

Post-Synod Response

*Diocese of Little Rock
December 2022*

Here in Arkansas, we have spent the last year participating on the local level in the Synod on Synodality called for by Pope Francis, which will culminate in a meeting of bishops and other delegates from around the world to take place in Rome in October of 2023 and 2024. We have had meetings on the parish level throughout our state — all parishes were invited and 43% of our parishes participated, surfacing 11 areas of special concern locally.

We then produced a synthesis document summarizing the results of this consultation here for transmittal to those overseeing the synod writ large on the regional, national and continental levels, and ultimately the worldwide level at the general assembly, which will take place in two sessions in 2023 and 2024. Our document, which was published in *Arkansas Catholic*, is available online at the Diocese of Little Rock website and will provide us valuable direction as we look to the future.



*Bishop Anthony
B. Taylor prepared
this response to the
diocesan report to
the United States
Conference of Catholic
Bishops for the Synod
on Synodality.*

Background

The Synod on Synodality in which we are participating is a sharing in the meetings of the synod of bishops established by Pope Paul VI

on Sept. 15, 1965, out of a desire to continue to foster the collegial spirit so much in evidence in Vatican II. These meetings usually take place about every three to five years.

The synod is a consultative body. The pope convenes the synod, chooses the topic, designates its members, presides over its sessions and decides how to implement the suggestions that surface. Usually, there is a summary document produced by the synod participants and then a follow-up document by the Holy Father based on what has been learned in that particular synod assembly.

To date, there have been 14 general ordinary post-Vatican II assemblies of bishops dealing with the following topics: the code of canon law, the priesthood, evangelization, catechesis, the family, reconciliation, the laity, consecrated life, the role of bishops, the Eucharist, Scripture, the New Evangelization, the youth and now synodality, most of which led to a concluding document by the Holy Father, usually an apostolic exhortation. The topic of the present synod is “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission.”

The complete report from the diocese’s synodal process, “Synod on Synodality Synthesis for the Diocese of Little Rock,” was published in the June 18, 2022, issue of *Arkansas Catholic* and is also available online on the Diocese of Little Rock website at <https://www.dolr.org/article/read-dioceses-synod-synodality-report>

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In Arkansas

The diocesan phase of the synod in Arkansas began with a public Mass at our Cathedral of St. Andrew Oct. 17, 2021, and ran all the way through the spring of 2022. There were parish listening sessions, one-on-one conversations, online questionnaires and sessions with specific targeted groups, including diocesan organizations, parish ministry leaders, ethnic minorities and even the homeless.

We asked people about their experience of the Church, how the Church could make them feel more included, and how they experienced the movement of the Holy Spirit in their life and in the life of the Church. In other words, what brings them joy in the Church and in their life? And finally, what is important for Church leaders to hear?

Though the present document does not rise to the level of the apostolic exhortations with which the pope customarily concludes and applies the work of these synods, it is intended to be a concluding document for local purposes of the local effort by me, the local bishop. The reason apostolic exhortations are called “exhortations” is that they focus on the future, on what is to be done next, and the same is true for this concluding document for the Diocese of Little Rock. Based on what we have learned, we look to see what we need to do next.

Out of these discussions, there emerged 11 major themes that “Church leaders need to hear,” regardless of the size and location of the parish and even the language of the respondents. One of the first steps to be taken toward implementation of the recommendations that surfaced in these discussions will be now for our Presbyteral Council to discuss these themes one by one at their monthly meetings over the course of the next year or so, and the Diocesan Pastoral Council to discuss these themes at their quarterly meetings. In the meantime, I have produced this document to give you a sense of the issues that have surfaced in this synodal process in Arkansas and to enlist your commitment to helping address these issues on the parish level.

SYNOD THEMES

These 11 major themes emerged in discussions in the Diocese of Little Rock:

1. Community/fellowship
 2. Youth and young adult faith formation
 3. Desire for the faith to be taught from the pulpit
 4. Need for Catholic support groups
 5. Need for priest presence, accountability, transparency, trust and communication
 6. Perception that the Church engages politically
 7. Rigidity of Church law, especially regarding divorce and annulment
 8. Judgment versus love
 9. LGBTQ issues
 10. Rural parishes feel abandoned
 11. Role of women
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Eleven themes are a lot to deal with in a single document, so I have grouped them according to the three topics about which Pope Francis has requested input by means of the synod, namely: communion, participation and mission. I would like to speak to each of these areas of concern.

