



*Archdiocese of Anchorage-Juneau
Synthesis of the Synod on Synodality*

I. INTRODUCTION

The new Archdiocese of Anchorage-Juneau was established on September 17, 2020, by Pope Francis, joining the former Archdiocese of Anchorage and the former Diocese of Juneau. The Synod on Synodality created an opportunity for the Archdiocese to listen to those in the geographic area of the new Archdiocese and will help the Archdiocese in further pastoral planning for the people of Southern Alaska.

As co-chairs of the Synod committee, it is with sincere gratitude that we, on behalf of Archbishop Andrew E. Bellisario, C.M., submit the Synod report for the Archdiocese of Anchorage-Juneau. It is our honor to share with our fellow dioceses across the United States the spiritual dimension of the journey, including the dreams, joys, concerns and sorrows expressed over the last several months during the Diocesan phase of the Synod on Synodality.

The Archdiocese of Anchorage-Juneau consists of 32 parishes and 14 missions over 123,900 square miles in both urban and rural communities, many accessed strictly by plane or boat throughout Southern Alaska. We are a mission diocese and our Catholic population is approximately 55,000. We heard from over 1,200 Catholics and an additional 100 brothers and sisters in Christ.

A Synod committee of nine members from across the Archdiocese of Anchorage-Juneau was established by Archbishop Andrew E. Bellisario, C.M. The opening Mass for the Synod was celebrated on October 17, 2021, at the Cathedral of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Anchorage, Alaska. From October to December 2021, a local process was established that provided consistency and training for facilitators across the Archdiocese. The first dialogue session was conducted in a parish in December of 2021 and the final was conducted for a marginalized community on May 7, 2022.

The synodal process involved bringing many together within their parishes, on zoom calls, or in homes and places of common interest. Some individuals participated because of a direct invitation from their parish, a friend or out of curiosity about the meaning of the Synod. Other individuals participated because this was the first time the Church asked for their opinion. We believe that participants were unified by the prompting of our Holy Father, Pope Francis, to listen and dialogue about each other's lived experience and image of the Church as they believe it is called to be by our Lord Jesus Christ.

Pope Francis called us, in this process, to accompany each other to gain greater understanding through respectful listening and dialogue. Over the past eight months, the committee developed a process to ensure consistency and accountability. We provided numerous opportunities for parishioners to engage in this

process. We supported small groups who felt alienated from the church and we reached out to the vulnerable and marginalized in a variety of settings. We invited on-line submissions for those who wanted to privately share or were unable to participate in a group gathering. We reached out to ministries of the Archdiocese, such as Catholic Native Ministry, catholic social service agencies, those institutionalized and interfaith groups, as well as marginalized communities including those who identify as LGBTQ+, disenfranchised Catholics, the elderly and the homeless. Each person that participated had their own unique experience and perspective.

There were 230 dialogue sessions conducted both in person and via teleconference (zoom). We received 57 reports and 91 letters and online responses. All the responses were honored and considered in the drafting of this synthesis.

In synthesis of the spiritual dimension of the journey, twelve primary themes surfaced through listening, dialogue and discernment. They include community, abuse, catechesis, celebrating liturgy as a eucharistic people, healing, LGBTQ+ community, vocation, women, synodality as a means to address disunity, engaging in ecumenism, engaging in dialogue with society and culture and youth.

PRIMARY THEMES WHICH SURFACED THROUGH LISTENING AND DIALOGUE

1. WELCOMING COMMUNITY

An overwhelming sentiment from Synod participants was that the Church needs to be more welcoming of all people with love and acceptance, not judgement and criticism. God calls us to be a joyful people! In the words of a parishioner, “Maybe by being a better companion I can help [others] be closer to God.”

A majority of people referred to feeling isolated and excluded. These included people of color, indigenous peoples, those with disabilities, women, the community which identifies as “traditional Catholics,” those living with mental illness and especially the LGBTQ+ community, their families and friends. In addition, our rural and mission parishes expressed a sentiment of isolation and need of greater support in order to be a thriving community.

It was stated that “diversity is not a problem, but a blessing” and there is a great need to rebuild community, reestablish and create new connections among parishioners and communities throughout the Archdiocese. The loss of connection was expressed due to COVID and the inability to gather and even worship together in person.

