

June 2022

Dear friends in Christ,



2222 N. 111th St.
Omaha, NE 68164

402-558-3100
archomaha.org

I am happy to present a synthesis of the archdiocesan phase of “Synod 2021-2023, for a Synodal Church.” Pope Francis has invited wide participation in the Synod process. Elizabeth Sondag, vice-chancellor of the Archdiocese of Omaha, led the team that presented this invitation here and compiled the responses.

This synthesis has been sent on to the USCCB to be included in the national response to the Synod that will be forwarded to the Holy See. Responses from around the world will be considered by the Synod of Bishops, meeting with the Holy Father in October 2023.

In the Archdiocese of Omaha, over 7,500 people responded to online and printed questionnaires. Approximately 500 people participated in listening sessions held in parishes, Catholic groups and through outreach to those on the peripheries. This did not provide a scientific sample, nor was it meant to be an opinion poll. At the same time, I believe we received a robust response, in the framework of the Synod themes. Particular attention has been given to the experiences of those who do not participate in the life of the Church. I am very grateful to all who took the time to participate in the Synod.

While we have completed the diocesan phase of the Synod process, we will continue to review what we have received here, as we consider how to preach the gospel in our time to how to form missionary disciples of Jesus Christ.

With best wishes, I am sincerely yours in Christ,



Most Reverend George J. Lucas
ARCHBISHOP OF OMAHA

Diocesan phase of the synod synthesis

June 2022



Introduction

The diocesan phase of the Synod on Synodality collected input from people in the Archdiocese of Omaha through listening sessions and questionnaires. The main questions posed in listening sessions or on the questionnaire were derived from the synod's theme, "For a synodal Church: communion, participation, mission." (See pages 4-8 for the list of the archdiocese's main questions and the participants' responses.) Individuals from different states of life, ages, ethnicities and religions participated.

This synthesis describes how people were invited to participate in the synod process, the questions asked during the process, and how the Holy Spirit worked through this process to lead the archdiocese to greater synodality.

To reach the greatest number of people possible, questionnaires were available for anyone in the archdiocese to complete, whether Catholic or not. Listening sessions were held for those on the peripheries and any interested parish and Catholic group.

Pastors were asked to read a letter from Archbishop George Lucas at Masses on the first weekend of February 2022. This letter invited everyone in the archdiocese—Catholic or non-Catholic—to participate in the diocesan phase of the synod. Pastors were also asked to publish the letter in that weekend's bulletin with reminder announcements in every bulletin during February.

Participation in the synod was also promoted on the archdiocese's website and Facebook page and in email campaigns. Catholic high school principals were invited to have their students complete the questionnaire.

The questionnaire was available in English and Spanish and could be accessed online. Hard copies were available for those without internet access. It was emailed to priests, deacons, and superiors of consecrated life who were invited to have their communities participate. The archdiocese's Director of Victim Outreach and Prevention invited survivors of abuse by Church personnel to participate.

Pastors were invited to hold listening sessions at their parishes. A website was created with information on how to host a listening session so that any interested Catholic group could do so. Listening sessions for those on the peripheries were conducted in several languages and at various locations.

¹ Synodality means "involvement and participation of the whole People of God in the life and mission of the Church."
—International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*.

Overview of results

Participants

The synod questionnaire was completed by **7,678** people, and approximately **500** people participated in listening sessions. Almost **95%** of participants were laity. The ages of the participants were:

- | | | | |
|---------------------------|------------|---------------------------|------------|
| • 13–18 year-olds: | 22% | • 51–65 year-olds: | 23% |
| • 19–35 year-olds: | 9% | • Over 65: | 29% |
| • 36–50 year-olds: | 16% | • Unknown: | 1% |

Most respondents were active Catholics. While it was hoped that there would be a more substantial response from people who no longer consider themselves Catholic and Catholics who do not participate in the life of the Church, it did not happen. To present a holistic viewpoint of all Catholics, as requested by Pope Francis, comments were used to amplify the voices of non-practicing Catholics, those who no longer consider themselves Catholics, and non-Catholics.

Some of the most noteworthy participants were survivors of abuse by Church personnel, immigrants, persons with disabilities, homeless, nursing home residents, incarcerated, non-Catholics, non-Catholic ministers, LGBTQ+ and their family members.

An accurate analysis of statistics according to race and ethnicity was not possible since 24% of respondents preferred not to state their race or ethnicity.

