



Diocesan SYNTHESIS REPORT



The Roman Catholic
Archdiocese of
Washington

“The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men [and women] of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.”

The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World¹

Echoing the words of Vatican II’s *Gaudium et Spes* (“Joy and Hope” - *The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*), in the Opening Mass for the diocesan phase of the Synod on October 17, 2021, Cardinal Wilton Gregory asked the faithful of The Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Washington to use the Universal Synod called for by Pope Francis as an opportunity to share with each other our joys, hopes, griefs and sorrows about our Church and world. Cardinal Gregory asked the faithful – clergy, religious and laity – “to use our hearts rather than just our ears to truly listen to one another and the voice of the Holy Spirit, so that journeying together, the Church of Washington could emerge from COVID-19 as a community of faith that invites and welcomes others into the life of the faith, and has strong, vibrant parishes focused on accompanying each other towards holiness.”

With these words, the faithful of the archdiocese began our synodal journey, along with the rest of the Church. The Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Washington numbers some 655,000 Catholics in 139 parishes, with 1008 women and men religious in 106 communities and 460 priests, deacons, and bishops. To model synodality, Cardinal Gregory appointed two diocesan contact people (a laywoman and a priest) as co-leaders of the archdiocesan Synod process, and asked that they consult widely before developing a diocesan implementation plan. Working with a group of laity, clergy and religious, the diocesan contact people consulted with pastors, parish leaders, archdiocesan staff, the Archdiocesan Pastoral Council and Archdiocesan Presbyteral Council on the best ways to engage the faithful of the diocese in this synodal process.

The result of this consultation was a consensus that the “goal” of the Archdiocese journeying together was not to create a new pastoral plan with management-based goals and objectives. Rather, the goal of our journeying together – laity, religious and clergy – was to be present

with one another, to listen and learn with each other, and to grow closer to the Lord and His Church. While Cardinal Gregory committed to publishing (in English and Spanish) this final diocesan synthesis, this report is secondary to the primary purpose of hosting parish and regional listening sessions where members of the local Church community gathered to pray, listen and dialogue together.

As the Archdiocese slowly emerges from the pandemic, the Synod process provided pastors an opportunity to invite parishioners to gather for prayer and community. Every parish has been affected by COVID-19 by experiencing illness, deaths, decreased participation in the sacraments, and missed celebrations like First Communions, funerals, weddings, and graduations. We have also seen the remarkable generosity of community members who gave their time, talent, and treasure to create parish food pantries and check in with fellow parishioners during COVID-19. We have seen the sacrifice of priests celebrating the Sacrament of Anointing the Sick in the most challenging of conditions. We have witnessed the steadfast dedication of our Catholic schoolteachers, who took to heart their commitment to ensure our children were able to continue their education throughout the pandemic.

This Synod was and continues to be a unique gift for the local Church of Washington. It is a gift of time, a chance to take a step back and reconnect with our parish communities, and an opportunity to invite people back to Sunday Mass and parish life. We saw the Synod as an invitation to reengage in parish life, an invitation that started with listening.

The Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Washington began its diocesan Synod process on October 17, 2021, with an Opening Mass celebrated by Cardinal Gregory at the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle with representatives from parishes, clergy, and religious communities

¹ Vatican II, *Gaudium et spes*, 07 December 1965, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html

throughout the archdiocese. From October 17 until February 2022, parishes hosted listening sessions where the clergy, parishioners, religious and other community members who live near the parish were invited to participate. A synodal model of parish listening sessions was intentionally selected because it brought people together from different ages and backgrounds (socio-economic, ethnicities, persons with disabilities, and vocations) as one local Church community to dialogue with each other. The parish listening sessions focused on the fundamental question and five of the core themes² from the *Vademecum*³ (literally “roadmap”).

One hundred and six of our 139 parishes submitted summaries of their listening session to the Archdiocese via an online portal. Also submitted were reports from two Catholic High Schools, one independent ecclesial community, The Catholic University of America, one ecumenical synod session, and one verbal report from groups with members who identify as LGBTQ+ Catholics and those who minister to them in the diocese. Additionally, we received over 1,000 individual responses to a survey that was open to all clergy, religious and laity.