One parishioner stated, “I long for an inclusive, loving, merciful, servant church.” This type of welcoming was described by many as focusing on “mercy and not judgement,” and being more intentional about reaching out to those who feel disenfranchised and marginalized. There was the call for the church to focus more on being “Christ-centered” in living out our common mission with support, inclusivity and

consistency. Some felt that the church could be “more open-minded and open-hearted, especially to the marginalized.”

Children, youth and young adults were emphasized by numerous groups as the future of our church. Participants commented on the importance of the church understanding the younger generations as a sign of inclusion and welcome. One participant noted “the church is turning inward on itself and has become a filling station waiting for customers rather than a field hospital.”

2. ABUSE

As the church in the United States recognizes twenty years since the establishment of the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, the topic of abuse and the overwhelming sentiment of distrust and pain was expressed. The abuse of children and vulnerable adults by ministers of the church remains forefront in most people’s minds. One person commented that the concern of abuse “is an undercurrent that is affecting participation.”

There remains a call for greater transparency and accountability as well as an understanding of how decisions are made and implemented. Despite both the former Archdiocese of Anchorage and the Diocese of Juneau having published, within the past few years, the names of ministers credibly accused of abuse, the majority of participants continue to feel a sense of skepticism and distrust of the church as a whole. There was worry expressed of the crisis’ lasting impact on victim/survivors, their families, Catholics and the church’s perception to the world. Many respondents also questioned when the next scandal would be exposed.

With the release of the United States Department of Interior’s report related to boarding schools, groups noted the need for transparency in regards to Alaska Native children and historical abuses. The historical trauma that impacts the Alaska Native people needs to be a priority and focus of the church and its dioceses.

Finally, in addition, to the worry about sexual abuse, many participants expressed concern about the need for financial transparency and other forms of misconduct.

3. CATECHESIS

The majority of synod participants expressed a clear need for better and greater catechesis, unified and consistent, based on the documents of Vatican II. There were pleas for formation and education for Catholics of all ages, especially for adults, families, and youth. This includes the standardization of sacramental preparation.

There is also a desire of many for trained faith formators and lay leadership to build strong ministries to engage and evangelize Catholics in local communities. “If we are properly educated in our Catholic faith, [then,] social justice, minorities, the vulnerable, people living in the margins and those who feel separated

from the Church would be welcomed naturally, because of our direct relationship with Christ as we act on the Word of God.”

One significant concern was how partisan politics is infiltrating homilies, church teaching and ministry. It was expressed that this developing trend has created significant division, intimidation and polarization among believers. There is a sincere desire for nurturing pastors and ministers who focus on what it means to be Catholic first.

All areas of catechesis were addressed, especially teaching scripture, church history, morality, sacramental theology, spiritual formation and direction, and the wisdom of the Second Vatican Council. To build relationships and dialogue, there was a call for intentional small group sharing in all areas of catechesis.

Finally, some participants expressed concerns for those who have barriers to conventional catechesis (due to special needs) and the importance of allowing for adaptations. Although the need for improved catechesis was a primary topic in our local church, some expressed their concern over feeling less valued because of an overemphasis and priority given to apologetics and doctrine.

4. CELEBRATING LITURGY AS A EUCHARISTIC PEOPLE

The Second Vatican Council teaches the source and summit of the Christian life is participation in the Eucharistic Sacrifice (Lumen Gentium 11). This was clearly expressed by all as the unifying and mystical presence of Christ within the community of faith. The expansive understanding of this sentiment was expressed in the following comment, “What keeps me here is the liturgy, the saints and the wonderful people who have gold in their hearts.”

The theme of the Eucharist was expressed in heartfelt comments. Many participants perceived judgment, rules, and condemnation hinders their participation and welcoming in the most sacred gift of our faith, the Holy Mass. There is a hunger for enriching liturgies and a longing for the feeling and sense of mystery, sacred beauty and reverence in the Eucharist. Some participants feel the loss of sacred rituals and disciplines including Latin, chant and altar rails as a result of changes in the liturgy over the years. Many expressed their desire for the revitalization of the Mass through teaching, celebration and spirituality to gain a greater appreciation of its meaning.

A majority of participants expressed a strong hope that all would be welcome and encouraged to participate in the Eucharist, and all would be represented, especially those who have experienced being overlooked. The belief in Christ’s presence in the Eucharist, scripture and the people is widespread, evident, and without question.

