



Diocese of Richmond Participant's Guide



Diocese of Richmond
For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission
Participant's Guide

Table of Contents

- I. General Introduction
- II. Participant Instructions
- III. Communion
- IV. Discussion and Dialogue
- V. Participation and Mission
- VI. Fundamental Question

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General Introduction:

In the [October 18, 2021 edition of the *Catholic Virginian*](#), Bishop Knestout introduced the Synod to the people of the Diocese. He explains: “‘Synod’ is a Greek word that literally means ‘on the same path’ so the Holy Father has asked the whole Church to ‘journey together’ on the same path in communion with one another. In communion, we join with one another to listen to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and prayerfully discern God’s will for us. Our mission, as a faith community, is to act upon what we’ve heard. Contrary to the emphasis our culture places upon quantifiable outcomes in measuring success, synodality is an ongoing process expressed in our willingness to journey together. The 2023 World Synod of Bishops will not be an end, i.e., an outcome, for the process. Rather, it will mark a continuation, as we continue journeying together as a Church.”

Every Diocese has been asked to participate in this unique process with a particular focus on the local level, specifically parishes and local communities. Within the Diocese of Richmond, Bishop Knestout is asking parishes to begin a consultative process with their advisory bodies (ex. Parish Councils and Finance Councils) and the diverse people of the parish communities. In a particular way these moments of dialogue should not just be with the same people whose voices are always heard, but rather an opportunity to provide newcomers and the marginalized a chance to be heard. Bishop Knestout wrote: “Our world, and sometimes even the Church, can seem divided along cultural, political and economic lines. We experience division from one another because of our own selfishness and sinfulness. As a counter to this experience, synodality leads us to listening, speaking, accepting co-responsibility for participation in the process, discerning and deciding.” The results of the conversation are not what matter most, but rather that the faithful of the Diocese have been able to enter into these unitive moments of discussion with each other.

Before local communities and individuals enter into the synodal process it is important to identify what synodality is *not*. While it is a time for one’s voice to be heard, it is not an opportunity to push one’s personal agenda. It is not a democratic process where the majority rules or a corporate strategic process. Finally, as has been stated before, it is not a process for only those people who are already involved. It would be easy to adopt one of these mindsets or about the process and come in with an idea of how the discussion might develop. However, by setting aside our own desires, and instead focusing on the movement of the Holy Spirit synodal discussions can play a more fruitful role in the life of our Church.

The synod’s three themes of Communion, Participation, and Mission echo throughout the preparatory documents provided by the Vatican. In the third section of the *Preparatory Document*, we are presented with examples from Scripture that help support the Synodal process and in particular the work that must be done on the local level. One example given (PD 17-21) expounds upon a common image in Scripture, that of the “community scene”. In these scenes Jesus, accompanied by the Apostles, interacts with large crowds, revealing to them the Kingdom of God. The common scene shows how the Church can evangelize, inspired and led by Christ, through the guidance of the Apostles, focusing on the crowd. It explains: “Even in the diversity of the Lord’s calls, their receptive response, the common trait is that faith always emerges as a valuing of people: their plea is heard, their difficulty is helped, their availability is appreciated, their dignity is confirmed by God’s gaze and restored to the community’s recognition.” (PD, 17). This statement should guide our consultative processes; gathering together we are led by the Holy Spirit to participate in dialogue and conversation that will help the Church to truly live out her

Diocese of Richmond
For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission
Participant's Guide

salvific mission. These conversations and listening sessions allow people to voice their experiences, interact with each other, and feel recognized by the Church and the community.

Through all of this we seek to answer the Fundamental Question:

“A synodal Church, in announcing the Gospel, ‘journeys together’: How is this ‘journeying together’ happening today in your particular Church? What steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow in our journeying together?” (PD, 26).

We are provided with ten guiding themes for this endeavor, with each theme providing a multitude of further questions. The Vatican encourages each Diocese to provide a structure to these conversations so that the information gathered can be easily synthesized. To better streamline this process the ten themes have been grouped together according to natural connections and questions have been distilled to address the unique reality of the Diocese of Richmond. When we enter into the discussions, centered on the provided themes, we constantly look to answering the fundamental question.

Diocese of Richmond
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Participant's Guide

Participant Instructions:

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this Synodal process. Your prayerful discernment and involvement will help our local communities and the Diocesan Church to hear a variety of experiences and voices and to present a truly representative document to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

As you begin this undertaking we ask you to surround your reflection and discernment with prayer. We humbly ask the Holy Spirit to guide this moment and to shape our conversations. The in-person Consultations will have periods of prayer throughout the process and we ask you to enter into prayer as you prepare. It is through prayer that we are able to move past our own preferences or frustrations and be able to share in an authentic way our thoughts on the Fundamental Question and the various themes that we are asked to address. Prayer will also help us to engage in true dialogue with those we might disagree with.