From the parish listening sessions, pastors were asked to name two Synod delegates to attend archdiocesan listening sessions. Starting in March 2022 and continuing into May, four regional listening sessions were held online or in-person. Cardinal Gregory, Bishop Campbell and Bishop Dorsonville, parish synod delegates, clergy delegates, and delegates from men and women religious communities attended these archdiocesan listening sessions. Each session focused on ensuring communities prayed together and shared with each other not only the joys of their parish life, but also the challenges, such as fostering opportunities for parishes to accompany and journey with one another. The archdiocesan phase of the Synod concluded with a Closing Mass on May 14, 2022, celebrated by Cardinal Gregory at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Catholic Church in Southeast Washington, D.C.

The diocesan synthesis report reflects the majority of positive observations and sources of pride in the archdiocese that were provided in the individual survey responses, parish summary reports and regional

listening sessions. This report also reflects the areas of concern and growth for this archdiocese and divergent opinions that surfaced most frequently in the individual survey responses, parish summary reports and regional listening sessions.

The diocesan synthesis report was drafted by a small team and shared with the Archdiocesan Pastoral Council and Presbyteral Council for their feedback before being finalized, submitted to the Synod of Bishops, and published for the faithful to study and reflect upon. The Synod process in The Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Washington was met with some trepidation, namely due to concerns that the language of the synodal questions was too theological and removed from people’s everyday experiences, and because listening sometimes does not lead to action and change. Ultimately, however, the faithful of the diocese embraced the synodal process as a sign of hope and healing for this local Church and as a way to journey together as a community of faith.

Response to the Fundamental Question

Each parish engaged in structured dialogue, centered on prayer, when responding to the fundamental question about how well we are “journeying together.” Most responses to the fundamental question included positive comments and challenges raised. Parishes, religious communities, and individuals were direct and honest on how journeying together happens in ways that draw people closer to Christ. On the other hand, many responders pointed out actions by the Church that hinder journeying together and draw people away from Christ and the Church.

The majority of responses to the fundamental question spoke to the positive ways in which the Church was journeying together, highlighting the many parish ministries available that focus on catechesis, liturgy and young adults. Additionally, many noted that COVID-19 inspired parishes to use social media deliberately and meaningfully for the first time, as well as encouraged pastors to call parishioners for one-on-one conversations

² The fundamental question was: A synodal Church, in announcing the Gospel, “journeys together:” How is this “journeying together” happening today in your particular Church? What steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow in our “journeying together?” The five core themes discerned in the archdiocese were: 1. Listening, 2. Speaking Out, 3. Sharing Responsibility for Our Common Mission, and Sharing Authority and Participation, 4. Discerning and Deciding, and 5. Celebration.

³ Synod of Bishops, *Vademecum*, 07 September 2021, <https://www.synod.va/en/news/the-vademecum-for-the-synod-on-synodality.html>.

inquiring about the impact of the pandemic on themselves and their families. Furthermore, with the increase of livestreamed Masses and parish meetings because of COVID, many homebound and disabled parishioners were able to participate in the life of the parish more regularly. Every participant noted that the experience of praying together was necessary for synodality, allowing the process to be transformative for all concerned. Participants noted the desire to have ongoing listening sessions and to continue the synodal process. Finally, a significant number of people noted that small faith groups offered a vital method of journeying together that helped draw people closer to Christ and His Church.

In addition to engaging in a synodal process with our parishes, the archdiocese, through our Office for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, engaged in a series of conversations with our closest ecumenical partners during this Synod. The fundamental question resonated with our ecumenical partners and the primary response to the fundamental question was affirming the importance of the principle of receptive ecumenism, namely, of each religious tradition being willing to learn from the other. When engaging in receptive ecumenism, both parties must be willing to start not from a point of judgment, but rather being ready to encounter the other and see differences as opportunities for learning, not for judgment and criticism. There will be times when we will not agree, but once ecumenical partners take the time to understand each other's positions on an issue, fruitful conversation can occur.

