

Diocese of Saint John

Synthesis of Synodal Process

May 2022

Bishop Christian Riesbeck, CC, opened the Synodal Process in the Diocese of Saint John on October 17, 2021. Parishes had until the end of January 2022 to submit reports and several parishes were given extensions until end of February, with some parishes submitting in March. Compared to neighbouring dioceses the Diocese of Saint John started earlier and finished the process a bit earlier with the hope of embarking on its own visioning process with their recently appointed bishop.

The faithful were invited to prayerfully complete the Synod questions in listening groups at their parish, or if necessary, through individual submissions via the diocesan website (though completion as a community was strongly encouraged in an effort to build synodality). Parishes were tasked with appointing a Synod contact person to compile a summary report of no more than ten pages to be forwarded to the diocese. Many parishes went to great lengths to reach out to the faithful, even making personal invitations. For some this was a genuine process of prayer and listening to the Holy Spirit and to one another, in some cases unfolding over several days to allow the Holy Spirit time to stir hearts. Those who participated in the Synod seemed genuinely interested in the process and had a sense of the urgency of this moment and a desire to be heard, both by the local and Universal Church. One parish shared that, “What was most significant throughout this listening experience was the respect demonstrated for the dignity and opinion of each individual. Participants appeared genuinely interested and engaged in this experience with a recognition that

we all come from different life experiences which has ultimately shaped our faith journey.”

There were a number of factors that influenced participation rates and how data was collected in each parish. Pandemic restrictions were the most common barrier, with many parishes indicating they felt participation would have been more favorable if meetings could have been held in person without restrictions. In the absence of in-person meetings parishes either made the document available to parishioners as a handout distributed at Mass, held virtual meetings, made direct invitations to parishioners via phone calls and emails, or promoted the questionnaire via their website and social media platforms. Some parishes expressed difficulty with low participation rates and lack of clarity and confusion with the formulation of the questions. Others made special efforts to reach those who have not been in regular contact with the church community in some time, as well as the marginalised and vulnerable populations of the community.

In 2018, the Diocese of Saint John underwent a parish amalgamation process, during which many churches were combined with other churches to form new larger parishes under the direction of one pastor. In addition to this a few churches were closed during this process. One lay association said, “this impacting structural change, followed by the two-year Covid pandemic, does not make it easy to assess the current state of affairs of our diocese. We are a church in flux and functioning within these limitations.”

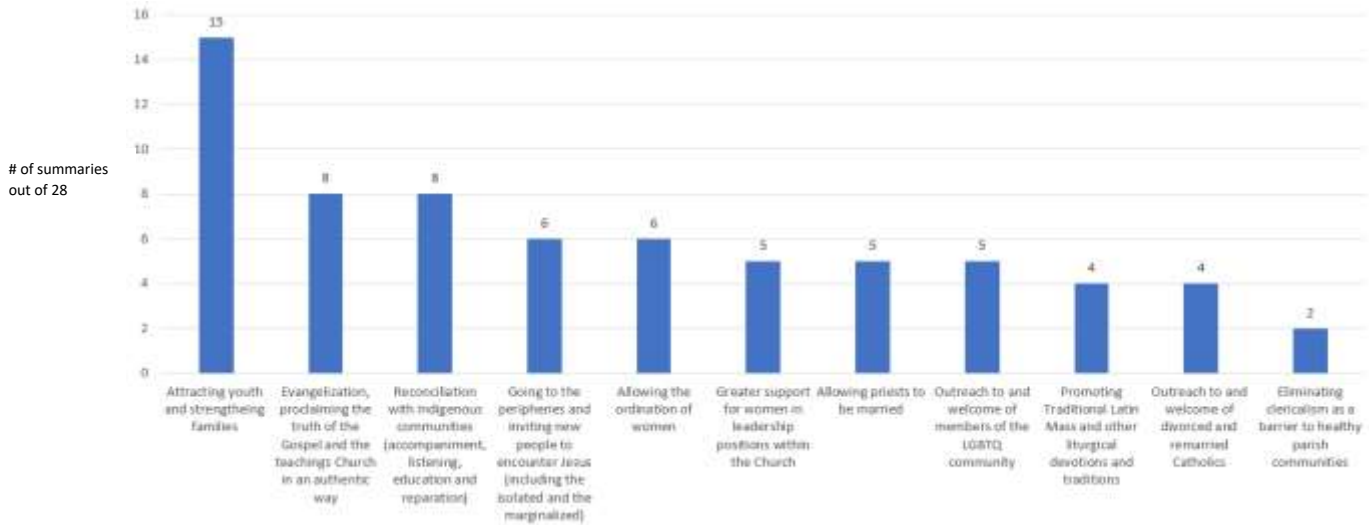
Those who participated in the Synodal process were predominantly active members of their parishes. Some parishes indicated that their sessions did not attract

individuals of other demographics such as youth, people of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and most parishes indicated difficulty reaching the peripheries and engaging non-churchgoers in the Synodal process. However, some expressed hope that the Synodal process could be the first step in building a culture that more easily facilitates this kind of reaching out. One pastor shared that the results of the Synodal process, “opened a forum of encounter at the local level.”