An overwhelming sadness could not be understated related to who can receive Christ in the Eucharist. It was emphasized by many throughout dialogue sessions and individual comments that the reception of Communion should be open to all, including those who are divorced and remarried, those in need of Jesus’

healing presence and nourishment and those who do not identify as Catholic but believe in the real presence and unifying nature of Christ in the “breaking of the bread.” In the words of one participant, “everyone who approaches the table hungry, must be fed.”

Finally, there was concern by some of one’s worthiness to receive due to public scandal, but this was overshadowed by a majority of participants who expressed pain for those who are not being welcomed to receive the Eucharist. A direct question was asked: “Who is worthy, who is denied, who decides?”

5. HEALING

Another key theme that emerged is the need for healing; a healing and reconciliation for injury, abuse, feelings of isolation and exclusion. Many participants voiced concerns over significant and life-long pain and trauma due to abuse by ministers toward children, youth and vulnerable adults, especially indigenous peoples and the historical trauma that lives within their communities. A need for recognition was shared for those who have been hurt due to being judged, condemned and treated as marginalized.

Many participants expressed a need for healing from pain – pain experienced by those who felt harmed through words and actions when in vulnerable states of life. There was also a calling for healing of wounds by those who are separated from the church. A majority of participants shared that they realize there are many reasons for this pain, but all are valid and need to be addressed for the healing and faith of the individual and the community at large. Some participants yearned for healing from fear, confusion, division and isolation brought on by the pandemic and well-meaning actions taken for the common good.

Many participants expressed the need for steps toward healing and re-engagement. Their suggestions included efforts toward listening and acknowledging harm with authenticity and without defensiveness. This included being present to the people and the community through sharing and listening as a first step. Providing opportunities for prayer, healing and transparency and public discussions is asked for by some. They asked the Church to “find ways to welcome people back to the church, by showing their purpose and [that they] are needed.” An emphasis on mercy and forgiveness and accepting people “where they are” was stated by many.

6. LGBTQ+ COMMUNITY

The engagement of those who identify with the LGBTQ+ community within our Archdiocese led to the most poignant and heartfelt expressions of pain, sorrow and rejection. Parents of LGBTQ+ youth and young adults question their own position and acceptance by other Catholics in the church. They feel ostracized because their children identify with the LGBTQ+ community. These participants seek church support and unconditional love, which in various instances is not found.

Those LGBTQ+ who were baptized and raised within a Catholic faith community felt rejected from being their authentic selves when they began to identify with the LGBTQ+ community. One person stated

“as a gay woman, I wanted to be Catholic, but never felt welcomed.” She stated that “churches talk about inclusivity but they are really not unless you fit into their own boxes.”

A majority of these participants feel that there is a hope for diversity in the church that includes the LGBTQ+ community. The desire to be welcomed and participate in all aspects of sacramental life is their heartfelt hope and dream. One person expressed that “it has been a heartbreaking journey for me.”

Many others, in addition to the LGBTQ+ participants, felt there is a need for healing for the experiences of rejection and non-acceptance for those of the LGBTQ+ community. There is significant concern from a majority of all ages about the lack of dignity and judgment shown to those of this community by the church hierarchy and its members. Many harbor a real concern on its impact on the mental health of an already vulnerable population.

One youth shared their experience of church in the following: “Even the priest says that being gay is an ideology that must not be allowed to spread, it hurts because being gay isn’t something you can change. It turns a lot of people away from the church, not just gay people, because this is very hateful.”

The overall sentiment of this theme is the church needs to accept people as they are. One person stated, “God doesn’t create junk.” Another person stated: “People have been gay or transgender forever and ignoring it is not working, saying you are welcome, but you really aren’t, is not working.” In short, many of the LGBTQ+ community seek inclusion and acceptance in the Church, and a majority of synod participants agree.

7. VOCATION

Synod participants expressed concern in the area of vocation. However, this theme’s emphasis was broad and included the need for the Church to support vocations for all, including marriage, family life, ordained ministry, consecrated and single life.

Support, care and appreciation for priests was emphasized by many. There was concern that they have many responsibilities outside of pastoral care and are unable to connect authentically with their parishioners. One focus and recommendation was to allow priests to marry. A number of participants felt that with greater experience of marriage, relationships and family, priests would be better informed and equipped to minister to their parishioners with compassion, understanding and empathy.