While responding to the fundamental question, there were several challenges to journeying together voiced repeatedly by participants. The laity noted that a painful challenge to journeying together was a lack of an invitation because "no one" invited them to come to Mass or a parish event. Another source of discouragement was a lack of welcome in parishes. The reasons cited as to why people did not feel welcomed included language and cultural barriers, parish ministries being exclusive, a lack of outreach to new parishioners, and a lack of inclusion for people who do not have children or who are disabled.

Two challenges raised across cultural and age groups, regardless of one's vocation in the Church, were the pandemic and poor communication. As noted above in this report, COVID-19 has been a challenge for people during the last two-and-a-half years. COVID-19 has hindered many people, especially the elderly and

families with young children, from returning to Sunday Mass or other parish activities. Another challenge that emerged because of COVID-19 is communication, which led to a lack of awareness that parishes had reopened for public Masses and that the Synod process had begun. Additionally, communication issues caused many people in the local diocese to be unaware of various archdiocesan policies and of archdiocesan activities and events. Parishioners expressed that parish staff act as "gatekeepers" of information and thus there is little information shared with the parishioners directly. In some parishes a lack of communication is hampering effective parish pastoral councils and finance councils from being truly synodal. Parishioners indicated that they know pastoral and finance councils exist and know that these councils meet. However, in some parishes, parishioners are unsure about when the councils meet, what is discussed, and how to contact members if one has a concern. Furthermore, parishioners are unsure on how decisions are made at the parish or archdiocesan levels, and how decisions are communicated to the larger community.

A final challenge to spiritual journeying together has been cultural. Journeying together is frequently seen in the United States as parish ministries focused on tasks, goals and outcomes, rather than as accompaniment and discipleship throughout one's entire lifetime. This cultural aspect is perhaps the most difficult challenge to journeying together as it involves shifting the local Church's perspective from maintenance mode to missionary discipleship.

Responses to the Core Themes

The Archdiocese chose to focus on five of the ten core themes from the *Vademecum* (1. Listening, 2. Speaking Out, 3. Sharing Responsibility for Our Common Mission, and Sharing Authority and Participation, 4. Discerning and Deciding, and 5. Celebration). For each of these themes, we identified responses that were surprising and others that were expected. We also saw notable trends that resonated with a larger proportion of people, all of whom participated in the Synod process, and trends that resonated with a smaller proportion, those on the peripheries.

Significant responses to the five thematic questions that were identified in the individual survey responses, parish listening sessions and the regional listening sessions include:

1. belief in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist;
2. a deep appreciation and love for pastors and parishes;
3. a desire to include youth and young adults in more meaningful ways in the life of the parish;
4. the positive and negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic;
5. an overwhelming positive response to being listened to during the Synod process;
6. a deep sense of pride at the multicultural identity of the Archdiocese and that there is a unity in our diversity since the Church is universal;
7. and a sense of welcome to marginalized communities and challenging voices heard in the Synod process.

Despite recent secular studies in the U.S. about Catholics' belief in the Eucharist, all parish and regional listening sessions indicated that, in fact, Catholics do know the Church's teaching on the Eucharist and have a deep love for it. Furthermore, while most people indicated that they understood why public celebrations of the Mass needed to be paused during the early days of COVID, people, especially young adults, said that in the future, the Church should find ways to ensure that public celebrations of Mass continue.

Another significant response to the Synod listening process was the positive feelings towards priests and parishes in the Archdiocese. The vast majority of people indicated that even if they did not agree with every decision made by their pastor, and even if they do not know many people in the parish, Catholics nevertheless appreciate their priests and the parish community. Catholics were grateful for how hard parish clergy and staff work and how many social services parishes offered during the pandemic.