Areas of satisfaction

One of the high points of the diocesan phase of the synod was the many people who said their lives were blessed by participating in the life and mission of the Church. Another high point was the enthusiasm of those who attended listening sessions. Those on the peripheries were particularly grateful that their opinion was sought since that does not often happen.

Many respondents expressed a genuine interest in evangelizing and sharing their faith with non-Catholics or fallen-away Catholics. These are people who consider themselves highly engaged in the life of their parish, are joyful, and eager to share that joy with others. They want to participate more fully in the life of the Church. They are committed to serving others and actively seek out more opportunities.

In trying times, people have leaned on their pastors and their Catholic faith for strength, and they have not been disappointed. Some respondents also have found the Catholic community to be supportive.

Many respondents, who wrote comments, expressed genuine respect and admiration for Archbishop Lucas. They believe he is an exceptional shepherd to the people of the archdiocese. Some people expressed wanting to have more access to the archbishop, particularly in the rural areas.

Areas of concern

One of the most important points of concern was the clear divide between members of the archdiocese. Some consider the Church to be too liberal and others too conservative. People from both perspectives agreed that priests do not preach consistent messages.

Catholics who report being more active in their faith life and parish tend to be more concerned that the Church is too liberal—particularly in Rome. These respondents see Pope Francis pushing a liberal agenda and hostile toward conservative Catholics. Some of them are hurt by what they see as the pope's disdain for the Latin Mass. They also believe the Church is following the culture instead of leading it.

On the other side of the spectrum, respondents said that the Church alienates people because it does not accept same-sex marriage, makes it difficult to get an annulment, and is too conservative.

COVID was a divisive issue, as well. People, who wrote comments about it, generally fell into one of two categories—the Church did too much to restrict personal freedoms, or the Church didn't do enough to keep people safe.

Other sources of contention were along a rural/urban divide. The majority of respondents, who live in rural areas and submitted comments, believe that the archdiocese invests more time and money into urban parishes, and they are often ignored.

Finally, some noted the numerous pleas for money from their parish and the archdiocese are annoying, as are the many mailings from the archdiocese.

Areas in need of healing and pastoral outreach

There were several areas where participants felt the Church needed to offer healing and pastoral outreach.

1. Survivors of sexual abuse by Church personnel spoke of the deep wounds they continue to carry and the need for further healing. The following statement from the Preparatory Document echoes the experience of the archdiocese: "For too long the cry of the victims [of sexual abuse by clerics and consecrated persons] has been a cry that the Church has not been able to hear sufficiently. These are deep wounds that are difficult to heal, for which forgiveness can never be asked for enough" (*Preparatory Document for the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, no. 6*).
2. The LGBTQ+ community and divorced and civilly remarried Catholics stated that they feel alienated from the Church.
3. Respondents desire more opportunities for faith formation, retreats, and other events to teach them more about their faith. They said this knowledge would help them perform missionary outreach.
4. There is a concern that priests are overworked. Respondents would like to reduce this burden but are unsure how.

Key questions and answers from Catholics

Communion

Question 1: How connected do you feel to the universal Catholic Church?

- **22%** feel very connected
- **48%** feel connected
- **22%** feel neither connected nor disconnected
- **7%** do not feel connected
- **1%** did not know they were connected

Question 2: How connected do you feel to the Archdiocese of Omaha?

- **19%** feel very connected
- **48%** feel connected
- **22%** feel neither connected nor disconnected
- **10%** do not feel connected
- **1%** did not know they were connected

When broken down by age, people over 65 reported the highest percentage (30%) of feeling very connected to the universal Catholic Church and the Archdiocese of Omaha. Teenagers were the most neutral, with 37% feeling neither connected nor disconnected. Teenagers also had the lowest percentage of feeling very connected at 6% and 9%, respectively.

Not surprisingly, the survey results show clergy and consecrated laity felt the greatest connection to the universal Catholic Church, with 45% responding that they feel very connected and 41% connected. The percentages were similar for their connection to the archdiocese.

The clergy feel a strong connection to Archbishop Lucas. They said he is unifying and easy to follow. They also noted that their priest and deacon communities helped them to remain connected to the archdiocese.

Although many people in rural parts of the archdiocese expressed that they felt ignored, their feelings of being very connected or connected to the archdiocese (67%) were similar to those from urban areas (68%).

In terms of marital status, single people over 19 were the most neutral regarding their connection to the universal Catholic Church and Archdiocese of Omaha, with 31% feeling neither connected nor disconnected. The percentage of divorced persons who felt disconnected from the universal Catholic Church and the Archdiocese of Omaha was slightly higher (3.5-5% higher) than the other groups in marital status categories.