A shortage of vocations was discussed but the quality of the priest and duties was emphasized more than the quantity of priests. Some participants shared experiences of clericalism, where superiority and righteousness were expressed more than pastoral care and support. There is a belief by many that better evaluation of candidates for ordination is needed. The pressure of accepting candidates whose lack of abilities hinder their capacity to truly care for the people is not acceptable. It was also stressed that the ordained should not be required or allowed to have administrative responsibilities if they lack the

qualifications and abilities. Priests should be assigned based on their gifts and the laity should be given authority to perform administrative and pastoral duties utilizing their gifts from God.

Many participants expressed an appreciation for women religious who are well-educated teachers, ministers, spiritual guides and servant leaders. “It has been the sisters who have inspired me,” explained one participant. Some expressed a longing for additional women religious orders to be present if they were available to the Archdiocese.

Finally, there was a desire to support the needs of the family through the realities and “messiness” of life. There was a hope for greater tolerance of children at Mass, support for couples in difficult marriages and greater compassion when divorce occurs. It is important to mention that single Catholics also are seeking ways to connect with other Catholics in their community.

8. *WOMEN*

The theme of women and their role and value in the church was evident throughout the synodal process. One male participant towards the end of their dialogue session stated:

“I heard the role of women, I think I see it as something I am taking away. We need women to have a bigger role in the parishes, in retreats, and so on. I think it would make a difference.”

It was expressed strongly and clearly that women and girls represent over half of the church’s population. However, their perspective, voices and experiences are heard on a limited basis and not fully acknowledged in preaching, matters of peace, justice, morality, sexuality, authority, governance and decision making.

A few comments referenced concern over a woman’s ministerial role in the church, feeling it is a negative influence on priestly vocations. Conversely a concern was expressed that when women are denied the opportunity to serve in various roles, their gifts are not recognized.

The overarching sentiment expressed in most dialogue sessions was the call for women to assume a larger role in Church ministry; namely, to preach and to be ordained as deacons and priests.

9. *SYNODALITY AS A MEANS TO ADDRESS DISUNITY*

There is hope in the synod as well as suspicion of its impact. Within the division of the Church lies distrust and assumptions that opposite view-holders will manipulate the synod process. We also acknowledge those who chose not to participate. We heard that many that did not participate were skeptical of the process. Would their lived experience of church matter? Was this process going to be fruitful or harmful to the church and its tradition and doctrine? Was this going to be yet another document for the book shelf? Regardless all are eager to see the fruits of these efforts and where this work will lead.

One theme woven through all of the synodal themes was disunity within the church. It is evident to participants and those who expressed doubt in this synodal process that there is division and incongruent

teaching among bishops, priests, lay ministers. Many participants believe this disunity creates confusion, a loss of joy and a lack of Christian love and acceptance. Synodality is a concept that many people recognized as desperately needed. One person commented, “the synodal process gives us a road map to move forward...to go beyond our lethargy.”

10. ENGAGING IN ECUMENISM

Holy Father Pope Francis is recognized as a model of ecumenism as he “shakes hands with every leader-Muslim, Jewish, Eastern Rite... [he] tries to bring people together because he is very pastoral that way.” The Pope is appreciated for sharing faith between Catholics and non-Catholics.

There were comments that Catholics need to dialogue, pray and work together towards our common belief in God as we show love and respect to each other and the lived shared beliefs with other denominations, both Christian and non-Christian.

The hope that came out of the synod dialogue sessions was for a deeper encouragement and acceptance of all faith communities, where there is tolerance and not falling into stereotypes. It was shared by some that there is the need to allow non-Catholics who believe in the presence of Christ in the Eucharist to be welcome to receive. Conversely, some commented with an opposite viewpoint. Many participants believe that prohibiting non-Catholics to partake in the Eucharist creates a separation between married couples, families and friends, where Christ is meant to be a sign of unity.

There was involvement by those of other faiths in this process, which showed great respect and appreciation for our shared beliefs, shared mission and the appreciation of the Catholic Church and Pope Francis. In one interfaith dialogue session, a brother in Christ, shared what he recognizes as the gift the Catholic Church offers is its universality and mysticism, which people are seeking and many other churches do not offer. These participants expressed a continued desire to work with Catholics to share in the corporal and spiritual works of mercy for all through continued interfaith community organizing, shared prayer, and expressions of unity.