Almost all responses, whether from individuals, parish sessions or regional gatherings, noted the impacts of COVID-19. In a significant way, COVID allowed homebound and disabled parishioners to participate more in the life of the parish through online meetings. Catholics from around the world were able to join

livestream Masses or meetings from parishes where they once lived. Additionally, many people were able to obtain food and housing assistance from Catholic Charities and parishes during COVID. Beyond the physical suffering caused by COVID, other negative effects of the pandemic included the inability to have funerals for deceased loved ones, restrictions on sacramental visits to the sick in hospitals and nursing facilities, the disappointment of delayed weddings, First Communions, and other life events, not to mention a profound loss of community life.

Another significant need articulated was the desire to include youth and young adults in the life of the parish, specifically in leadership roles. Parishes asked that the Archdiocese invest more time and resources in attracting youth and young adults to parish life and providing formation opportunities for them. There was a sense of pride in the Archdiocese about the multicultural identity of parishes and ministries. The parish and regional listening sessions responded favorably regarding the need to support and welcome marginalized communities. The Deaf and disabled communities as well as women, and persons who identify as LGBTQ+ were mentioned regularly as to the need to be more welcoming and affirming of the gifts these communities bring to the Church. The final significant response to the thematic questions, overwhelmingly positive by Catholics regardless of their vocational state in life, was appreciation for being listened to. Parishioners felt the synodal process was a helpful way to speak with their parish clergy and the Archdiocese. The Synod gave people a voice and allowed Catholics to be heard by their bishops and parish leadership.

Several surprising and unexpected responses arose during the archdiocesan phase of the Synod. Parishioners expressed a deep appreciation for their pastors, priests and deacons, and most parishioners indicated that they trust their local clergy members with regards to ensuring children and vulnerable people are protected. While parishioners do not necessarily agree with every decision a pastor makes, they do appreciate all of the sacrifices priests make in service to the people of God and believe that clergy and parish staff are better trained on how to protect children. Despite a devotion to one's parish and pastor, there remains, however, a deep mistrust and hurt among many Catholics of the Bishops in the United States and of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). Clergy, religious and laity indicated that they believe that the episcopal conference is too focused on

political issues, rather than on evangelization. There were also many expressions of mistrust of the U.S. bishops because of how clergy sexual abuse cases have been handled in the past, how bishops accused of sexual abuse and misconduct are treated, and a lack of transparency in how decisions are made by those in leadership. While it was expected that Catholics would be upset about former Cardinal McCarrick, it was unexpected that so many Catholics had such strong opinions about the USCCB. Catholics across the political spectrum believe the U.S. Bishops are too political, are unwilling to apologize for the clergy sexual abuse crisis and are not concerned enough about spiritual issues related to the Church. However, a surprising result against this trend was the gratitude expressed by regional participants regarding the attention and care that Cardinal Gregory, Bishop Dorsonville and Bishop Campbell showed during this synodal process by attending and staying for the duration of each regional listening session to engage with those present.

Another unexpected response to the Synod process was that despite the Hispanic Catholic population being 30-40% of the Archdiocese, there was significantly less Hispanic input in the listening sessions than expected. Materials were developed in Spanish and many parishes with significant Spanish-speaking populations participated. However, there was little to no mention in parish and regional reports about immigration concerns or the need for more Spanish-language programs.

Ideas and Items that Resonated

Several ideas and items resonated across individuals, parishes and religious communities that participated in the Synod process. The Archdiocese's diversity is a subject of legitimate pride, but many noted a lack of equity and inclusion in parish life. An example is the fact that this Archdiocese has the largest Deaf and hearing-impaired Catholic community in the U.S., but this community experiences a lack of inclusion because there are currently no active archdiocesan priests who are fluent in American Sign Language. Another issue that resonated deeply across the synod process concerned marginalized Catholics, specifically persons who identify as LGBTQ+ and the divorced and remarried. The request was for greater inclusion of these Catholics in the life of the Church and for greater accompaniment for them and their families.

