



Synodal Path 2021-2023

For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission

Diocesan Phase in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Charlotte

October 17, 2021 - June 30, 2022

Diocesan Synthesis

Dr. Alessandro Rovati

Introduction

While with the publication of the Diocesan Synthesis the diocesan phase of the synod comes to a close, the process does not end in our local Church. Quite the opposite, the final report's publication marks a beginning. Pope Francis explained at the synod's opening that "encounter and listening are not ends in themselves, leaving everything just as it was before. On the contrary, whenever we enter into dialogue, we allow ourselves to be challenged, to advance on a journey. And in the end, we are no longer the same; we are changed."¹ What now begins is the moment of apostolic discernment in which our local ordinary, the Most Reverend Peter J. Jugis, will take the time to study, digest, and meditate on everything that emerged from the synodal journey in the diocese. Not only will he be able to look at the testimonies and needs that arose in the diocese as a whole, but he will also have a chance to learn about the many situations and needs that individuals, parishes, and various groups described in their synod contributions. They were so diverse and rich that this report could not reflect on all of them. Sometimes, there was a very important and pressing need that was mentioned only by an individual group or parish. Having to choose what to include in this short report, though, the diocesan synthesis identifies and focuses on the most frequent answers that emerged in the process. It gives a sense of the most salient experiences and needs that characterize the Diocese of Charlotte and aids the USCCB in the work of synthesis that the Vatican asked for at this stage of the synod journey. Nothing of what emerged from the synodal conversations will be lost, though. In fact, Bishop Jugis has already asked to be briefed in greater detail on all the synod contributions to "add

¹ Pope Francis, "Homily at the Holy Mass for the Opening of the Synodal Path." (October 10, 2021)

another dimension of [his] awareness of the diocese's needs" and provide "good input for [his] ministry."²

The synodal journey in the diocese also continues in the parishes, groups, and associations that participated in it. The people who facilitated the synod and the leadership of the communities in which it happened now have the responsibility to pray about, understand, and respond to what they learned. There are already many initiatives starting around the diocese to respond to some of the needs that emerged in the synodal conversations. And there will likely be many other fruits that what began with the synod will bring to our communities. The coming months will be an exciting moment of ecclesial deliberation in which, by paying attention to the reality of our current situation, by having listened to all the members of the diocesan family, and by being docile to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, our local Church and all its communities will try to respond to what the Lord calls us toward to continue our journey of faith and missionary work. While the synod has national, continental, and global relevance, it was designed to work and be impactful at multiple levels, with the local level, ultimately, being the most important one. No matter what the Holy Spirit wants to do with our diocesan contribution to the global synod as the process continues, what remains for the Diocese of Charlotte is the journey we have made as individuals, communities, and diocesan family.

Participation in the Synod

In the Diocese of Charlotte, 76 of the 92 parishes and missions organized synod sessions, and almost all the diocesan offices and ministries did as well. The diocese received synod reports from Catholic Charities, the Family Life Office, the Office for Youth Ministry, the Faith Formation Office, the Hispanic Ministry, the Vietnamese Ministry, and the Korean Ministry. Synod sessions were organized by the Campus Ministry Office in many of the college communities they serve and by the Catholic Schools Office in all the diocesan schools. The Permanent Deacons, the Saint Joseph College Seminary, and the priests in at least five vicariates organized synod sessions as well. Furthermore, 16 different lay associations, apostolates, and groups held synod sessions with a few more whose members participated in the synod process through their parishes. There were also two religious orders that organized synod sessions in their communities: the Benedictine Monks of Belmont Abbey and the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas. Finally, the Eritrean Catholics of Charlotte, an Oriental Rite Catholic community, participated in the process as well.

Between January and early June, there were more than 400 synod sessions in the diocese. The vast majority (about 350) met in person, while the rest met online. Approximately 6000 people participated in the synod by attending a listening session. Many different language communities participated in these gatherings, and sessions were held in English, Spanish, Tigrinya, Vietnamese, and Korean. Furthermore, both the diocese and more than 30 parishes and groups

² Bishop J. Peter Jugis, "Address at the Diocesan Gathering for the Synod." (June 11, 2022)

created and distributed online surveys to allow people who could not participate in one of the listening sessions to contribute to the synod. More than 1000 people participated in the synod this way, which means that more than 7000 individuals were part of the synod process in our diocese.

The diocese has never conceived of the process as a matter of numbers. At the end of the day, nothing is more important in our life together than the individual person with her story, faith, and needs. Still, it is remarkable that so many people engaged in the process. What is touching is not the mere number of people but the fact that the participation is a sign that there are so many who have a desire to grow in their faith, to participate more fully in the life of the Church, and to entrust to their community and the broader Church their joys and concerns.