When it came to their connection to the Archdiocese of Omaha, most comments were very positive. People said that their lives had been blessed by participating in the life and evangelizing mission of the Church. There also was a clear theme of happiness and gratitude for the Catholic faith among Spanish speakers.

The majority of the negative comments centered around the fact that there is no longer a printed version of the Catholic Voice archdiocesan newspaper. This was particularly prevalent in the 51+ age group. The archdiocese is currently evaluating how to respond to this concern.

Respondents also worry about the diminishing number of priestly vocations and their effect on the Church in the future.

Participation

Question 3: Do you participate in the life of the Catholic Church?

96.5% of Catholics who responded say they participate in the life of the Catholic Church, with only 3.5% responding that they do not participate. Those who do not participate listed “I am not interested” and “My schedule conflicts with the parish activities I am interested in” as the top two reasons.

<i>Reasons to not participate in the life of the Church</i>	13-18	19-25	26-35	36-50	51-65	65+	Total
A. I have different beliefs	10.5%	20%	11.8%	2.8%	22.6%	17.4%	11.5%
B. Mass schedule or location does not fit my schedule	20%	20%	11.8%	2.8%	9.7%		15.9%
C. There is no childcare option	2.2%		5.9%				1.8%
D. My schedule conflicts with the parish activities that interest me	25%		23.5%	11.1%	9.7%		20%
E. I do not feel welcome	3.9%		11.8%	13.9%	16.1%	13%	7.1%
F. I don't understand or I don't speak English well	0.4%				3.2%		0.6%
G. I am not interested	28.5%	40%	11.8%	11.1%	6.5%	26.1%	23.8%
H. Other	8.8%	20%	23.5%	58.3%	32.3%	43.5%	19.4%

Question 4: For those who participate—Ideally, would you like to participate more in the life of the Church?

36% said yes, 30% said probably, and 34% said they participate sufficiently. Among those who would like or probably like to participate more, the top two reasons they do not were “My schedule conflicts with the Catholic activities in which I am interested” and “My parish’s activities do not interest me.”

<i>Reasons to not participate in the life of the Church</i>	13-18	19-25	26-35	36-50	51-65	65+	Unknown	Total
A. Mass schedule or location does not fit my schedule	23.8%	23.5%	8.2%	12.5%	10.3%	12.2%	14.3%	15.4%
B. My parish’s activities do not interest me	28.5%	12.3%	13.7%	9.7%	17.3%	26.4%		20%
C. I do not feel welcome	3.2%	8.4%	6.1%	7%	11.2%	10.3%		7.1%
D. My schedule conflicts with the parish activities that interest me	32.7%	33.5%	35.6%	32.6%	41.1%	27.8%	21.4%	33.9%
E. There is no childcare option	0.9%	4.5%	18.2%	8.4%	1.1%	0.6%		4.3%
F. I have some different beliefs	7.4%	7.8%	4.3%	5.9%	5.4%	12.3%	7.1%	7.2%
G. My spouse or someone in my household is not Catholic	2.8%	2.8%	2.7%	4.8%	6.5%	8.8%	7.1%	4.9%
H. I don't understand or I don't speak English well	0.4%	0.6%	2.5%	2.5%	0.9%	0.4%	28.6%	1.2%
I. Other	0.3%	6.7%	8.6%	16.5%	6.3%	1.3%	21.4%	6%

66% of those who participate in the life of the Church would like to participate more. The percentage was even higher among 19–50-year-olds. These percentages correspond with comments from people that they would like their parishes to have perpetual adoration and more young adult groups, bible studies, and activities for young families. The most common reasons for not participating more in the life of the Church, even though there is a desire, are scheduling conflicts and a lack of parish activities in which they are interested.

Spanish speakers expressed the need for more Spanish masses, including the suburban areas of the archdiocese. They expressed their gratitude for those parishes that have a Spanish-speaking priest.

Consecrated laity expressed a desire to be better known and heard.

Mission

Question 5: Do you currently participate in the evangelizing mission of the Catholic Church in any way?

More than half of responding Catholics (58%) report that they participate in the evangelizing mission of the Catholic Church, with 72% of those respondents noting that they have the skills, knowledge, and tools to do so.

Those who participate in evangelization said they do so because they believe the Catholic faith is true, and they are called to share it with others. Parents and grandparents want to pass on their faith to their children and grandchildren.