⁴ Another way of expressing the positive comments and challenges is the spiritual language of consolations (positives) and desolations (negative comments and challenges).

There were also several issues raised in parishes and in the regional listening sessions from a smaller percentage of the Catholics who participated in the synodal process. Some Catholics, including young adults and young families, are very concerned about the Holy Father's apostolic letter *Traditionis Custodes* (Guardians of the Tradition) and expressed a deep desire to continue celebrating the Mass according to the 1962 Missal in their current parish. Another issue raised by a small percentage of participants was the need to increase pastoral efforts and activities for seniors. Many of the elderly could be companions to new families and to youth, since older generations have more time to volunteer their time and engage in parish activities. Well-publicized immigration issues, while important to many parishioners, did not surface as often as expected. Also, given the widespread attention to the environment, such concerns were not raised often in the parish reports or at the archdiocesan regional listening sessions, even though we were one of the first U.S. dioceses with a *Laudato Si'* (Praise be to You) action plan and an Archdiocesan Care for Creation team.

Principal Fruits of Discernment

From positive comments and challenges⁴ voiced during the listening sessions, six principal fruits of discernment surfaced, namely:

1. Continue synodal listening sessions;
2. Together with their pastors, parishes should integrate into parish life what was heard and discerned;
3. Increase transparency and accountability in decision-making at the parish and diocesan levels;
4. Increase communication, specifically "listening to each other" vs. "talking at each other" or "passing along announcements";
5. Increase both adult and intergenerational faith formation;
6. Make more use of qualified laypersons in decision-making and administrative tasks at the parish and diocesan levels in order to assist the clergy and allow them more time for sacramental ministry and preaching.

Many of the principal fruits of discernment center on Pope Francis' synodal call of listening, dialogue, and accompaniment. Most participants, even many who were at first unsure of what a synodal process was, came to see the value in a structured listening session that used prayer and guided questions for listening and dialogue. While some people were confused by the theologically-phrased questions found in the core themes of the synod's *Preparatory Document*⁵ and desired that the questions be more tailored for a layperson's experience, people nevertheless were enthusiastic and eager to participate in a process of communal listening and discernment. There was a strong desire by the laity and religious communities that parish clergy authentically implement and integrate the synodal process into decision-making and to implement listening session feedback into parish life, including within pastoral and finance councils. People also voiced a desire for more welcoming parishes that not only form youth and young adults but also accompany these groups through major life transitions.

Another principal fruit of discernment was a desire for increased transparency and accountability in decision-making at parish and diocesan levels. Catholics indicated that, while they understood the hierarchical nature of the Church and how it shapes decisions at the parish and diocesan levels, when there is poor financial management or challenges with clergy assignments, there is little recourse or understanding of how decisions are made. Furthermore, many lay people have secular backgrounds and expertise in financial matters, communications or technology and are willing to assist parish clergy and staff in these administrative tasks so that decisions can be made that benefit the entire community. Related to this point is the desire for more accountability when clergy assignments do not fit a particular community or when clergy fail to follow diocesan policy. Overall, the process of deriving the fruits of discernment for the synodal process was felt to be a prayerful experience for the People of God in the Archdiocese and an experience that they wish to continue as a way to strengthen this local Church.

How the Spirit is Guiding this Local Church on the Path of Synodality

Discerning how the Holy Spirit is already guiding the Church of Washington to grow in synodality has been both forthright and challenging. There were several areas where it was easy to discern the Holy Spirit's impetus. Some of these areas include having more listening sessions and improving communications between parish councils and parishioners. Also, archdiocesan offices and parishes should offer more adult faith formation and lay leadership formation opportunities, empowering youth and young adults to leadership roles and inviting them to participate fully in parish life, while authentically living out Catholic Social Teaching and the Corporal Works of Mercy. These areas were raised in most parish listening sessions, in the individual survey responses, and in all four regional listening sessions.

