spiritual conversation to use with their parishioners. The end result was 145 gatherings happening in every one of our parishes bringing together 821 people for reflection on the scriptures, spiritual conversation, and dialogue on six key questions distilled from the synod themes. The fruits of these conversations were recorded and submitted to the diocesan synod team. The synod team added a follow-up survey for an additional 117 parishioners who were unable to attend in-person or virtual listening sessions.

Additionally, the diocesan synod team launched an external survey to help give voice to those not normally considered. The faithful were encouraged to invite their friends, neighbours, and relatives who were no longer connected to the church to offer their feedback. These invitations were supported by social media ads encouraging participation. This survey garnered 513 responses, more than half of whom identified that they attend church rarely or never.

In the Diocese of Antigonish, individuals engaged through online surveys, mail-in surveys, email letters and poetry. Letters were mailed or hand-delivered to the diocesan offices. Groups engaged through in-person conversations, missions, and virtual conversations via Zoom or Facebook live. These activities resulted in 156 individual submissions and group reports from 8 ministries including two university youth chaplaincy programs, the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Martha and Martha Associates, and 18 parishes.

The Diocese of Charlottetown also conducted sessions and completed a synthesis that will be sent separately.

1.2 New Brunswick

The Archdiocese of Moncton held listening, discernment, and faith sharing exercises with their diocesan committees, parishes, pastoral units, religious communities and a few individual members. The sessions helped participants to listen to each other, to the Holy Spirit and to the Word of God to hear how the diocesan Church can "walk together" to become messengers of the Gospel, in accordance with the Mission entrusted to the Church, and to discern what are the further steps that "the Spirit invites to ask

in order to grow as a synodal Church". A number of diocesan men and women undertook this reflection with respect and depth.

The Synod Team from the Diocese of Bathurst prepared a document to assist groups in their reflection and how to plan the synodal consultation in their community. The bishop organized a meeting with all the parish priests of the diocese where each priest chose a question for his parish unit. The parish units formed groups and met under the direction of their parish priest focusing on a synod issue. The size and homogeneity of the groups differed according to the situation of each parish unit. The members of the diocesan committee followed up with each group to assess the progress of the process and help if necessary. At the end of this spiritual exercise, each group sent a report to the members of the committee who synthesized it to produce the diocesan report.

This Synodal Process was experienced in various ways by the participants. The diversity of the questions nourished and generated good reflections among the participants. In short, this process was well received by the faithful who walked together, being inspired by the Holy Spirit.

The Diocese of Edmundston laid a groundwork of prayer and adoration in all the Christian communities of the diocese. The synod prayer was widely disseminated in parishes, homes for the elderly and religious communities. Several communities also set up Word sharing groups, some face-to-face and others virtual. The second phase marked the work within each pastoral unit

The bishop and diocesan committee held meetings with the pastoral animation teams in each of the areas of the diocese to help set the expectations of this synod and the needs of the communities. These meetings were supplemented by an online diocesan gathering with about sixty participants. The goal of this gathering was to inform, reflect and share on the meaning of this synod.

Additionally, the team developed resources to be put at the service of the pastoral units. They developed a reflection-discussion approach around the 10 themes proposed in the Preparatory Document and the Vademecum, prepared videos with the bishop to present each of the three stages and the series of themes proposed for reflection-exchange, conducted several weekly radio programs to provide information and motivation to live this synod and to update on the work in progress.

Saint John Diocese hosted synod sessions in parishes, with 79% of parishes making submissions to the diocese. Those who participated in the Synod seemed genuinely interested in the process and had a sense of the urgency of this moment and a desire to be heard, both by the local and Universal Church. Online meetings and submissions were held when necessary. The diocese had a parish participation rate of 79%, with 22 of 28 parishes submitting responses, plus 6 lay associations/groups.

1.3 Newfoundland & Labrador

The listening process in the Archdiocese of St. John's was overseen and facilitated by a team of three persons. Thirteen focus groups gathered in different parts of the archdiocese, either in person or online. In each focus group, discussion and conversation revolved around the ten "thematic nuclei" in the Preparatory Document. In addition to the focus groups, people also had the opportunity to respond to

the ten themes by means of an online survey. Thirty responses were received, each of them commenting on all ten themes.

The Diocese of Corner Brook and Labrador collected submissions from parish councils, as well as from the Knights of Columbus, the Catholic Women's League, the Presentation Associates and the Diocesan Pastoral Planning Committee. The priests of the Diocese dedicated a portion of their pastoral study days to consideration of the questions. Several individuals preferred to submit written responses to the questions.

The Diocese of Grand Falls hosted parish listening sessions as primary means of input. Of chief importance was the fact that all participants felt truly heard and their reflections valued. 48 sessions were held, with nearly 700 participants. An opportunity to provide feedback in writing was made available as well.

2.0 Discernment of the Collected Contributions

Synod sessions were held in each diocese in Atlantic Canada. Submissions were gathered through prayerful discussion, surveys, email, and online forms. Submissions through listening groups and discussions were strongly preferred to online submissions. Overall there was a beautiful diversity of methods used in our region to help the faithful journey together through the synod process. Within this diversity of methods a number of common themes emerged.

2.1 Listening

A common theme was that the people of God had significant doubt that their voices would have a meaningful impact. "People often expressed a weariness about the long string of processes, in which they were 'listened to, but not heard.' A commonly-heard refrain was, 'Listening is critical, but it is not enough by itself – it must be accompanied by respect, and action.'... The problem is not identified as a lack of invitation to speak; in fact, many identified that there have been multiple opportunities to speak, but the listening has been poor and response nonexistent."

Furthermore, some were concerned that the sessions did not attract individuals of other demographics such as youth, people of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and most parishes indicated difficulty reaching the peripheries and engaging non-churchgoers in the Synodal Process.

2.2 Centrality of Christ & Power of the Holy Spirit

Parish groups were extremely clear of the need to allow the Holy Spirit to work and for the person of Jesus Christ to be central to their lives and to the work of the Church. This theme extended into all questions where there was a call for more focus on Christ, both personally through prayer and teaching, and sacramentally through the Eucharistic celebration and devotions. In some cases, there was a slight edge to this, suggesting that the institutional Church was a block to what the Lord and Spirit want for the world.

Overall, there was great personal faith demonstrated by parish respondents and an overlapping interest in Jesus from external respondents. However, we also see the beginning of an emergent trend where

there is a perceived distinction between the “institutional Church”, the commands of Christ, and the people of God. This is further evidenced in the themes of inclusivity and leadership outlined below.

2.3 Inclusivity & Welcome

The theme of inclusivity was pervasive in all reflection questions. This theme contained many different aspects related to *doctrine and disciplines*, *evangelization*, and *communion and community*.

A) Doctrines and Disciplines

Further responses revealed that inclusivity and welcome were not as simple as having more greeters at the door of the church — although local hospitality was deemed very important. Instead, many felt there were institutional and systemic issues that were exclusionary. In particular, many people named doctrines and disciplines such as married priests, divorce and remarriage, ordination of women, the role of women, and stances toward LGBTQIA2S+ people as exclusionary and unwelcoming.

These sentiments were very strongly felt, as one diocesan submission quoted: “The availability of ordination to men only is hurtful to women who feel called to ordination and an abuse of human rights in the minds of some faithful. The exclusion of LGBTQIA2S+ individuals from full communion with the church is also seen as a human rights violation, particularly by youth.”

B) Evangelization & Mission

A large number of responses identified evangelization as a priority, with a strong desire to reach out to the peripheries and proclaim the Gospel of Jesus. A true and authentic Christian witness was identified as essential. Many felt a witness of joy and integrity was crucial, and that a culture of listening and inclusion would help people feel welcome at all levels of parish life.

This witness includes moving beyond our own walls to truly welcome those who suffer from social injustice. “As a Church-People of God, we must be more attentive to the need of the poor and come to their aid. Paying attention to the poor and abandoned derives from the logic of Christian faith itself.” Pope Francis says: “We are called to find Christ in the poor, to lend our voice to their causes and to be their friends.” (The Church of Mercy, p. 25)

C) Communion & Community

Synod groups identified the importance of community as part of inclusivity and welcome. When asked of an example of journeying together many people identified a small group or ministry (Faith Study, prayer group, service groups, etc.) as a key experience. For many people smaller group experiences helped to generate real connections and relationships that fostered a sense of being part of something and offered opportunities to grow and serve. Generally speaking, negative experiences in these smaller settings were also a source of not feeling welcome or included. Occasionally, a sense of exclusion was felt by a decision from another source such as “leaders”, “the diocese”, or “the church”, but it appears primary experiences of welcome or inclusion occur in smaller settings. In both circumstances the frustration of “not being heard”, whether new ideas or an alternate view point, was paramount.

There was also a great desire for unity and diversity. Many people identified theological or liturgical divisions as problematic in the church and raised division as a key concern. Division was also experienced locally in the divide between communities, particularly in light of amalgamation of parishes or the creation of pastoral units within the region. The desire for diversity mainly manifested in allowing for many different devotions, gathering types, and liturgical expressions including space for contemporary and Latin celebrations. The main idea was to make room for many expressions stemming from a desire to include as many people as possible while maintaining a unifying Catholic identity. There were, of course, advocates for a singular form of expression as being primary or ideal over others although this sentiment seems to be vocal but less prevalent.

2.4 Leadership & Accountability

A great number of responses centered on leadership and identified these issues as barriers to outreach and evangelization as they colour the entire external reaction to the church and discourage members from inviting others to join.

A) The Impact of Scandal

The two primary issues of accountability were Clergy Sexual Abuse and Residential Schools. Of those who raised them many external respondents cited them as reasons they would never be interested in the Catholic church. Synod participants felt that taking “real” responsibility for these issues was important. The shape this would take was unclear but the sentiment was strong. For example, one submission noted: “In 2022 the last of the class-action debt was paid, however, bitterness and hurt over the crimes, the lack of accountability by the institutional church and download of financial responsibility to the parishes remain deeply among our faithful – in those who left and those who stayed.”

Some said that the mishandling of clergy sexual abuse made them ashamed to be Catholic. Others reflected that their trust has been destroyed by the scandal of sexual abuse by clergy and by the way it has been handled (or rather, not handled). There has been a serious lack of consultation of the laity with regard to the sexual abuse crisis – and little, if any help toward healing of the pain and anger that so many are feeling.

Stemming from these issues was a strong sense of division between the average person and the “institutional church”. Institutional church seems to mean a small caste of leaders, generally clergy or central organizations such as the diocese or Rome, who make decisions with outsized effect on the people impacted. Examples of this ranged from local decisions about financial resources to the sex abuse scandals.

B) Participation & Decision Making

This sense of division led to strong calls for increased participation in decision making, not necessarily a democratic approach but rather more emphasis on listening, consulting, and truly “being heard” in decision making processes. This is especially important when working with those on the peripheries who have an intuitive sense of when they are not being listened to. As

a result, they will not open up when they feel they are being judged, hence the need to establish a bond and trust with them.

Ultimately there appears to be a divide between laity and leadership in the Church. There is a perception that decision making ultimately excludes grassroots input, particularly as it proceeds to Church hierarchy. This is further compounded by comments from respondents that point out that the lack of inclusion of women in decision-making renders the Church irrelevant to many thinking people.

Some people expressed concerns about where Church leadership is headed – for some, a fear that tradition would be lost and teachings of the Church compromised in favor of modernizing worship, and for others, a fear of going back to pre-Vatican II ways. People on either end of this spectrum are invested in their churches and extremely sensitive to anything they fear would compromise what they see as important and valuable in the Church.

2.5 Specific Considerations

In addition to the general themes identified above there were some specific considerations worthy of additional review.

A) Amalgamation

Many of the dioceses in the region have recently undergone large-scale parish amalgamations in one form or another. Overall, while there was recognition for the necessity of such a move. Those with negative experiences spoke about being “blindsided”, “not being heard”, or “that everything was a foregone conclusion”. Some had positive experiences whereby many voices were heard, communication was clear, and opportunities for dialog existed. The creation of parishes or pastoral units with multiple locations left many feeling a sense of disconnection from their community and decisions of leadership. Additionally, some of those affected by church closures did not have a sense of inclusion/sense of welcoming in their new church. One lay association said, “this impacting structural change, followed by the two-year Covid pandemic, does not make it easy to assess the current state of affairs of our diocese. We are a church in flux and functioning within these limitations.”

B) Youth & Families

There was a very strong desire to reconnect with youth and families. This was seen as both a current weakness and an important factor in growing together. Part of this concern focused on insufficient follow-up with youth after catechesis as well as difficulty reaching these groups despite a strong desire to do so.

Youth and Family participants identified the importance of faith for them but also highlighted the difficulty of being a Catholic in today’s world where there are many different voices and values. The value of being inclusive and welcoming identified above were also very important and many identified they felt very welcome and included in their youth groups. There was also a theme of not being heard: that young people have no voice in decisions at the local and universal level. It was

expressed that many felt a group of older people made all the decisions and input from young people was unwanted and unappreciated.

Youth worshippers are found in small numbers and are of prime concern to our faithful, who wonder how to engage them, share with them the love of God, and support their faith journeys.

C) Rural Experience

While the general issues facing the church externally appear to overshadow locality two particular issues presented themselves.