Communion

In the category of communion, people raised the need for greater community and fellowship, the need for Catholic support groups, the need to treat others with love rather than judgment, and to welcome and include people with

LGBTQ and other issues. This is obviously a broad category, but the underlying theme is the need to foster respect for and a welcoming attitude toward every person, and this will only occur if people get to know each other.

Therefore, parishes should intentionally and creatively seek ways to create bridges within their community, especially if there are two language groups. Hispanics and Anglos consistently expressed how they want to find a way to overcome the language barrier and come together as a single, united community. There is also a need to give greater attention to the needs of our African-American parishioners, as well as our Vietnamese parishioners and those who attend one of our two traditional Latin Mass parishes. Therefore, based on the input of this synod, parishes should actively seek ways to get people connected, maybe working on projects together. Many people reported that their parish does not even have community-wide celebrations or social events. That is a missed opportunity to build community!

Others shared sad stories about having to face a devastating illness or some other tragedy alone, and no one called to see how they were doing — another missed opportunity. I would like to challenge every Catholic to remember that we “are our brother’s (and sister’s) keeper,” so we need to reach out proactively to our brothers and sisters, especially in their time of need.

Some parishioners who are separated, divorced or dealing with gender issues or unwed pregnancies describe how they feel pushed to the margin, often at the very time when they most need the loving embrace of the Church. This is especially the case for the bereaved and for caretakers of loved ones dealing with dementia or other mental health issues. Very few parishes offer much support for people dealing with these issues, yet this is needed everywhere.

People also asked how we could be more inclusive of those who struggle with LGBTQ issues themselves or in the life of one of their family members. Some describe family

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members leaving the Church because they or their loved ones found the support they needed elsewhere.

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Pope Francis reminds us that the Church is a field hospital for the vulnerable! What can you and your parish do to make your parish a place where those who are hurting can find healing? Does Alcoholics Anonymous meet there? Is there a Courage chapter for those dealing with same-sex attraction? How about a grief support group? Or respite care for caretakers of loved ones who have Alzheimer's disease—a full-time job if there ever was one!

Providing this loving care could go a long way to address the criticism we receive that the Church is too bureaucratic and lacks compassion when faced with people whose state of life is not “in sync” with the Church. People want more understanding and dialogue. They want to be treated with respect. People want and need to experience the love of Christ in all their involvement with the Church, even when there are problems. They want to be welcomed with a smile and treated with kindness. Often people just need someone to listen to them.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How can we get to know each other better?
 - How can your parish do a better job of reaching out to those who are on the margins or who have special needs to create a more unified parish community? What concrete steps can you take to make this happen?
 - What kinds of support groups do people in your parish most need to help them deal with their problems and better experience the love of Christ in your community?
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Participation

In the category of participation, people expressed the need for priests to be more present and the parish be characterized by accountability, transparency, trust and good communication. The input we received included much praise for our priests in general but also complaints about some priests not performing their duties adequately or not being responsive to the needs of the parish. No one expects their priest to be perfect, but they do expect him to try.

In these cases, people were frustrated by the fact that they didn't know of any process for addressing the issue, especially when it seems that Church leadership is unresponsive to their concerns. People feel a great deal of ownership for their parish, so they want to know why decisions are made and want their input to be taken seriously. What happens in their parish matters to them.

People also want to really get to know their priest, which admittedly can be difficult when the parish is very large or the priest has multiple communities to take care of. People also want to be able to contact their priest readily and at least reach another human being when they call — not just options to leave a voice message, especially when the priest himself is not even one of the options provided! People do need to respect their priest's privacy and so need to use good judgment, but if the priesthood is a life lived for others, then people's after-hours access to their priest should not be limited to emergency situations. There needs to be a good balance, which people find to be lacking in some places.

It warms my heart to see how grateful many of our people are for the generous service of our missionary priests, despite long-standing challenges that some people have understanding them. I have always asked these priests to make written copies of their homilies available for the benefit of those who are hard of hearing or otherwise have

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difficulty understanding their homilies. We presently have 24 missionary priests from outside the United States serving in Arkansas — one-fourth of the priests in active ministry here.

On the one hand, people know instinctively that without these generous priests who celebrate more than 70 Masses every weekend, many of our 130 churches would have no weekend Mass. Thanks to them, unlike in other dioceses, we have not had to shut even our smallest places for lack of clergy to serve them.

