

# Synthesis of the Synod on Synodality Consultations



For a synodal Church  
communion | participation | mission

# SYNOD ON SYNODALITY: REPORT OF THE ARCHDIOCESE OF CHICAGO June 2022

## **Introduction**

Catholics (and others) in the Archdiocese of Chicago (AoC) had a wide range of opportunities to offer comments and reflections on the synodal process. These opportunities included the various consultative bodies of the AoC; e.g., the Archdiocesan Pastoral Council (APC), the Archdiocesan Women's Committee (AWC) the Presbyteral Council (PC), the Consejo Hispano (CH), agencies and departments of the AoC; e.g., the Office of Ecumenical and Interfaith Affairs, Kolbe House, also educational institutions and their chaplaincies, communities of religious, individual parish meetings and processes, meetings with ecumenical leaders and individual submissions to the AoC synod website. In other words, a significant and wide-ranging array of opportunities was offered to Catholics and others in the AoC.

*Synod Workbooks* were provided as guides for reflection, discussion and the submission of comments. They were constructed in light of the materials sent from Rome and from the USCCB in Washington, D.C. The short workbooks highlighted three themes underscored by the Holy Father, Pope Francis, for the synod: communion, participation and mission.

This report will attempt to synthesize the results of the reflections received by the AoC and to offer some critical analysis of those results along with commentary. Because the process was not designed as a sociological survey but rather as a vehicle for narrative responses, strictly quantitative results are not available. What follows is our reading of the various narrative responses that were submitted.

Those who submitted reflections can be assured that every comment was read and noted and, in its own way, incorporated in the final report which will be sent to the USCCB. It should also be noted that relevant information ought to be utilized within the AoC, especially as the Renew My Church (RMC) process moves forward.

## Context

A very important piece of context is the number of actual participants in the process. Because of the many different ways the *Workbook* was used and the various forms of consultation, it is impossible to provide an exact number. Our best estimate is that some 40,000 respondents took part in the process directly or indirectly. That number would represent approximately 2% of the Catholic population of the AoC.

In this limited number of Catholics, who were the responding populations? Again, our response to this question is based on a general reading of the responses and not on strictly quantitative measures. With this in mind, it can be said that the respondents were:

- much more likely to be women rather than men
- older rather than younger
- mostly white and Anglo
- not representative of the 40%+ Hispanic composition of the AoC
- similarly lacking in proportionate representation were the Polish, Black and Asian communities
- a significant majority of disaffected but somehow engaged Catholics (unhappy with the Church but still with it)
- an overwhelming majority of people focused on their immediate parish experience of the Church who had issues with “the institutional Church”
- shaped in some measure by the pandemic; e.g., in reassessing and revaluing their live participation in the Eucharist
- a minority of enthusiastic Catholics who saw a positive future, represented especially by the Hispanic responses and some women religious
- Ecumenical leaders of other Christian communities.

Pope Francis had envisioned a synodal process that would consult with the entire body of the faithful throughout the world. The essential elements of that process were to include prayer, reflection, listening, dialogue, and discernment – all of which would allow for a Spirit-prompted direction to emerge. In fact, the process that did unfold in the AoC, unfortunately, was more like a survey or sounding that resulted in opinions. In this context, many respondents seem to speak **to** the Church (as if an object outside of themselves) rather than **from** the Church (as subjects and active agents in the Church). In some instances, however, the pope’s process was followed. This was especially true in the Hispanic community, some communities of consecrated life, meetings with ecumenical leaders and groups of incarcerated people.

In light of these elements of context, it is no surprise that the results of the synodal consultation were heavily weighted in the direction of structural and institutional change; e.g., the ordination of women, the ordination of married men, change in the Church’s teaching on homosexuality and sexuality in general, concerns about the liturgy, ranging from a good number of requests for more inclusive participation to a few wanting greater

permission to use the Missal of 1962 and a vigorous re-assertion of Catholic orthodoxy especially on prolife matters. This was the way that respondents described a church that they would like to see emerge in the future and it was clear that at times there were organized efforts to lobby for these issues. They also noted that their positions were largely shaped by their disappointments; e.g., in a sense of exclusion, the scandals of clerical sexual misconduct, the mismanagement of the RMC reconfigurations and a disregard for their liturgical sensibilities.