Firstly, rural communities more intensely experience the limited number of priests where Mass may be celebrated on a limited schedule. As a result, Liturgy of the Word with Communion is more common. Secondly, the physical geography often makes having a unified parish identity more difficult.

3.0 Conclusions

Each of the dioceses in the region used criteria to develop their conclusions that were unique and appropriate to their situations. Nevertheless, the conclusions were quite similar across the board.

3.1 Centrality of Christ and the Holy Spirit

“There is no true evangelization if the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God are not proclaimed” (Evangelization in the Modern World, #22).

The Church needs to focus on her mission and her sharing in the mission of Christ. She needs to have a clear vision of what the Church should look like in the future and clear ideas about how to grow that Church of the future. The Holy Spirit is still with us and because of the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit, we can have hope – the hope to which we are called.

Prompted by this experience of journeying together the local church must embark on its own journey, to accept Jesus’ call to discipleship and do as Jesus did. This is a true renewal of our baptismal promises to evangelize and live out the mission of our faith.

3.2 Inclusivity and Welcome

“The centrality of the kerygma calls for stressing those elements which are most needed today: it has to express God’s saving love which precedes any moral and religious obligation on our part; it should not impose the truth but appeal to freedom; it should be marked by joy, encouragement, liveliness and a harmonious balance which will not reduce preaching to a few doctrines which are at times more philosophical than evangelical. All this demands on the part of the evangelizer certain attitudes which foster openness to the message: approachability, readiness for dialogue, patience, a warmth and welcome which is non-judgmental” (Joy of the Gospel, #165).

While there is a desire to welcome marginalized groups such as women, the LGBTQIA2S+ population, separated Catholics, and divorced and remarried Catholics the results show a significant divide in the

Church between those who wish to see the Church advance on some long-standing issues and those who want the Church to remain faithful to its traditional teaching on the same issues. The issue of how this gulf is to be bridged (or if it can be bridged) remains a priority for the Church universal. The approach to take here is divergent. For some, “reforming the Church is about creating a new Church that would embrace all the fashionable values of today's society,” while for others “reforming the Church consists in becoming ever more faithful to the Church as Christ founded and desired it because it is his Church and not ours.” The former is a reform which would constantly be out-of-touch from the ever-evolving world, whereas the latter is one of constant updating our approach to the world, without distorting the teaching and tradition handed down.

A) Doctrine and Disciplines

There is much work to do when considering the issue of inclusivity related to doctrines. The natural law and moral law do not change. So then, how to deal with these questions becomes a matter finding new ways to express them and recognizing that greater assent to truth occurs as we increase in conformity to Christ not by convincing arguments alone. On disciplines, perhaps these could be examined to find which are fundamental and universal practice and which need purification and renewal. This is a question for the universal church to consider. In the diocese, understanding this need for inclusivity can inform our evangelization and training efforts.

B) Communion and Community

“The grace that is given us by Christ in the liturgy calls for vital involvement: “The sacred liturgy does not exhaust the entire activity of the Church” (SC, 9), in fact “it must be preceded by evangelization, faith and conversion. It can then produce its fruits in the life of the faithful (CCC, 1072)”

Interestingly, many felt most engaged and welcomed in a small group or ministry context such as prayer group, Bible study, or service organization. This points to a reality that inclusivity and welcome can be experienced locally through encounter and relationships between persons. Thus, providing more opportunities for people to connect in smaller settings appears to be a more fruitful, and practical, approach to take locally. These smaller settings can create spaces of inclusion, welcome, formation and evangelization, outside the context of the liturgy, which requires an appropriate disposition for full participation.

Smaller groups and opportunities to connect can also open up new spaces to work with specific groups. Respondents highlighted the need for increased effort with families and youth. Groups that gather and support families and young people can be the nucleus of this reaching out rather than solely fixating on the fact they are “not at Mass”. For those many families and youth who do participate in the liturgy such groups could also be a place of support in dealing with their felt needs of being Catholic in an increasingly difficult environment.

Likewise, the positive experiences reported by participations, demonstrate that smaller groups can offset many of the concerns raised in rural realities. In particular small scripture groups were

very effective in providing connection and community. As we wrestle with the challenges of geography and infrequency of the Eucharistic liturgy, perhaps the focus needs to shift to groups that nourish and sustain each other, who then gather for the Eucharist when available rather than focusing on communion services.

3.3 Leadership and Accountability

There is a deep need to acknowledge and apologize for the mistakes of the past and to make amends. Many submissions relayed the need for a “real” response. Unfortunately, it was not always clear what concrete actions could be taken.