On the other hand, I understand that cross-cultural ministry can be as challenging for our missionary priests as it is also for some of our people, especially when the missionary comes from a place where there is less lay involvement in parish administration and decision-making than here. Moreover, a number of people commented on not feeling fed spiritually by some of our missionary priests, again probably due to the difference in culture. It's a big adjustment. Perhaps greater reliance on some of our deacons in fostering the spiritual life of such parishes might help. We do provide orientation for our missionary priests, and in time most adapt well to life and ministry here.

We did hear that some rural parishes felt abandoned, including places of declining demographics that have been served by missionary priests for a long time and would really like to have an American priest once in a while.

There were other areas of concern as well. In particular, people complained about the rigidity of Church law, especially regarding divorce and annulment. Here on the local level, the diocese is trying to facilitate the process by no longer charging any fees, even though staffing the Tribunal is an expensive proposition, and by getting additional trained personnel for the Tribunal. But marriage cases still take time, and every denied case produces a painful crisis for the parties involved. Synod participants saw this as another major reason why people are leaving the Church and wish the universal Church would rethink the entire annulment system.

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Catholics in Arkansas are also concerned that the role of women is not adequately recognized and that young women lack female role models for leadership in the Church. Our people feel an immense debt of gratitude for the service of women religious in the past and lament the fact that while those who remain continue to offer effective and generous service, they are aging and not being replaced by new vocations.

People expressed support for women to be allowed to pursue the permanent diaconate, for which there may be some historical support based on the early Church, though Pope Francis continues to study the matter. Women in ministry complained that some priests do not know how to work with women in general and women religious in particular. There is also the perception that there is more support in Arkansas for vocations to the priesthood than for women's religious vocations.

There are many areas where significant consultation already exists in our diocese. On the diocesan level, we have numerous councils, boards and organizations, some of which are largely staffed with laity, and every parish is to have a parish pastoral council and parish finance council, both of which having representation that truly reflects a cross-section of the parish so that the concerns of all can be taken into account.

These councils are important markers of parish viability and offer the priest valuable guidance for the decisions he will need to make. The diocese has very specific guidelines for parish pastoral councils and parish finance councils, and it is very useful to review these guidelines periodically in order to make sure that they are providing the sort of consultation needed in your parish. Indeed, there is a training video for parish pastoral councils and parish finance councils on the Chancery page of the website of the Diocese of Little Rock.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What changes are needed in your parish to provide greater access and improved communication between parishioners and your priest?
- What can be done to help your priest's ministry be more spiritually effective, especially if your parish is served by a missionary priest?
- What new or different opportunities for spiritual growth would you like to see in your parish? How could these be provided?
- What changes are needed in parish administration to achieve greater accountability, transparency and trust?
- Given that we locally are not able to change Church law on our own, what can be done to make the annulment process less painful and more humane? Does your parish have advocates who have the knowledge, time and pastoral sensitivity to accompany people through the annulment process? If not, how can we bridge that gap?
- Given that we cannot change Church law regarding ordained ministry on our own, how can we do better job of drawing on the leadership gifts of all laity in our Church (but especially laywomen, who are often underrepresented in leadership)? How can we show greater respect and appreciation for the women who fill leadership roles within our parish?

Mission

In the category of mission, much concern was raised about youth and young adult formation, especially in view of the significant exit of young adults from the Church. This is a major focus of the diocesan offices of faith formation and youth and young adults.

While some parishes have effective programs, most of our parishes need greater opportunities for youth and young adult faith formation, and some explicitly ask for more diocesan leadership and direction in these areas. And yet, perhaps due to distance, many of our parishes do not send their youth to diocesan youth events. Perhaps we need to consider a different approach. It was felt that we depend too much on untrained volunteers, usually parents of the youth in the program, and these volunteers discontinue their service once their child graduates, creating great instability in many of our programs. But of course, hiring trained youth ministers takes money, which means making youth ministry a priority.

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Young adults, and indeed Catholics of all ages, feel frustration about the shortage of available diocesan retreat experiences, especially in English — we currently have more adult activities available in Spanish. Even so, for both groups adult faith formation continues to be a challenge both on the diocesan level and especially the parish level.

Cursillo provided an excellent retreat experience for many people over the course of the last few decades but was discontinued at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. Actually, the English-language Cursillos had already been suspended earlier due to lack of response. By now, there is a lot of pent-up demand, and so we will be taking steps to try to resume offering more retreat opportunities again in the near future.

I have just appointed two of our newly ordained permanent deacons as spiritual advisors to our Cursillo movement in an effort to help revive Cursillo in both

English and Spanish, and I hope Cursillistas from the past will now step forward to assist in resurrecting this wonderful spiritual opportunity for a whole new generation of Catholics.