When you gather for your Consultation with your local community you'll be assigned into a small group that will discuss a set of questions. These questions will center on the themes of; Communion, Discussion and Dialogue, and Participation and Mission. While you will most likely not have a chance to discuss every one of these areas, they are provided here for your discernment. Please remember the Fundamental Question as you think through the sets of questions, knowing that this is the question we are ultimately called to answer. Space is provided for you to take notes as you work your way through the material.

Communion

Introduction:

This first grouping examines the idea of Communion in a particular way. The themes draw us into discussion on what it means to journey together, listen to each other, and celebrate together. We're prompted to examine who is on the margins and who feels that they have the opportunity to speak and to be heard. The celebration of Mass is turned to as a communal experience and we are led to discuss the experience in our individual communities.

Questions:

How would you characterize your Church community-the people who are journeying together? What persons or groups are left on the margins? How is your parish inviting those on the margins into relationship?

(Consider different demographics, levels of involvement and levels of satisfaction. Also consider methods of outreach and evangelization and the effectiveness of those methods.)

Who does our Church currently listen to? Who is not being listened to? Which groups are less likely to be listened to? Who is being left out of the conversation? (Consider age, social status, race/ethnicity, gender, etc. in your discussion.)

Do our liturgies promote the active participation of all the faithful in the liturgy and encourage them to live lives of faith? Does the homily draw from the Word of God and inspire the faithful? (Who are the people attending and actively participating in Mass? Is the music calling the faithful to deeper prayer in the Mass?)

Notes:

Discussion and Dialogue

Introduction:

For a synodal process that is focused on participatory opportunities for discussion and dialogue this grouping will look into how we accomplish these ideas on a regular basis. We are encouraged to be rooted in the Holy Spirit and guided by courage and a boldness to speak out to those we encounter, whether in the pews or distant from their faith. The Church and society find themselves facing division and conflict on a regular basis. Our ability to share about ourselves and enter into dialogue with others will help to determine how effective we are at spreading the Gospel message.

Questions:

Under what circumstances and in what ways are Catholics communicating in the world today? How does the prevalence of digital and social media affect communication?

(Consider communication at home, at work or online, the ability to have civil conversations while in disagreement, the interaction between clergy and laity, and communication between parish and parishioners.)

How is the Church dialoguing, collaborating, and resolving conflicts among its own members in the Church? (Consider this question on different levels: within your parish, locally, within your deanery, between dioceses, between different ecclesial movements, or globally.)

How is the Church dialoguing, collaborating, and resolving conflicts with members of other Christian denominations, people of other non-Christian religious traditions, and people with no religious affiliation? What have been the fruits of doing so, and what have been the difficulties? (Do you see your community working together with other churches in your area? Is it a member of an ecumenical association or ministry? Are there interfaith service or charitable works being accomplished? Is your community meaningfully interacting with the those that identify as having no connection with religion?)

What areas and issues in the wider society is the Church focused on? Are there areas or issues we need to pay more attention to? (Consider politics, economics, culture, outreach, etc.)

Notes:

Participation and Mission

Introduction:

The third grouping utilizes the remaining two aspects of the Synod's theme: Participation and Mission. All members of the Church are called to participate in the Church's salvific mission, but we must face the reality that many people feel unprepared and ill equipped to live a life of public witness or to serve the Church in leadership roles. The parish plays an important role in forming the faithful for lives of mission and service and to encourage people to utilize their different God given talents to answer God's unique call for them. Those who choose to lead also express an authority in their areas of responsibilities and guide their community through discernment and decision-making processes.

Questions:

How is the parish equipping and empowering people to go out and be on mission for Jesus Christ in their regular lives? What obstacles do the faithful face in living and professing their faith publicly? What opportunities is the parish providing to help the faithful face those obstacles? What is still needed?

(Do the faithful have opportunities to learn how to pray, learn how to discern, and learn how to live as a Christian witness?)

How are lay leaders given responsibility and to what extent do they have the authority to make decisions? (How are consultative groups used? Do lay leaders have the ability to make smaller decisions as well as either making or being part of the discussion for big picture, long-term decisions?)

What opportunities does your parish or community offer to raise people up into leadership positions? How are those in leadership roles formed to make them more capable of journeying together? How do you offer opportunities for those in leadership to listen and engage in dialogue with those they are journeying with?

(Consider formation and leadership opportunities as well as town halls and open forums.)

How are decisions made for the parish or community? (Is there a time of discernment and collaboration and who has authority to make the decisions? Who is engaged in the process? How are those not in leadership positions able to participate?)

Notes:

Fundamental Question

A synodal Church, in announcing the Gospel, 'journeys together': How is this 'journeying together' happening today in your particular Church? What steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow in our journeying together?

Notes:
