

Synod on Synodality

Report from Region IX

1. Called to “scrutinize the signs of the times” (*Gaudium et Spes* #4) and to reflect on our journey as church, the dioceses of Region IX came together to share our experiences and to respond to the call of the Spirit to “grow as a synodal church (Preparatory Document).”

2. Region IX comprises the 15 dioceses in Iowa, Nebraska, Kansas, and Missouri. These states along the Missouri and Mississippi rivers lie at the center of the continental United States. They include a few large cities, many smaller cities and towns, and large rural areas. There are many smaller rural parishes. The population of the area is increasingly diverse due to migration within the country and internationally. Growing diversity enriches us culturally and challenges us to be aware of biases and of other human rights issues. These aspects of our location are part of what we bring to our experience of and dreams for the church.

3. The dioceses in the region took a variety of approaches to Synod listening sessions. Some worked primarily through parishes and Catholic schools; others held diocesan sessions. Some worked with other institutions and groups both Catholic and non-Catholic. Some held sessions in more than one language. Some used surveys; others stressed in-person gatherings. Still others encouraged one-on-one conversations. Several dioceses had projects already in process and integrated the Synod into those. Not all dioceses included demographic information about the participants. Those that did reported varying degrees of success in hearing from all sectors of the population. The following represents our effort to synthesize the findings reported by the 15 dioceses.

Communion

Eucharist as Source and Center

4. Virtually every diocesan report from this region placed a major emphasis on the church as communion. This is consistent with the fact that relationship is a fundamental human need, and with the call of the church to be, as People of God, “a sign and instrument of the communion to which all creation is called (*Lumen Gentium* #1).” The communion to which all are called is, in fact, a sharing in the very life of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (*Lumen Gentium* #2).

5. In each diocese, those who participated in the Synod activities reported positive experiences of the church as communion. Many of those experiences centered on the Eucharist as the source and summit of our unity. They rejoice in the Real Presence of Christ and in His self-gift to us. That experience of communion with Christ strengthens them in their personal faith. It also connects them with one another as members of the Body of Christ. Many participants in all dioceses love the universality of the Mass and the fact that it connects us not only with our local church, but with Catholics throughout the world and even with those of the past and future.

6. Because the Eucharist is so important, respondents appreciate ways in which the church helps them strengthen their belief in and devotion to the Eucharist. Most importantly, they want to experience good celebrations of the Mass in which all are moved to reverence for what is happening, and to full participation in the liturgy. Good music and good homilies are most frequently mentioned, although people disagree on what makes them good. Other values include catechesis, spiritual talks, parish missions, study groups, and retreats that emphasize Catholic belief in the transformation of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ. Groups also said participation in other sacraments, especially Reconciliation, and Eucharistic devotions, such as Adoration and Benediction, strengthen their faith in the Eucharist and its centrality in their lives. Some people feel that their parish is doing a good job in this regard, while others say a great deal more could be done.

Need for spiritual renewal

7. Many Catholics are saddened when they see a drop in the number of people, especially young people, who attend Mass regularly; and when they hear about Catholics who no longer believe in the Real Presence. They believe the church could help by attending to the quality of liturgies, by providing more and better catechesis, and by promoting Eucharistic devotion and prayer. Some members from a number of dioceses spoke of witnessing what seems to them a lack of reverence at Mass and attribute that to people not understanding the awesome mystery in which they are privileged to participate. Individual Catholics could personally invite someone who is not in the pews to attend Mass with them.

8. Sadly, celebration of the Eucharist is also experienced as an area of division within the church. The most common issue regarding the liturgy is the celebration of the pre-Conciliar Mass. One report referred to “liturgy wars.” Almost every diocese reported that some members are frustrated that opportunities to celebrate the Mass in that form have been abridged. On the other hand, some people are frustrated that not everyone embraces the Conciliar liturgy. The differences of opinion sometimes reach the level of animosity. People on each side of the issue reported feeling judged by those who differ from them. Another issue has to do with integration of diverse cultures within a parish. Having different Masses in different languages may allow each member of the parish to participate in their first language, but does it promote communion among all parishioners?