## Values

The responses revealed a number of operative values. These values reflected positions all along the ideological spectrum: some were liberal, some were more traditional, and many of them mainstream. The values included:

- a spirit of inclusion and welcoming
- fidelity and, therefore, a retrieval of historical tradition and orthodoxy
- innovation and adaptability to contemporary (mainly North American, middle class, white) sensibilities and, therefore, a clearer reflection of the world and culture around us
- nurturing a younger generation (although without a direction for this)
- sacramental presence and, therefore, a retrieval of the Eucharist in the life of the Church (understanding and practice) although shaped differently on “the right” with Latin and adoration or on “the left” with greater vibrancy, inclusion and creativity in liturgy
- outreach to the poor and marginalized.

## Directions

As respondents considered the Church going forward into the future, they envisioned certain directions that emerged primarily from their experience.

1. The Church ought to welcome, include and accept everyone, especially those who have been in any way marginalized by the Church itself. These would include:
  - the deaf community
  - LGBTQ+ community (which seems to be ambiguously both accepted and rejected by the Church)
  - those with intellectual and physical disabilities
  - the incarcerated
  - the divorced and remarried
  - singles
  - women (who feel marginalized)
  - the elderly
  - sick and homebound
  - the abandoned by society who are homeless, live in poverty and receive an unequal share in the goods and opportunities of society, especially education and employment.

What is not clear is the nature of the desired welcome and acceptance. Is it a matter of general support or does it entail approval, endorsement and perhaps even a doctrinal change; e.g., in the instance of homosexuality and the sacrament of marriage? Or, is the focus on the individuals rather than their condition? By way of commentary, another question can be raised. How does the radically inclusive vision of Jesus in the Gospel (all are invited) match his call to an exclusive and all-encompassing commitment?

- 2.** The Church should foster a culture of participation. While participation surely involves being able to take part in the sacraments through various parish ministries; e.g., lectoring, Eucharistic ministry, religious education, social justice and ministers of care, it also includes being offered relevant sermons and liturgies which inspire people. Participation has to be a two-way street, in which people not only participate in the life of the Church but experience the Church participating in their lives. Women especially commented on the need to offer sensitivity training to priests and those who preach, so that they avoid using hurtful language or discussing topics in ways that communicate a lack of regard for women.
- 3.** Across every ideological boundary and across every personal difference, in their responses Catholics uniformly highlight the centrality of the Eucharist. They also affirm the need to reclaim the Eucharist in the life of the Church, but they do so in very different ways. Many want a Eucharist that is more egalitarian and better reflects the 50% of the Church that is female. Some speak of the importance of the Eucharist being the point of reference for real communion occurring in a parish, so that the Church is intentional in giving priority to building relationships within a parish community and a common relationship of all in the Holy Spirit. True communion can take place only if there is collaboration and active listening from the heart, hearing the joys and the sorrows experienced by God's people. Finally, a few others seemed to be united in pressing for a more liberal use of the Roman Missal of 1962, or a stronger emphasis on Eucharistic devotions. Everyone also seems to want – in different ways – a better grasp of the Eucharist, a deeper understanding. This suggests a collective readiness for liturgical-sacramental formation.
- 4.** Another common concern or hope has to do with family life. In sometimes very different ways, respondents want to see a “generational faith” take hold. In other words, they want to be able to hand on to a next generation their faith. The way they look at faith and their experience of the Church may differ significantly, but somehow they all want young people to go forward with that faith. They recognize that a life without faith (and without a shared experience of it in the Church) is a greatly diminished life. And they want the best for their children.
- 5.** The particular experience of RMC in the AoC shaped responses to the questions about the synod and synodality. There were two very different directions that emerged in the responses. Many respondents want to celebrate the way that communities have been able to come together and forge a new identity. It has not been an easy process for them, but they recognize the good that has resulted from their efforts and sacrifices. Other respondents felt broken by the process of RMC. They are looking for a direction that would take them on a path of healing. In different ways, the RMC process has dramatically highlighted the ways that the faithful can, should and sometimes do not walk together on the road. It affects the basic dimensions of communion, participation and mission. The work of RMC is far from finished, and it can profit immensely from a kind of synodal catechesis-formation.