Of those Catholics who do not evangelize (42%), 62% felt that they did not have the skills, knowledge, and tools. Those over 65 were more likely than all other age groups to say they didn't have the skills, knowledge, and tools needed to evangelize. Those who don't participate in the evangelizing mission of the Church cited various reasons, including not wanting to force their faith on anyone, disagreements with Catholic Church teachings, and the Church abuse scandal.

Question 6: How likely are you to recommend your parish to a friend or colleague?

Age	Very unlikely	Unlikely	Neutral	Likely	Very Likely
13-18	3.19%	10.96%	33.44%	38.51%	13.9%
19-25	2.08%	5.56%	16.67%	31.25%	44.44%
26-35	0.65%	3.04%	13.91%	32.17%	50.22%
36-50	1.34%	4.10%	11.94%	28.34%	54.28%
51-65	1.84%	4.17%	14.66%	33.93%	45.40%
65+	1.7%	2.93%	14.52%	37.54%	43.31%
Unknown		3.57%	10.71%	33.93%	51.79%
Total	1.87%	4.95%	17.53%	34.79%	40.87%

People who said they would be likely to recommend their parish to others cited a great priest, a vibrant parish community, a beautiful church, or belonging to a group they like. In the Spanish-speaking community, one of the main reasons for recommending their parish was a Spanish-speaking priest.

Even those who said they were likely or very likely to recommend their parish to a friend or colleague said they would only do so if they were asked, which rarely happens. As a result, the statistics do not accurately reflect how many people recommend their parish to others.

Those who said that they would be unlikely to recommend their parish said it was because of a dislike of their priest or because the community was not welcoming. In the Spanish-speaking communities, it was often because they did not like some of the people that led groups in the parish or that the parish was not welcoming or lacked community.

Other reasons people stated for being unlikely or very unlikely to recommend their parish include:

- **Mass is not engaging, including boring homilies**
- **Lack of interesting activities for their age or state of life**
- **Too great of a focus on money**

It should be noted that only 4.95% of respondents said they are unlikely to recommend their parish, and only 1.87% were very unlikely.

Many young adults in the Omaha area report feeling lost in a big parish. In the rural parishes, a common theme was that parishes were not open to outsiders. Some elderly clerics feel forgotten, and some active priests report too much administrative work.

For a synodal Church

Question 7: How has your life been blessed within the last three months by participating in the life and evangelizing mission of the Church?

Respondents listed specific ways in which they participate in the life of the Church. The following were the most common:

- | | |
|------------------------------|---|
| • Attending Mass | • Belonging to a Catholic group |
| • Going to confession | • Going to adoration |
| • Praying | • Having children in the Catholic school |

People reported growing in faith by participating in the archdiocesan mentorship program, parish small groups, and other Catholic groups. Many people said that participating in the life of the Church brings them inner peace and happiness, reduces stress, and increases gratitude. Others responded that their faith has been an immense help when they were suffering and that they feel joyful when serving the poor and sharing their faith.

At the archdiocese's Newman Center, young adults said their prayer lives and understanding of church teaching have deepened. Consecrated laity stressed the importance of going to Mass and receiving Holy Communion to sustain them. Non-English-speaking communities that do not have a regular Mass in their language said it is a great blessing when Mass is celebrated in their native language.

Question 8: In what ways do you feel called to grow in your participation in the life and evangelizing mission of the Church?

Many people expressed a desire to grow in their prayer life and become more involved in their faith (for example, attend Mass more frequently, join a bible study, etc.). Some said they were called to be more open about their faith, evangelize, and volunteer for leadership roles within their parish. Parents and grandparents want to pass their faith on to their children and grandchildren.

Not all respondents felt called to do more than they were doing. Others said they do not feel called to grow in their participation in the life and evangelizing mission of the Church because they disagree with the Church on specific issues or do not see a reason to participate in the institutional Church.

Regardless of whether they desired to participate in the evangelizing mission of the Church, there was a strong desire by respondents to participate more through service and/or social justice.

Key questions and answers from non-Catholics and those who no longer consider themselves Catholic

Question 9: What is your impression of the Catholic Church?

Almost half (46%) of non-Catholics, or those who no longer consider themselves Catholic, have neither a favorable nor a non-favorable impression of the Catholic Church. Of those who have an opinion, it is twice as likely to be unfavorable (39%) as favorable (15%).

Those who have a favorable opinion of the Catholic Church said they admired the charitable efforts of the Church and found the Church spiritually enriching and welcoming. The majority of these responses came from non-Catholics who were married to Catholics.