The Experience of Faith in the People of God

The synodal journey was an occasion to see with clarity the many ways the Lord remains present and faithful to His people. So many stories of conversion, extraordinary testimonies of charity, and heartfelt descriptions of how Christ touched people's hearts emerged during the synodal conversations.

“*Me encanta*,” a person said at one of the synod sessions in Spanish, “it fills me with delight, with joy, to live the relationship with Christ in the life of the Church.” “I was a soldier in Mexico,” another said, “and I did many things that I am not proud of. But the Lord’s mercy touched my life and transformed it completely. I thought I was lost, and yet here I am.” Here is another moving testimony: “When my wife died, I thought it would be the end. Instead, a new life of service and devotion to the Church opened up to me.” “To participate in the liturgy is like being in heaven,” a person reflected; “it is a moment in which we are in communion with God.” Another synod participant reflected: “Faith is not just the rules; it is a relationship with God. The Holy Spirit called me to be devoted to daily prayer, the *examen*, and journaling. I turn to Christ more often now for guidance and comforting.” Another individual said, “The Gospel touches me and transforms me through the friends in my community and the love they have for me.” “The friendships I have in the parish enrich me. There is a sharing of selves that happens by conversing about lives in light of our faith. It is deeply beautiful,” said a person capturing something that many pondered about. Here is one last testimony: “There have been so many instances where one of us has been put into a place because someone is searching for a Church to call home. Or have been in a place where an individual is seeking someone who is willing to listen and pay attention to what they’re saying. When we are in those moments, reaching out to others who are searching or in need, is when we know God is with us. When you’re truly ‘present’ with someone who is in need of help you feel that God is speaking to you and standing right by your side.”

The testimonies abound. It is impossible not to be filled with awe and gratitude for God's creativity in reaching out to His people. In fact, while the synod also uncovered a lot of challenges and difficulties that people face, thinking back on it, the dominant note is the realization of Christ's faithfulness. If anything, the fact that there are so many challenges and difficulties makes it even more evident that the Lord has not abandoned us. Because one would think that in a world so filled with contradictions, the faith would simply cease to exist. And yet it does not, for, again and again, God takes a new initiative to conquer our hearts.

When asked about the most significant signs of the Lord's presence in their lives and about things that nourish their faith the most, people most frequently identified the following: prayer (both individual and communal); life in the family and the testimonies of faith of spouses, children, parents, and extended family; participation in the liturgy, the Holy Mass in particular; the sacraments in general, with a special emphasis on the Eucharist and on Confession; being involved in works of mercy, acts of kindness and charity, opportunities for service, and occasions to minister to and be with those in need; the friendship and unity with other members of one's parish or faith community; the testimony, example, and accompaniment of priests and deacons; the meditation on and study of Scripture both personally and in small groups; and, finally, Eucharistic adoration. Different language groups generally agreed on how the Lord is present in their midst. However, non-English speakers added a particular emphasis on the possibility of experiencing God's presence and closeness in suffering while facing life's struggles and trials and in the practice of Marian devotions.

Challenges to Communion, Participation, and Mission

By focusing on the signs of the Lord's presence in their lives, people also realized the many ways in which following and giving space to such a presence is hindered by difficulties and challenges. In studying carefully all the synod contributions, it is possible to identify at least 123 different challenges and questions that people named in the conversations. It is impossible to give a complete account of all of them here. The focus will remain, instead, on the ones that emerged more often.

First, people realized that they are often distracted and do not let the awareness of Christ's presence be the leading force in their lives. In some cases, such distraction is caused by the difficulty of giving space to personal prayer amidst the busyness of life. Other times, the struggle is caused by one's work commitments, especially in minority and migrant communities whose jobs often keep them occupied for very long hours and even during the weekends. Smartphones, the internet, and social media also came up a lot. Synod participants said that they create noise in one's mind, represent a constant temptation to shy away from the tasks or the relationships at hand, and often cause loneliness and addiction. Finally, people recognized that they often fail to give the life of faith priority over other interests and activities. The result is a lack of participation in faith activities and parish or community life.