6. Many respondents saw the need for greater outreach to the poor and marginalized in society. For the more traditionally minded respondents, this meant charitable support for the poor. For others, the outreach should address the underlying issues of justice that marginalized people, for example, racism, forms of systemic inequity, failure to regard the value of human labor and laborers, and reluctance to accept and welcome immigrants and refugees. Somehow the Church needs to give clearer and more transparent witness to its concern and care for the poor. In this context, interestingly, the Church's solid historical record of educating young people, providing health care especially for the poor, and the delivery of social services to those in need was not recognized.
7. A wide range of respondents, coming from very different experiences and positions, were united and emphatic in stating the need for the Church to address and to continue to address the scandals of clerical sexual misconduct with minors and the associated institutional mismanagement. Although the abuse crisis is not so present in today's headlines, it is very much present in the minds and hearts of Catholic people. The grief of the crisis is very much alive. As the Church moves into the future, it must take up the double task of healing and prevention. The healing outreach to those who have suffered abuse must be a priority for the Church. That healing extends beyond those directly abused but to the entire Church that has suffered so greatly. People are also looking for an assurance that the Church is doing whatever is possible to prevent abuse in the future.

## Deficits

As indicated in the introduction to this report, it is important not only to offer the results of the synod inquiry process but also to do some analysis and to offer commentary. In that light, this section describes some deficits in the responses from those who did not fully understand the synodal process. In other words, mention should be made of what did **not** appear in the responses and perhaps **ought** to have been noted by respondents had they understood synodality. A subsequent and concluding section will underscore some signs of hope in the responses of those who did, for they help us move into the future.

A first surprising and troubling deficit is the overall lack of reference – with rare exceptions – to Jesus Christ at the center of faith and the life of the Church, which is, after all, his Mystical Body. The preoccupation with structures and institutional concerns seems to have eclipsed the very center of faith. For that matter, there was very little mention of the work of the Holy Spirit, who is the bond of unity in the Church.

A second deficit has to do with the encounter of faith and Church with contemporary culture. The Church lives in the culture. And, in the vision of Pope St. Paul VI (*Evangelii nuntiandi*), the Church is called to evangelize the culture. Part of that encounter and evangelization means that the Church brings to the culture a prophetic critique and challenge. In considering the full spectrum of respondents from right to left (to use these tags in a very general way), whoever the respondents are, they mostly seem to buy into the culture. If from the right, one could detect a politicized faith. If from the left, one could see a faith that accommodated easily to the culture. In neither instance did faith and Church seem to stand apart from cultural currents and assume a prophetic stance as a part of its evangelization effort.

The language of the responses revealed a third deficit. Very rarely did the responses draw from or reflect biblical language. The Word of God is the norm of faith. Furthermore, an essential dimension of the renewal of the Second Vatican Council was the retrieval of the centrality of the Word in the life of the Church.

The absence of biblical language and references is a truly notable deficit. Again, this deficit crosses over the entire spectrum of respondents. This biblical deficit should be addressed as an integral part of Church renewal.

Respondents rarely expressed gratitude for the faith they had received, or for the Church community that nurtured that faith, or for the ministry that served their faith. They seemed to be far more aware of the glass half-empty. This fourth deficit of gratitude is very significant. The Church is a historical people of faith. Today's community depends on the legacy of faith built up by previous generations. The historical memory of faith builds our bridge into the future. The lack of gratitude is a troubling deficit.

Largely but not entirely absent from the responses was a sense of the Church's (and believers') mission in and to the world. At best, the responses offered a faint vision of the Church committed to holding up standards of justice, of making peace, of reconciling and building bridges, of being good stewards of God's creation, and of being signs and instruments of God's mercy. Obviously, this is a significant deficit for a future-looking synod that emphasizes communion, participation, and mission.

## **Seeds of Hope**

The listing of deficits in the responses from the synod consultation could easily leave us dispirited. There is, however, another side, a much more promising side.

Four groups – religious communities and ecumenical leaders, as well as Hispanics, the incarcerated and, whom Pope Francis might characterize as “on the margins” – offer some seeds of hope. Together, these groups seem to have grasped the directions and hopes for the synod on synodality as well as a path forward for the Church. The two groups from the margins or edges of our local Church are the Consejo Hispano (the Hispanic Council of the AoC representing Hispanic Catholics) and Kolbe House (representing incarcerated persons). The women religious and ecumenical leaders represent a diversity of congregations.

A discernment process does not depend on tallying the number of people who take a certain position. Discernment relies ultimately not primarily on the quantity of responses but on the quality of resonance with the movements of the Holy Spirit. In this light, it is clear that these four groups offer good insight into where the Lord might be leading the Church today and into the future.

The women religious realistically assess the challenge of dialogue: “We fear offending the other, we fear violence and division; we struggle to be respectful but honest in our diversity – something, it seems, that synodality is trying to help us address/overcome.” If we engage in dialogue, then they say that it becomes clear that “God the Spirit lives within us and calls us to action...(and that) the Spirit is still in charge and will lead us faithfully.”