A) The Impact of Scandal

“Without real indignation, without historical memory and without a commitment to learning from past mistakes, problems remain unresolved and keep coming back. We can see this these days in the case of war. The memory of the past must never be sacrificed at the altar of alleged progress,” (Pope Francis to Canadian Indigenous Delegations, April 1, 2022).

On the matter of residential schools, it is clear from our responses that the church in Canada must honour the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The Holy Father’s Visit to Canada and the National Reconciliation Fund are good starts. They must be built on locally through work with our local communities. Clergy formation and religious education should include more focus on the local church’s relationship with Indigenous Peoples, including truth about the Residential School in our region to help foster new awareness. More can be done to celebrate this relationship around the Feast of Saint Anne.

Sexual Abuse scandals also dominate the public consciousness. Continuing our work toward safe environments and responsible ministry and commitment to action are key here. Perhaps more can be done to highlight current policies and make reporting and follow up as clear and transparent as possible. Locally, the ongoing lawsuits in our region marks a moment for expressing sorrow, offering apology, and making restitution. Clear and consistent communication about this process can help demonstrate commitment to a new way of dealing with these issues.

B) Participation & Decision Making

“Besides this apostolate which certainly pertains to all Christians, the laity can also be called in various ways to a more direct form of cooperation in the apostolate of the Hierarchy. This was the way certain men and women assisted Paul the Apostle in the Gospel, laboring much in the Lord. Further, they have the capacity to assume from the Hierarchy certain ecclesiastical functions, which are to be performed for a spiritual purpose” (Lumen Gentium, #33).

The desire for greater participation in leadership by all the baptized is something we are working on locally. One diocese created leadership teams to assist pastors in decision making and established new guidelines for pastoral and finance councils. However, ultimately it appears people are not asking for a democracy but instead for their voices to be heard and respected. Developing processes that engage people in small groups and as individuals will need to form part of consultation and

decision in the future. Providing clear, timely, and transparent communication can also help people to understand the situation in their community and why certain actions are necessary.

Other means of participation in leadership could be developed through further study by the universal church on the concepts of *co-responsibility* and *delegation*. A deeper exploration of how the laity can, and should, cooperate in the temporal and spiritual aspects of the church and a parish or diocese can open up new pathways for participation. Deepening understanding of the importance of *all the baptized* in the mission of the Church is also necessary.

3.4 Local Actions

In addition to the above conclusions there are a number of concrete actions local dioceses can undertake as a fruit of the local Synodal Process. These actions can model a form of participative leadership, combat skepticism, and help orient particular churches on a more missionary path.

A) Engage in Pastoral Planning & Mission

The Synodal Process gathered large numbers of the faithful for moments of prayer and reflection on the Church and the world. Some dioceses were even able to capture feedback from those not normally consulted. The results provide a pool of insight which can be used to discern a plan for a particular church. Such a plan, growing out of a broad consultation, would be a sign of action from the Synodal Process even while the lead up to 2023 is ongoing. Even difficult feedback provides important information on how to communicate a plan or where to focus resources for further formation. While many items raised in the consultation are matters of universal law and doctrine, a solid plan that focuses on what can be done will help foster change: formation in Christian worship and practice, training in evangelization, gathering in small communities — none of these actions require a document back from the Vatican to bring to light.

B) Encourage Synodality and Pastoral Dialogue

In *Joy of the Gospel* Pope Francis encouraged bishops to “encourage and develop the means of participation proposed in the Code of Canon Law, and other forms of pastoral dialogue” (#31). These forms of participation not only include local synods but also the finance council and pastoral council at the diocesan and parochial levels. In many cases these existing bodies are not fully realized in their roles of consultation and participation. The local diocese can provide clear formation and training on the nature and role of Pastoral Council and Finance Council (with respect to their area of competency) regarding *authority, consultation, co-responsibility, deliberation, delegation, and pastoral planning*.

C) Invest in leadership

Formation in theology and pastoral care is critical for our ordained and non-ordained leaders. However, without adequate skills in leadership many will flounder in their roles. In particular bishops and pastors, who carry a great responsibility, need the tools and support necessary to ensure they can carry out all the duties entrusted to them. Adding leadership to the docket of local seminaries, clergy study days, and lay formation programs will help to improve the decision

making, communication, and participation at all levels of the church. Dioceses can also explore other means of support such as leadership teams or teams of clergy working *in solidum*.

While the challenges related to the Synodal Process, especially in the midst of a global pandemic put a damper on participation, a great number of the faithful were able to gather for spiritual conversation and discernment. We are now entrusted to move this discernment to action lest it become “just another process” with no results.