A second preeminent challenge that people identified is the culture and environment we live in. While different people highlighted different elements of contemporary society that are especially challenging to them, there was a widely shared sense of a profound tension between the faith and the world today. Many Christian commitments about the world, who we are, and what we owe to each other, commitments that could have been taken for granted until relatively recently, are now questioned and actively opposed. We live in a secular environment whose individualism, relativism, polarization, and consumerism challenge us deeply. Our common life and people's imaginations are shaped by a throwaway culture that constantly damages human dignity and hurts the vulnerable and creation, and we are not immune from absorbing the same cultural forces that are at play in today's society. The result is that people find it hard to understand the faith and pursue what is right in a cultural context that often directs us in the exact opposite direction. Many recognized that the culture frequently shapes us more than the Church, so we become confused about the truth. Furthermore, it is extremely difficult to live our call to be missionary disciples in such a context. On the one hand, people feel inadequately prepared for such a call. On the other, many experience a fear of being judged, excluded, or rejected because of their faith and thus feel blocked.

The third preeminent challenge people described is the internal divisions the Church at large and our individual communities experience. These profound divisions come in three primary forms. First, our communities struggle to make an authentic experience of communion due to barriers created by language, race, and culture. These barriers manifest themselves especially in the interactions in parishes with both an anglo community and one or more minority communities. Because of such divisions, minority and migrant communities often feel forgotten and treated as an afterthought. There is a widespread perception that ethnic minorities lack support from and recognition by clergy and the diocese and that minority and migrant cultures and sensibilities are looked at with suspicion and, sometimes, outright hostility. Furthermore, language barriers and the diocesan priests' lack of foreign-language training make it difficult for non-English speakers to fully engage in worship and the faith community and receive the necessary pastoral care. Second, even within minority and migrant communities there are divisions caused by the different countries of origin, the internal cultural divisions among people who come from the same country, and whether people are historic or brand-new members of a community. Third, there are profound divisions caused by the polarization and disunity within the Church over some of its teachings and how to embody them in society. In particular, the disagreements that appear to cause the most significant strife in our communities are the ones surrounding the Church's public witness on abortion, homosexuality and gender issues, the role of women in the Church, and the legacy of Vatican II in matters of liturgy and in the Church's life and spirituality more broadly. The faithful are profoundly split about such matters. People also wondered whether secular and political commitments, a worldly mentality, and the internalization of our age's polarization rather than authentic theological commitments are the source of many of the internal

disagreements that ail the Church. While contestation has always been part of the Catholic tradition, it might appear as though we have reached a stage in which disagreements are intractable and the very premises upon which they are based incommensurable. For example, some want to focus exclusively on pastoral experience and seem to be forgetful of the importance of Scripture, the Catholic tradition, and the *Magisterium*. Others, instead, have a mistaken idea of the immutability of the Church's teachings and think that any attempt to reflect upon the signs of the times and discern whether the Holy Spirit is calling us to a deeper understanding of the truth of Divine Revelation is in and of itself a betrayal of the faith.

The synod showed that we frequently let internal divisions and disagreements completely take over our imagination and way of being together. Too often, the bonds of charity that should exist in our Christian community are broken because we reduce the other to the sum total of the things we disagree about. Rather than starting from our unity in Christ, we let the polarization and enmity that characterizes the broader culture poison our hearts and communities. Furthermore, the temptation of "othering" people who have a different sensibility or experience from ours, as the dominant culture does, is very present in our midst. It is a risk that cuts across the whole ecclesial spectrum, and we should all, no one excluded, pray for the grace to resist it. Scripture is clear that God will always elicit a multiplicity of charisms and gifts in the Church so that, all together and in their distinctiveness, they might contribute to the building of the kingdom. Accordingly, it is to our grave detriment and the detriment of the Church when we weaponize the theological, spiritual, or cultural sensibility or tradition with which the Lord touched our lives. The different gifts the Holy Spirit gives the Church are for building the one Body of Christ. It is truly a sin when we use them to fight with one another.

Pope Francis warned us against the temptation to turn the synod into a parliamentary battle in which one side defeats the other to affirm its positions. The Holy Father has been very clear about this. We must resist the temptation to reduce the synod to "the communication and comparison of our own opinions on this or that issue, or a single aspect of the Church's teaching or discipline... The idea of distinguishing between majorities and minorities must not prevail."³ The Pope expanded on this vision in his book *Let Us Dream* to explain that synodality does not involve changing "traditional truths of Christian doctrine;" instead, it is concerned with "how teaching can be lived and applied in the changing contexts of our times."⁴ The synod is about reflecting together on how to embody more fully our Christian commitments so that the Church may face today's challenges. Accordingly, rather than getting angry or frustrated with those who have difficulties or questions about this or that teaching of the Church, we should examine ourselves and the life of our communities to see whether we actually embody them fully. For example, the Church is clear that its theology of the priesthood does not in any way imply a decrease in worth or dignity for the laity, in general, and women, in particular. And it also affirms

³ Pope Francis, "Address to the Faithful of the Diocese of Rome," September 18, 2021.