The ecumenical leaders, while not naïve about the challenge of proclaiming the Gospel in a secular age, urged a recovery of Jesus' healing ministry by trusting in the power of the



kerygma, the dynamism of the Word of God, to touch the hearts of people of every age, but also to give focus to Christian communities as, in the words of Pope Francis, they become “field hospitals” to bring about healing in a broken world.

From a different but complementary perspective, the Consejo Hispano begins with and regularly returns to a sense of “we are the Church.” In other words, these respondents see themselves subjects and protagonists in the process. The Church is not an object that they view and comment upon from the outside. It belongs to their very life. Because of that take on the Church, the Consejo understands the centrality of family and intergenerational connections for the life of faith and mission in the world. At the same time, these respondents honestly assess the obstacles and failures in the way that they live out their life in community and their variance from the ideals of the Gospel. They understand themselves to be called to a continuous conversion of heart. They also recognize that they must continuously hold to their awareness of the great promise of the Kingdom of God and the assurance that the Holy Spirit is working within them even now. Finally, the Consejo looks to the future of the Church and recognizes that some things need to be – in their word – modernized or updated. The shape of that modernization is not fully clear, but it does mean leaving behind antiquated forms that no longer serve the Gospel. It is important to be open to the Holy Spirit and be united with one another, as important discernments are made.

This represents a brief summary of the Consejo Hispano’s consultation. It does underscore a community that understands the call to be on the road together, *synhodos*, or – in Spanish – *en camino*. The larger church community can truly profit from this Hispanic experience.

The responses from Kolbe House represent those who are incarcerated. Some of these respondents are awaiting trial, and others are serving sentences. All of them struggle with difficult circumstances exacerbated by their separation from loved ones and the familiar routines of life. In this context, their responses to the synod inquiry are all the more striking.

The Kolbe House respondents uniformly affirm the sustaining power of faith in their lives. Along with that sustaining power, they are very much aware of their personal and collective call to a conversion of heart. Whether they have made mistakes and failed in the past or find themselves subject to an unjust punishment, they know that they need to change. The community of faith invites them to that conversion of heart. Similarly, these respondents express a strong need for finding support from one another. There is a kind of church community within the jail or prison. They need a supportive community to sustain their movement forward.

They also highlight the importance of the presence of the Church to them in whatever way that can happen. Prior to and beyond the structures and particular operations of the Church, the very presence of the Church becomes a source of strength, consolation and hope. Finally, their circumstances make sacramental participation difficult and not as frequent as they would like. That has underscored the importance of the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist for them.

Like the Consejo Hispano and some women religious, the respondents from Kolbe House seem to have captured a genuine sense of synodality, of being on the road together, even in the straightened circumstances of their lives. Faith and community bring hope and encouragement in a difficult part of their journey.



In the end, the original intuitions of Pope Francis about synodality are verified. The Church's future may require structural and institutional readjustments, but it ought not to pin its hopes exclusively or even primarily on that. More to the heart of the matter is the Church's availability to the Holy Spirit who draws God's people forward. And the faithful need to find ways to make themselves ever more available and ready to engage in honest dialogue, to discern the promptings of the Holy Spirit in each other, and together to summon the courage to take action and carry the Lord's mission into the world. This will require solid Christian formation, but one that keeps in mind the need for the Christian faithful not only to walk together, but stay together.

In his own interactions with individuals and groups, and after reading the results of this consultation, the archbishop was struck by the consistent call for Church leadership to create the space and opportunity for the People of God to participate in honest dialogue. If the Church is truly to be synodal, respondents observed, she must be especially attentive to those whose voices have remained silent or have been silenced. In this regard, the archbishop heard the voice of women, involved in this synod consultation, urging the hierarchy to speak **to** them before speaking **about them**. The same is true of members of the LGBTQ community, and those in "irregular" marriage situations. Their insistence in this regard was not always a matter of demanding changes to Church teaching and practice, but rather of showing respect for their experience as they try to live in accord with the Gospel, all the while facing unique challenges in doing so. This will require suspending any pre-judgments about the reality of their lives, they say, particularly those based on imaginings about their sexual activity. They find it disrespectful when their lives are reduced so narrowly. Simply put, the urging of those who felt their voices have not been included is that Church leaders not only need to **listen to** but **hear** what they have to say in order to really come to know them as fellow disciples who, like the bishops themselves, strive each day to take up their crosses and follow Jesus.