In the parish and regional sessions, laity and religious, regardless of age, socio-economic background, or level of catechesis consistently voiced a desire for more listening sessions with the clergy and, especially, with the bishops. In the parish and regional listening sessions and individual survey responses, accompaniment of Catholics, whether youth, young adults, people who identify as LGBTQ+ and their families, or divorced and remarried persons were voiced as constant concerns. The need was perceived to continue engaging in dialogue about sensitive topics and to accompany people in their faith over the course of their entire lives. Other sensitive topics where participants in the synod asked for more listening and dialogue were the exercise of civility in a highly politicized culture, addressing racism in the Church, and clergy sexual abuse scandals.

One action step to assist in better communication between parish leadership and parishioners is to strengthen the parish pastoral councils that have faced the challenges of membership decline and fewer meetings because of COVID, while holding up the majority of parishes that have strong pastoral councils as best practice models. In addition to holding up best practices in parish pastoral

⁵ Synod of Bishops, Preparatory Document, 07 September 2021, <https://www.synod.va/en/news/the-preparatory-document.html>.

councils, it would be beneficial to revise and promote the archdiocesan guidelines for pastoral councils, and then ensure the guidelines are implemented in parishes and are accessible to the faithful. Additionally, a template could be created for parishes to use incorporating dialogue and listening sessions. A final concrete action step to address concerns about ineffective communication is to review the practices of the archdiocesan chancery regarding how various items are communicated to clergy and parishioners. There was a felt need for stronger and regular communications from the Archdiocese about a variety of issues, including events, formation opportunities, policies and procedures.

Parish revitalization was perceived as coming about by means of an emphasis on missionary discipleship and personal accompaniment across generations, cultures, parishes, vocational states in life and backgrounds. Action steps for these areas would involve a long-term pastoral vision for the Archdiocese. Such a plan would help in addressing long-standing hurt and mistrust in Catholic communities who feel marginalized by the past actions of Church leaders.

It is proposed that a multi-year pastoral revitalization initiative be developed and implemented in the Archdiocese that focuses on:

- **Evangelization:** specifically empowering Catholics to evangelize using practical tools and creating more welcoming parishes through beautiful liturgies, hospitality and ministries that encourage new pastoral leaders to step forward.
- **Forming missionary disciples:** specifically forming intergenerational regional teams that will work with parishes to provide adult faith formation in the teachings of the Church and also form parishioners in how to accompany youth and young adults.
- **Pastoral activities** that work toward forgiveness and restoring trust for those who have felt marginalized

by the past actions of Church leaders. Outreach to marginalized communities would include: Black Catholic parishes whose founding was rooted in slavery or segregation; recent immigrants, especially Hispanic, African and Asian Pacific Islander communities who have not felt welcomed in parishes; survivors of clergy sexual abuse; divorced and remarried Catholics; the Traditional Latin Mass community; and persons who identify themselves as LGBTQ+ Catholics and their families.

- **The beauty of the Catholic faith** by inviting people back to their parish to celebrate Sunday Mass and other aspects of parish life, such as catechesis and Corporal Works of Mercy.

Conclusion

At the concluding Mass for the archdiocesan phase of this historic Synod, Cardinal Gregory preached about Christ's new commandment to love one another as he loved, and how a mother's love mirrors the love of the Church for the People of God. "In listening, she [your mother] makes you feel important, she makes you feel loved, and she makes you feel that even the most difficult situation is possibly able to be resolved. A mother's love does not always say yes, but a mother's love is always healing, is always strengthening. May the Church love her children in the very same way. Not always saying yes to everything that we ask, but always making us feel important and noble and worthwhile and listened to."

It is the sincere hope of the archdiocesan leadership that this Synod process has imitated a mother's love for her children and demonstrated to all who have participated in it that the Church loves her children and listens to their "joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties."⁶ The Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Washington remains committed to continuing down this synodal path during these two years and beyond as the Universal Church journeys together to proclaim Christ's Gospel message of love, mercy, and salvation!

⁶ Vatican II, *Gaudium et spes*, 07 December 1965, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.



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