9. Another major issue regarding the Eucharist is the fact that some are excluded from receiving. Again, most dioceses reported that members experience grief when non-Catholic Christians and people who are divorced and civilly remarried are denied communion. Some members believe the church’s practice amounts to exclusion that is opposed to the example of Jesus. Others believe that the limitations are an important aspect of respecting Catholic teaching.

10. An issue peculiar to this time in history has to do with closure of churches during the early portion of the COVID pandemic. Nearly every diocese in the region reported that some members were disappointed or angry about the closure and believe that the action of church leaders amounted to a failure to uphold the importance of the Eucharist in the life of Catholics.

Shared Faith

11. The long tradition of Catholic teaching is another treasured source of unity within the church. Dioceses reported that participants expressed a high regard for Catholic teaching and for its nearly 2,000-year history. In every diocese, one expression of that regard is a desire to learn more about it. Participants of every age and demographic group spoke of the need for lifelong formation. They would like to see more opportunities for Bible study, in-person and on-line courses, lectures, small-group discussions and convocations among other offerings. Catholics also perceive Catholic Tradition in different ways. Some understand it to mean that church teaching does not change. In several dioceses, participants wish for a return to traditional teaching or suggest that we need a “back to basics” approach to catechesis. Others welcome change as an aspect of our living tradition. Whatever their perspective, people long for a deeper understanding of Catholic teaching, and the opportunity to ask questions and to reflect together on ways to apply the teachings of the church to their lives.

12. Members of all dioceses also wish the church would do more to support their spiritual growth by exposing them to many aspects of the rich heritage of Catholic spirituality. They ask for retreats and other opportunities to pray and reflect together as well as for encouragement in their individual spiritual lives.

Welcoming one another in community

13. While the Eucharist is central, Catholics want to experience communion within their parishes in other ways as well. As one report put it: “People want to be known, valued and loved.” Every diocesan report included some comments about parishes being and/or failing to be welcoming communities. As in other areas, people’s experiences of the church vary widely. People who are active in their parishes seem to experience the parish as a place where they are welcome and where their participation is valued. A number of reports spoke of some parishes having “cliques” so that it was difficult for new members to find a place. Others said simply that parish members need to develop a welcoming attitude and practices of reaching out to new members. A frequent suggestion was the formation of small groups in which parishioners could get to know and support one another, growing together in faith.

14. Special challenges arise when parishes are closed or combined, forcing people who were at home in one parish to develop a new set of relationships. Closures and mergers result in larger parishes or in “mission” parishes served by a priest who must drive a great deal and whose presence in the parish is limited to sacramental administration with even time for that being limited.

Wounds in the church

15. Diocesan reports described the need to heal three major wounds if the church is to be the community it is called to be: polarization, clericalism, and the sex abuse scandal.

16. Polarization is rife within our world today and sadly is affecting the church as well. One area of polarization has already been addressed above: the pre-Conciliar liturgy. Polarization is found along other lines as well. In some cases, the political divisions in the U.S. are allowed to divide members of a parish or diocese. One group may condemn another for

supporting a certain party or candidate. Discussions of church teaching can devolve into arguments. The labels “liberal” and “conservative” are often applied in a derogatory manner to those who have a different opinion regarding the interpretation and application of church teaching. Respondents in one diocese asserted that there is no safe place for discussion of difficult issues. In several dioceses, respondents noted that at times even the bishops seem to be at odds with one another, causing confusion and fear among the laity.