⁴ Pope Francis, *Let Us Dream* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 2022), 84-5.

that everyone is called to participate fully in the life of the Church, each according to his or her role and charism. Yet, we might want to reflect on whether, in practice, we are still tempted to divide the Church neatly into leaders and followers or to let it function more as a bureaucracy than as a people who lives in communion.⁵ Similarly, the Catechism explicitly says that people with homosexual tendencies “must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity” and that “every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided.”⁶ Yet, are we truly embodying such stances? Is it possible that we need to grow in our ability to follow what the Lord wants of us in this and other matters? The internal disagreements about what the Church teaches are an invitation to examine our conscience, grow in our understanding of what the Lord calls us to, and more fully embody Christ's commandments.

There was also significant consensus among synod participants that reaching out and involving the youth in the Church’s life and providing them with adequate role models is a very pressing challenge. Many lamented the lack of ongoing formation and accompaniment of young people beyond sacramental education and noticed how often adolescents and teenagers leave the Church after Confirmation. Furthermore, people identified the Church’s history of clergy abuse, its lingering effects, and its negative impact on the Church’s public witness, ability to retain its faithful, and moral authority in encouraging participation and giving as fundamental hindrances to the life of faith today. People also mentioned the disagreements among priests, pastors, and bishops in the Church, the scandals and lack of transparency caused by some of them, and the perceived emphasis on the importance of the clergy and the hierarchy over and above the laity as elements that create difficulties in the life of the faithful. Finally, the pandemic and its aftermath emerged as significant challenges as well. People felt isolated as many of the ministries that provided support and nourishment stopped and failed to restart in a timely fashion as pandemic-related restrictions eased.

The Synod Process: Fruits and Obstacles

Overall, the diocesan synodal journey was profoundly moving and beautiful. It has already enriched the life of our diocese by planting so many unexpected seeds of friendship and communion within our communities and among them. Here is a sample of people’s reflections on the process and its fruits in their communities.

“The students who participated in our conversation agreed that these questions were worthwhile to consider and to discuss even apart from whatever impact our discussion may have on the synodal process. It was instructive for me, as the campus minister, to have this platform to listen to my students’ responses.” “The process of the listening sessions, although initially met with much skepticism, seemed to be a positive experience for all who participated. It helped to increase the understanding of each other within our community and was a good way to identify

⁵ Pope Francis, “Address to the Faithful of the Diocese of Rome,” September 18, 2021.

⁶ CCC 2348.

its needs.” “The Synodal process was at first a bit daunting. Would this be truly fruitful? What would we learn that others needed to hear? Will our responses have a real effect? I can say that the discussion with my brother priests was fraternally rewarding... I was moved by their responses; their candor, their humility, and genuine desire to share their truth, much of which was very personal.” “Participants appreciated the synod process. Continuing the conversation would be beneficial on many levels, especially in increasing community spirit, nourishing each other in our faith, and sharing our struggles.” One more: “We gathered people of very different ages and backgrounds to sit down and discuss, something *none* of them had ever done in a setting like this. To hear the personal concerns and ideas of male and female, old and young, married and single, priest and deacons was a great opportunity. The fellowship was fantastic; it has opened doors to new members and participants in various Church organizations and groups, and now at Mass many of us who did not know each other reach out to greet and share. Without this event, this would not have happened.”

What a beautiful testament to the gift the Holy Father has given us by summoning us to participate in the synod. Yet, we should not give the impression that everything was perfect. The difficulties and struggles abounded, and the road to embodying the vision the synod aspired to is still very long. First, while participation in the synod far exceeded all expectations, we must recognize that there were a considerable number of parishes and groups that, for various reasons, decided not to participate in it. Second, even some of the parishes and groups that were part of the process seemed to be more concerned about "checking the box," so to speak, rather than investing the time and energy needed to participate fully in it. Third, there was considerable skepticism and, at times, outright opposition to the synod around the diocese. Fourth, and this was even more prevalent, despite all the best efforts of the various synod facilitators around the diocese, several months into the process, the majority of people still did not know about it. There are parishes and groups that genuinely tried to offer their members an opportunity to engage with the synod but whose people did not end up showing up at scheduled sessions or responding to the online surveys. And even in many parishes and groups where the synod was well attended, it still involved a minute fraction of the overall membership. In fact, the synod revealed a profound disconnect and breakdown in communication that characterizes many of our communities. A driven, small group of people carry the bulk of our parishes and communities' activities, while others seem to passively go through the motions. As some of the testimonies suggest, the synod certainly helped to enlarge such a circle of conversation and care. There are also moving examples of people who are usually marginalized and on the outside for whom this process opened a way to participate more fully in the life of their communities and to have their voices heard. Still, we must recognize that it did not happen on a very large scale and that steps must be taken to increase people's active involvement in the life of the Church. Finally, one last difficulty that we encountered along the way is that organizing, leading, and capturing the fruits of synod sessions is not easy. The art of encountering and listening to people is a skill that needs to be cultivated rather than something that can be improvised. Accordingly, some of the richness that