The Diocese of Saint John had a parish participation rate of 79%, with 22 of 28 parishes submitting responses. Of the three regions, Fredericton had the most participation with only one parish of nine not submitting a response, while the Miramichi had the lowest participation rate with only two of six parishes submitting responses. In Saint John while 12 of the 13 parishes submitted responses, four of these did not compile a summary report (although individual response forms from these parishes were forwarded to the diocese). Synod results from 22 parishes and 6 lay associations/groups were compiled under the direction of the Episcopal Vicar for Evangelization and Parish Renewal, with assistance from a diocesan staff member, a lay volunteer and a seminarian.

Throughout this endeavour, what emerged was the true purpose of the Synod, and an understanding that while the data collected is important, this exercise is much more about the process of Synodality – laying a foundation in parishes that facilitates ongoing relationships of listening, rooted in prayer, and involving people at every level of parish life (from those on the peripheries to those serving in leadership, and everyone in between.)

In consolidating the responses from the 28 parishes and lay associations who submitted summary reports, a number of common priorities were identified. They include in order of frequency:



More than half of the 28 summary reports submitted (15, or 57%) identified youth and families as an area of concern, citing difficulty reaching these groups despite a strong desire to do so. While there were a variety of reasons suggested for this, several parishes indicated frustration that nothing is offered to attract youth and young adults (other than religious education).

Nearly a third of reports (8, or 29%) identified evangelization as a priority, with a strong desire to reach out to the peripheries and proclaim the Gospel of Jesus. A true and authentic Christian witness was identified as essential in many different ways across all parishes. Many felt a witness of joy and integrity was crucial, and that a culture of listening and inclusion would help people feel welcome at all levels of parish life.

This number was the same (8, 29%) for Indigenous issues, which also ranked highly among respondents (it was a question that our diocese added to the original ten Synod questions). Those parishes with Indigenous communities within the parish boundaries were both more sensitive to the need for reconciliation and more invested in relationships that live this out.

Some parishes expressed concerns about where Church leadership is headed – for some, a fear that tradition would be lost and teachings of the Church compromised in favor of modernizing worship, and for others, a fear of going back to pre-Vatican II ways. People on either end of this spectrum are invested in their churches and extremely sensitive to anything they fear would compromise what they see as important and valuable in the Church.

Social justice issues were also very prominent on the hearts of those who filled out the Synod questionnaire, indicating a strong desire to reach out to those in need with the Gospel of Jesus as apostles of mercy. The manner in which these were communicated varied from parish to parish. However, common groups that were identified included the poor, alienated, members of the LGBTQ community, divorced and remarried Catholics, suffering, and the marginalized.

Clericalism in all forms was denounced, with many people expressing a fear of not being heard. Ordination of women and married men, as well as greater participation of the laity at all levels of Church leadership are among the solutions proposed by some participants as a way to remedy clericalism.

In addition to these common themes, some new horizons emerged. By far, the desire to listen and participate in the mission of the Church was clear, though there were differences regarding what the mission of the Church is. The Synod has begun a process in our parishes upon which people can build for future visioning, both at the parish and diocesan level. People have a strong desire to be heard. Parishes and the diocese as a whole should be aware of this crucial moment in the life of the diocesan church, and not lose the opportunity to continue in Synodality. Respondents also indicated a need for evangelization and proper formation in order to become true missionary disciples of Jesus.

Some challenges that were identified by parishes during this process included the perception of the hierarchy (mistrust and shame, particularly around sexual abuse scandals and residential schools) and the relationship between leaders and the average parishioner in the pews. Many people expressed concern that decisions relating to the parish were made in a small group that was disconnected from the rest of the parish, and that it is difficult for new people to penetrate those circles and be able to serve in leadership. Others feared that while they had a strong desire to speak up and care deeply about the Church, their voices will not be heard or taken into account. Some also noted a desire for the Church to change its position on key teachings relating to the priesthood and human sexuality, while others expressed that a return to the traditional roots of the faith is the solution to many of the problems faced by our Church today. The pandemic posed problems not only for collecting Synod responses, but also for building community and parish life over the past two years, as many respondents noted.

When asked to summarize how the Holy Spirit is calling us to grow, as a church, in Saint John, respondents indicated both visible changes to church environments (including bringing back kneelers, altar rails, communion paten), liturgy (including Latin Mass) as well growing in virtue (making the faith the centre of individual and family life, sharing the truths of the faith unapologetically, and being Catholic in the truest sense of the word). Some practical suggestions included forming small groups of faith and support, sending out disciples in pairs to the world, being more obedient to Sacred Tradition, letting go of old ways and becoming like the world. Some identified a need for the bishop and priests to remind people frequently that our role as Christians is to evangelize.

The end objective was to help people feel listened to and ensure that the diocese will prayerfully discern this feedback into tangible results that will help open people up to a relationship with Jesus in their parishes. Overall, the experience of the Synod in the Diocese of Saint John, for those who participated appears to be a positive one. Great care should be taken to accompany and nurture the goodness in all the perspectives offered, while always remaining faithful to the fullness of beauty that exists in the teachings of the Church, as lived out in real encounters that move beyond form and ritual to a true encounter with Jesus in the Church. Despite a wide array of responses that varied depending on the experience of the individuals filling out the response forms, a unifying thread among all respondents is the desire to participate as members of the Church in discerning the Holy Spirit's will for the future. The diocese will need to take great care to discern a path forward that builds on this foundation of Synodality, encouraging and supporting parishes to continue engaging the faithful in ongoing conversations rooted in prayer that will open hearts to the will of Christ for parishes, the diocese, and the Universal Church.