17. In the Synod Preparatory Document, Pope Francis identified clericalism as a major obstacle to communion and synodality in the church. Respondents from throughout Region IX seem to agree with him. Many said the church doesn’t listen to the laity or that lay people are given little to no part in planning and decision making, whether in the parish, the diocese, or the universal church. Some identified specific instances in which their concerns had been silenced by a pastor. Others stated that lay people are not allowed to take initiative in the church without the blessing of the priest and that decisions made at all levels are clergy-driven.

18. Every diocesan report included the message that the great wound of the sex abuse scandal is far from healed. Those who were victimized continue to deal with the pain of that experience. They need and deserve on-going support. The whole church continues to suffer from the loss of credibility and from the evidence that members of the hierarchy were more concerned to protect the institution than they were to protect its members – even its most vulnerable members. Many people are afraid to trust the church or the clergy because of the dishonesty and abuse of power that went on for decades and in so many parts of the world. Church leaders must continue to acknowledge honestly and humbly the wrong that has been done.

Feelings about the hierarchy

19. Lay participants in many dioceses expressed great appreciation for local bishops and priests. At the same time, a significant number expressed a certain distrust of the hierarchy in general. Some faulted the bishops for not speaking up more forcefully on social issues and for failing to provide a consistent message. Similarly, with regard to the current pope, some are happy with his leadership while others expressed disappointment, describing him as either too liberal or too conservative. Comments on his being “too liberal” outnumbered comments in the two other categories, namely that he is “too conservative” and that people are happy with his leadership.

Participation

20. A vital aspect of communion among persons is shared responsibility and participation in the life of the community. The Synod on Synodality picks up on the call of the Council for all members to participate not only in the liturgy but in the entire life and mission of the church. Above all, everyone is called to live a holy life, a life that bears witness to the abundant grace God constantly pours out on the world (*Lumen Gentium* #5).

21. Synod participants in several dioceses felt that the Synod process marks an important step in that direction, or that it can be an important step if the church follows through and integrates synodality into all its work. The documents of Vatican II speak of the universal call to

holiness and of the call to us to recognize the many gifts given by the Spirit to different members for the sake of the whole church. The diverse charisms are to be celebrated and called forth so that the life of the church may be enriched and its mission fulfilled.

22. Diocesan reports from Region IX indicated that respondents view increasing lay involvement in a positive light. They would like to see further support for lay ministry. They believe that lay ministers should be allowed greater responsibility in parish planning and administration. One diocesan report identified the need for a collaborative model for church ministries. Another called for the application of the principle of subsidiarity.

23. Besides encouragement, lay ministers need adequate preparation for the ministries they undertake. They need support in developing their spiritual lives as the foundation for their ministry. They also need a strong foundation in the teachings of the church and a clear grasp of their role in the church.

24. Many participants throughout Region IX see increased lay participation in the church as part of the necessary response to the priest shortage. A great deal of what must be done in a parish does not require ordination and many lay people have administrative and organizational skills. They could relieve pastors of some of the burden, freeing priests to be present and to develop relationships with people of the parish – something both priests and lay people desire. Some priests would need help with letting lay people take over parish tasks for which they seem convinced they have final responsibility and must therefore have the final word in all things. Some felt that removing the requirement for priestly celibacy, and therefore allowing married priests, could be a change that alleviates the strain caused by the priest shortage.

The Issue of Exclusion

25. Like the call to communion, the goal of full participation is related integrally to inclusivity, which will require a great deal of prayer and work going forward. The issue of welcome was mentioned previously in the discussion of communion. For various reasons, not everyone feels welcome in their own parish. Even those who felt that their parish was generally a place of welcome and warmth acknowledge that whole groups do not feel welcome or valued in the church at all. Groups most often cited as feeling ignored, left out, or rejected by the church are young people, women, LGBTQ+ people, divorced people, elderly people, members of other Christian denominations, and people of diverse cultures. The reasons people feel left out of the community vary from group to group and likely even from parish to parish.