emerged from the synod was lost, as the descriptions of the synodal conversations the diocese received did not always do justice to what people actually expressed during the listening sessions. Such observations are not meant as a critique against the people that with incredible generosity helped steward the process in their communities. Instead, they are mentioned to recognize that if we want to become a synodal Church in which communal conversation is a habit, we will need to invest the resources necessary to form a synodal leadership as well.

The difficulties we encountered should not surprise us. On the one hand, engaging in the synod in this way is a brand new endeavor, and it will take time and practice to become a Church that is truly capable of it. The process definitely felt like learning how to walk. We stumbled along the way, and our steps were a bit shaky at times, but we now know how to move more confidently and are eager to get better at it so that we may one day run. On the other hand, no “silver bullets” can take away the struggle in our journey of faith individually and as a Church. Not even the synod can bring people back in flocks into the pews, stop the youth from struggling with and often abandoning the faith, or make society recognize the truth of Christianity. As always in the Christian life, there is something that comes before. It is not simply a new way of having conversations among us that is the solution. Something must capture the hearts and minds of each one of us, of our contemporaries, and our fellow Catholics for everyone to feel the desire to participate more fully in the life of the Church. And what is true for the synod is true for a host of other ideas that we debate in the Church. It is not adding this or that catechetical course that will resolve our problems, nor will the solution be celebrating the liturgy one way or another, reforming this or that teaching, or changing this or that leader. Pope Francis has always been captivated by what Benedict XVI writes in the first page of his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*: “Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea [and it is not the result of new programs or projects, we could add], but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.”⁷ One thing that we learned from the synod is precisely the need to give greater space to the encounter with the Lord in our lives and to take steps to make the lives of our communities more open and attuned to such an encounter.

When asked to reflect on the steps that the Holy Spirit is suggesting to embody more fully our Christian vocation today, people focused on the following: the need to increase the silence and prayerfulness in our lives, especially by giving space to moments of Eucharistic adoration and of quiet listening to God; to organize the life of our parishes and communities so that there might be more and more easily accessible opportunities to pray and to grow in one’s Christian life through ongoing faith formation, Bible studies, small faith groups, and retreats; to be more bold and generous in our witness to the Gospel by sharing our faith with others and reaching out beyond the comfort of the parish or one’s faith community; to be better examples of Christ and models of faith for our families and for our broader community, especially in settings that are not explicitly Christian; to embrace the diversity of languages and cultures that make up our Catholic

⁷ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 7.

community and offer more frequent access to the Holy Mass, the sacraments, and faith formation in the native language of non-English speakers; to put greater emphasis on the formation and inclusion of youth in our parishes and communities by investing time and resources in encouraging faith in young people and reassuring them of their place in the Church; to provide greater support for families by nurturing them and by promoting activities that involve all their members; to take greater care of relationships within our parishes and communities by being more attentive to, honest, forgiving, patient, and humble with one another since too often we live as strangers when, instead, we are called to be brothers and sisters; to recognize and address the suffering that exists in our parishes, faith communities, and places where we live by reaching out and more intentionally ministering to the marginalized and the poor on an individual basis without simply delegating such a fundamental Christian calling to activities organized by the diocese; and, finally, to work for unity in our parishes and communities so that our public witness may be strengthened and we might grow in communion with one another and with the Lord.

Amidst the many challenges of today's world, we must become a synodal Church, that is, a Church that is aware that the Lord is present in our midst and longs for unity with us and thus wants to follow in His footsteps. That is why we need to listen to the testimonies of the ways the Lord is at work in our lives and the lives of our communities and to the questions and challenges that people face. The Lord is calling us through all these things, asking us to take a step in our Christian vocation. Participating in the synod gave people a concrete sign that the Church cares for them, that their testimonies have value, and that their needs are heard and embraced. It is one thing to say that Christ reaches and takes care of us through the Church. It is entirely different to see that reality embodied in someone who prays with you, looks at you, listens to you, and desires to journey with you. In this time of confusion, difficulties, and divisions, we need to experience again the hand of Christ reaching out to us, the caress of the Nazarene touching our wounds and embracing our needs through the concrete presence of people who love us. May the Holy Spirit accompany us as we continue our journey together to become such a community.