Another area related to the mission of the Church that came up with some frequency was the somewhat

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contradictory desire that the faith be taught from the pulpit and yet the perception that instead the Church engages politically. By this, it would seem that some people have a hard time with the social doctrine of the Church, which naturally must be lived out in the public square — that’s why Jesus himself got into so much trouble!

If someone disagrees with the teaching of the Church, for instance, regarding the death penalty, then that teaching is labeled political when it really is about Catholic doctrine, which is the same everywhere in the world. One thing I have been very vigilant about is the prohibition of any priest or deacon to engage in partisan politics from the pulpit — no condemning or endorsing particular candidates or political parties. Any cleric who does that repeatedly in this diocese could lose their faculty to preach. We speak to issues, issues like immigration and abortion and human rights and the earth our common home, all of which are in the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church — and then leave it to the individual voter to determine how to proceed. The United States bishops produce a Faithful Citizenship document each election cycle to highlight the issues at play and what the Church teaches about those issues. I know that makes some people uncomfortable because there are a lot of factors to consider when deciding how to vote — and some voters do not agree with the teaching of the Church on specific matters, but we must proclaim the truth anyway. Our role is to form consciences, and then the ball is in your court.

There are clearly many matters about which people want reassurance that the perennial teaching of the Church has not changed, especially in matters of sexual morality.

Moral truths that seem obvious to people of a certain age are not obvious to those raised after the sexual revolution. Today's young people are being raised in a society where promiscuity is portrayed as normal in social media and regarding which there are apparently no agreed-upon limits to sexual behavior. People want their priests to set aside social and political correctness and address without inhibition the moral issues about which many of our youth — and even adults — are simply clueless, especially these days regarding issues of sexuality and gender. We must address these clearly, but as we saw earlier in this account, we must do so in a way that is loving and non-judgmental, a difficult task!

One constant theme that underlies much of the synodal process in Arkansas was the desire for more opportunities for spiritual growth, with special hope for increasing growth in our love for and appreciation of the Eucharist during this time of national Eucharistic revival.

With this in mind, I would like to announce a new initiative that I think will bring many spiritual blessings to our diocese, namely the establishment of a diocesan shrine of Divine Mercy to be inaugurated next spring on the feast of Corpus Christi, the Body and Blood of the Lord, Sunday, June 11, 2023. This shrine will be at St. Edward Parish in Little Rock and will serve as a place of pilgrimage, adoration and reconciliation. The plan is for Eucharistic exposition and adoration to take place there every day at 5 p.m. Monday through Thursday and at 3 p.m. — the hour of mercy — on Friday, Saturday and Sunday. The sacrament of reconciliation will be available there in English and in Spanish every day during adoration except Monday.

Moreover, there will be a plenary indulgence for everyone who comes to the shrine, spends time there praying for the intention of the Holy Father and goes to confession and receives the Eucharist during Mass within

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Continued ...

30 days of that visit. This shrine will be a ministry of St. Edward Parish, which is conveniently located in central Little Rock.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What areas of the social doctrine of the Church do you find difficult to accept, and how can we do a better job of helping to form consciences in these sometimes-controversial areas of Church teaching?
 - Why are teens and young adults leaving the Church, and what can we do to address this problem? Are there changes in our program you would recommend? How can we better engage youth and young adults in the life, mission and work of the Church?
 - How can we proclaim the truths of sexual morality and gender in a way that is clear and faithful but also loving and non-judgmental?
 - Along with the inauguration of our diocesan shrine of Divine Mercy, what can be done in your parish to increase devotion to our Lord in the Eucharist and gratitude for God's infinite mercy for us who are sinners?
 - How can we love our brother or sister who does not fully accept/live/understand our Church's moral teaching? How can we meet them where they are and accompany them on a journey to greater understanding?
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Conclusion

The Synod on Synodality was called to create a dialogue whereby the issues raised in the course of our conversations could surface and then be addressed, which is our task for the coming years. But beyond the specific concerns raised, the ultimate goal was to model and foster a new, more consultative way of doing things.

This could help clericalism cease to be an obstacle in the life of the Church. As our Eucharistic Revival unfolds over the course of these next few years, it is my hope that our local Church will become more “synodal” in everything we do. The word synod derives from two Greek words: *syn* meaning “with” or “together” and *hodos* meaning “road” or “way,” the idea being that we “go down the road together” or “we journey together” and we try not to leave anyone behind.

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*Bishop Anthony B. Taylor
Little Rock, Arkansas*