26. Only two dioceses reported that a significant percentage of participants in the Synod were young. Both of those dioceses worked through their Catholic schools to hear from younger people. All dioceses did hear from some young people and many of those said they felt a lack of connection with the church. In general, young people seem to feel not listened to and/or that the church is irrelevant to their generation. Their ideas, gifts, worldview, struggles and questions are not addressed or in some cases even acknowledged. Some parishes offer nothing to engage young people once they are confirmed. Young adults, single and married, feel they have no place to belong. The young see themselves as more accepting of others and better at forming community. They assert that the church should make use of their gifts. A concern in a number of

dioceses is that young people are being drawn to other churches where they find more opportunities to be involved. They may also be attracted by energetic preaching and music.

27. Many women see themselves as excluded because there are few women in leadership or decision-making roles. Thus, their experience is not taken into consideration as church policies are developed. Some women feel that others view them as “second-class Catholics,” or that church leaders do not treat them with respect. They find this to be the case even as women provide a majority of the volunteer work in the parishes. The question of ordaining women was raised in nearly every diocese, whether to the diaconate or to the priesthood. Some believe that women will not take their proper place in the church until they can be ordained while others disagree, believing that women can be given positions of influence without being admitted to ordination.

28. People who identify as LGBTQ+ believe they are condemned by church teachings. If they participate in any church activities, they feel the need to hide who they are in order to be tolerated, let alone welcomed. Family members and friends of those who are LGBTQ+ are also hurt by the lack of welcome. They often feel torn between remaining in the church and supporting their loved ones. The issue of welcoming LGBTQ+ people, and the difficulty of doing so given church teaching, arose in nearly every diocese.

29. A significant number of reports included comments that divorced people feel judged by others in the church, in some cases even if they have gone through the annulment process but certainly if they have not done so. The annulment process is experienced as unduly burdensome and judgmental as well.

30. Elderly people often feel forgotten and ignored, especially if health or other issues keep them from being present at Mass. These include people who have spent years as active contributing parishioners.

31. Members of cultural minorities find that at times the language, traditions, music, and art precious to them are ignored or rejected by those involved in planning parish liturgies and other activities. Some parishes do better in this regard than others do, but policies at all levels need to be inclusive. Immigrant populations especially conveyed the importance of the Church supporting their spiritual and material needs, and were disheartened when works of charity were not coupled with attention to issues of systemic injustice.

Mission

32. The church exists not for self-preservation but for mission. Pope Francis continually invites us to go out to the margins, to walk with one another, especially with those who think differently than we do and with those in most need. Diocesan reports indicated that some Synod participants focused on evangelization and mission, while others seemed to concentrate on their own needs or the needs of parish members. Where dioceses reported pastoral plans or goals, they included evangelization, service, and/or outreach among their commitments. One report cited Pope Francis’ call to “smell like the sheep.”

33. Dioceses reported a number of responses to the call to evangelization. Some are eager to evangelize and want to help spread the Catholic faith to others. On the other hand, a significant number of Catholics seem to shy away from it. Some say it just isn't done; religion is a topic to be avoided in conversations outside of one's own family or faith community. Sometimes they can't even speak freely there. Many are certain they would fail at any such effort; they are not sufficiently knowledgeable to speak with others about their faith. There is a clear need for the institutional church to help people share their faith in everyday life and interpersonal relationships.

34. A few diocesan reports addressed the call to serve those in need. When that topic was included, it was listed as a cause for joy in a parish or diocese. People expressed admiration for those engaged in service. One diocese heard from respondents who said they would like to see the church provide more opportunities to serve. Participants describe service as one way to grow in unity and in Christian faith.

35. Several dioceses made special efforts to engage with people who are perceived to be marginalized in the church and in society: with those who have left the church, with members of cultural minorities, with those who have been imprisoned, with those who are homeless, with others who feel they are not welcome.

36. Some dioceses also reached out to people of other Christian denominations and spoke of ecumenical relationships and cooperation. Ministers of other denominations expressed keen interest in developing those relationships. Young people in several dioceses expressed interest in ecumenical discussion as well as cooperation in service projects.