There were a variety of reasons for unfavorable opinions of the Catholic Church. Many respondents said they do not feel welcome because they cannot receive Holy Communion. Others said it was challenging to follow along and participate in Mass.

Homeless individuals said that while the Catholic Church was willing to help them with their basic needs, parishes are not particularly open to having them be a part of the parish community. Over half of the homeless said they know where a Catholic Church is but cannot get there.

Several respondents said they found the Catholic Church's teachings on the following issues to be discriminatory and not reflective of Jesus' love for all:

1. Same-sex marriage

2. Women not being ordained priests

3. Non-Catholics and divorced and civilly remarried Catholics are unable to receive Holy Communion

A theme among teenagers was that many "Catholic" peers are hypocritical and Catholic in name only.

Question 10: For non-Catholic ministers, are there any endeavors in which you would like your church to work together with the Catholic Church?

75% of non-Catholic ministers said they had worked with Catholics on a committee or project, usually involving service to the poor or advocating for social justice issues. Despite differences on some topics, non-Catholic ministers are very interested in working with Catholic leaders and are waiting for them to express an interest.

Discerning next steps

Holy Spirit's Voice

After evaluating the responses of the more than 8,000 people who participated in the diocesan phase of the synod, it is clear that most respondents feel blessed to be a part of the Archdiocese of Omaha and want to join in its mission and vision. While there is still work to be done, the positive feedback was significant.

It is clear from the responses that the Holy Spirit is asking the following of the archdiocese:

I. Focus on Encountering Christ in Prayer and the Word of God

Six years ago, the archdiocese implemented the following pastoral vision, “One Church: Encountering Christ, Equipping Disciples, Living Mercy.” The diocesan phase of the synod confirmed that this pastoral vision still very much resonates with the people in the archdiocese. It is evident that “Encountering Christ” is the greatest need within the pastoral vision.

Many respondents seem to have answered the synod questions through the lens of their political/cultural views instead of Jesus being their focal point. The political/cultural viewpoint illustrates a need for people to know Jesus more personally, and so for a greater focus by the local Church on prayer and scripture in conjunction with the national Eucharistic revival.

The rest of the archdiocesan pastoral vision then flows from this encounter with Christ. A closer relationship with Jesus brings about a greater desire to be His disciple and live mercy. If a person has not personally encountered Christ, it is impossible to participate fully in the Church’s mission to invite others to encounter Him. When we grow spiritually in unity with Jesus, we grow more in unity with each other, and our divisions are healed.

II. Greater Outreach to the Peripheries and the Elderly

Hearing from so many on the peripheries, such as immigrants, persons with disabilities, and the incarcerated, about their great thirst for faith makes it clear that more outreach is necessary to meet the spiritual needs of the poor and vulnerable among us.

III. Places of Welcome

After hearing from those who voice feeling unwelcome by the Catholic Church for a variety of reasons (being homeless, large parish, LGBTQ+), it is clear that the Lord is inviting the archdiocese to grow in being places of welcome. The challenge will be to find ways to do so while at the same time remaining true to the teachings of the Church.

IV. Increase Vocation Outreach to Hispanics

Approximately 20% of the people in our archdiocese are native Spanish speakers. Still, we have very few native Spanish-speaking seminarians. The archdiocese needs to increase its outreach to native Spanish-speaking young men.



Further Proposals for the Archdiocese in Communion with the Whole Church

Greater collaboration is needed between clergy and laity. In our archdiocese, the pastors are being asked to take a crucial step towards greater collaboration during the implementation of our new families of parishes as part of our Journey of Faith pastoral planning process. Similar collaboration is needed across the Church worldwide.

Additionally, the archdiocese and the universal Church need to look at the best practices of those parishes who are living synodality. The next step is to encourage other parishes to imitate those practices.

Finally, it would be helpful for the archdiocese, in communion with the whole Church, if the universal law of the Church assigned fewer administrative duties to pastors and the principle of subsidiarity was further implemented. Further implementation of this principle would lessen the unsustainable centralization of Church administrative and judicial duties.

Conclusion

Participating in the diocesan phase of the synod has provided us with a better understanding of our strengths and shown us where work is needed. Exactly how the Holy Spirit calls us to respond to these invitations will be discerned within the archdiocese in the coming months and years. The archdiocese awaits with joyful hope the outcome of the Synod of Bishops in October 2023 and any papal actions to follow.