Ecumenism was another topic where a majority of participants support the church’s involvement where we seek unity and common ground.

11. ENGAGING IN DIALOGUE WITH SOCIETY AND CULTURE

It was stated by many that “Catholics are recognizable by our actions” and the church needs to be more vibrant in its effort to live out its social teaching of justice and morality. The church needs to recognize the complexities of moral issues including, the death penalty, marriage equality, racism, birth-control, abortion, domestic violence, dignity of all, wealth disparity, incarceration, immigration, refugees, end of life, climate change and the environment. Many expressed that the complexity of these issues requires the church to

support all ages and stages of life through the implementation of catholic social teaching and social justice programs.

Regarding the challenges that society is facing, one participant feels that the complexity of issues is where division lies because some want quick simple answers and others want to enter the complexity and “discover where God is in all” of it.

Points made were that the church needs to reflect its social teaching on justice and mercy more fully as it engages in the world locally, nationally and universally. The hopes of the local synod are for there to be a greater participation and presence in the community and the church to be more “open-minded and open-hearted.” The church needs to be more engaged with the world and society on issues of social justice as Catholics not as partisan politicians. “Politics over faith is our main challenge,” exclaimed one participant, describing how it creates division and hard feelings that are difficult to overcome.

12. YOUTH

The synod process actively involved both adults and youth in discussing youth and young adult ministry within the Church. Some parishes included youth in various sessions, as well as Lumen Christi Catholic high school. The youth overwhelmingly expressed that they experience the love of God through their relationships with their family, their friends and those they encounter.

A number of youth indicated that the church is not listening to them. They would prefer learning more of the “why” of the faith, not just “what.” The youth were also concerned in the lack of love and empathy they often see from the Church. One youth stated, “the church must do better at allowing LGBT people [to be] accepted into the church community. I know a lot of them who love the church, [but] don’t go because they feel cast out even though they are not out of the closet yet.”

Many of the youth recommend using social media more if the Church wishes to better connect with them. These participants also stated it would be good to hold inter-religious conferences so that students of all denominations could understand each other better.

Some youth questioned how relevant the Church is to their lives and their struggles. There was concern of the lack of welcoming transgender people and the lack of women in ministerial positions. Some felt that the judgement of others was discouraging. One student stated, “I dream that the church can be a safe haven for people struggling in the world, [where] they can go to get away from it all and be equally loved.”

The responses from parents and adults differed from the majority of voices from the youth. An overwhelming number of adult respondents shared that we are losing our youth. A few felt this was because young adults are drawn to the reverence of the traditional Mass, which is not available. Others noted that it is because of a lack of proper catechesis, and relevance to their lives. One parent explained her child felt that the Mass was not relatable and faith formation was not engaging. Another parent stated: “I hope he doesn’t remember the Catholic religion as all those painful nights being bored... but I hope he remembers some of

the youth group things that were fun. He has some close friends as a result of that.” Another parent commented “our kids are not coming back to church; one big reason there is no joy.”

Both adults and youth agree that the youth must be more involved in parish life. And that the Church needs to explore ways to better engage, accompany, and support them.

III CONCLUSION

We concluded the Diocesan phase of the Synod process on Pentecost Sunday, June 5, 2022. This celebration was the first time the newly established Archdiocese of Anchorage-Juneau was able to fully gather. Representatives from all regions of the Archdiocese came together for this celebration. At the conclusion of the Mass, we presented a summary of the hopes, dreams, sorrows and joys shared by participants throughout the Archdiocese.

For those that participated, it is clear they are seeking transparency in what was heard and hoping that their work and energy will bear fruit. Many times over, a desire was expressed to continue to dialogue in small groups within parishes and the Archdiocese. There has been nothing more important to the committee than to ensure the integrity of this process by honoring each person’s comments to ensure that their feelings and hopes are valued and understood.

We pray that the Holy Spirit continues to guide the process during the Regional and Continental phases of this Synod on Synodality. We pray for synod committees and all bishops throughout the world, as the thoughts, ideas and concerns of the people of the world are brought together, and especially of this local Archdiocese, to the Holy Father in October of 2023.