37. The synthesis committee was somewhat surprised at the lack of expressed interest in ecumenical discussion and by the fact that very few dioceses reported that respondents had much to say about Catholic Social Teaching or about care for our common home.

What's next?

38. The Synod sessions did not yield specific action plans but pointed more generally to areas that need addressing. Certain themes resound throughout the diocesan reports read by this committee. They include: the need for a strong program of life-long faith formation emphasizing spiritual growth and deepening understanding of church teaching, the need to develop communities in which all feel welcome, the need to grow in the ability to listen to one another and to develop collaborative methods for working together at all levels within the church.

Life-long faith formation

39. The need for faith formation has been mentioned numerous times already in this report. It arises in connection with participation in the liturgy and appreciation for the sacraments, a grounding in and finding unity through church Tradition, a desire to participate more fully in the work of the church, and the call to evangelization and mission. Every diocese concluded that this is one of the things we need to do.

40. Decades ago, Catholic schools were seen as the primary place for catechesis, supplemented by catechism classes for children who did not have access to the schools. Nearly all religion classes were taught by priests and religious. Today Catholic schools reach a small and diminishing percent of young people, especially in rural areas. The responsibility for parish religious education programs falls almost entirely to lay people. The church recognizes that parents have a primary responsibility for passing on the faith to their children. People are increasingly aware that adult faith requires adult formation. Education in the faith continues beyond graduation from grade school, high school and college. We grow as persons throughout our lives, and lifelong faith formation needs to account for this evolution.

41. Providing faith formation will require investment of resources. There will be a need for well-prepared teachers, and for materials, equipment, space and time. The resources of many parishes and dioceses already seem stretched, thus determining needs will require careful planning and discernment.

Becoming communities where all are welcome

42. If all people are to feel welcome in the church, we will need to approach the stranger in a welcoming manner. If all of us are to grow together as community, we must listen to one another without passing judgment, let go at times of our need to be right, and develop the ability to learn from others. The value of simply listening is a clear message of the Synod process. People must be able to speak honestly on even the most controversial topics without fear of rejection. We must be open to new ideas and new ways of doing things. That will require an understanding of what is central to the identity of church, diocese, and parish; and what changes can help us grow rather than to feel threatened. Faith formation can help us develop greater understanding and grow in trusting the Holy Spirit who, as the *Adsumus* prayer reminds us, is “at work in every place and time.”

43. As noted above, whole groups of people feel that the teachings of the church preclude their sense of being welcome in the community. We need to examine the way in which certain teachings are presented, to demonstrate that we can be faithful to God without giving the impression that we are qualified to pass judgment on other people.

Leadership and participation in the church

44. It is important to note that in many dioceses, lay respondents voiced deep appreciation for their local bishops and priests. A number of bishops say that the experience of the Synod has helped them better understand the people to whom they are called to minister. As local churches and the church universal, we need to build on the positive relationships but also address the wounds left by the sex abuse scandal and the frustrations of those who believe they are not heard or appreciated. Young people need to receive the message that their presence, their ideals, and their desire to serve are appreciated. Women and members of ethnic and cultural minorities should be welcomed into more leadership roles and influence, and their leadership should be visible to the whole church. Lay leadership in general needs to be welcomed and enhanced as a standard aspect of church operation.

45. One key to improving collaboration among clergy and laity will be communication. Lay members in quite a few dioceses said they want greater transparency regarding decision making.

Building on the work of the Synod

46. The diocesan reports show that the Synod is describing a new path for the church in which all members take responsibility for the church's mission, and where all are welcome, grow together in faith and worship, and confidently offer their gifts for the sake of the whole community. Many have welcomed that direction with enthusiasm and a renewed hope, others with a certain skepticism. We continue to pray and work together to open our hearts to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.