

Diocesan Synthesis of Listening Sessions for the  
**SYNOD ON SYNODALITY**

Diocese of Superior, Wisconsin  
Submitted to the USCCB - Spring 2022

**Part One – Overview of the Diocese’s Approach**

When the Synod on Synodality was announced in 2021 our diocesan leadership was several months into a time of intentional prayer and learning, discerning a plan to move our diocese from ‘maintenance mode’ in a more missionary direction. The preparatory documents (*For a Synodal Church* and the *Vademecum*) allowed latitude to tailor the diocese’s efforts to current pastoral efforts and circumstances. Accordingly, we were happy to engage in this synodal process as a means of heightening the call to mission in a way that coincided with this diocesan effort beautifully while also being faithful to the Holy Father’s desire for the Synod.

**General Focus:**

*“The aim is not to overwhelm dioceses and parishes, but rather to integrate the Synodal Process into the life of the local Church in creative ways that promote deepen [sic] communion, fuller participation, and a more fruitful mission.” -- Vademecum for Synod on Synodality, 3.1*

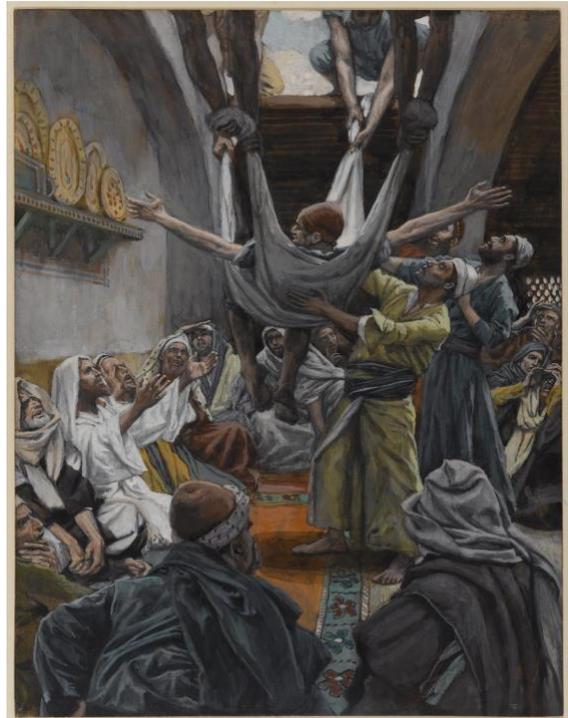
With the principle outlined in the quote above in mind, the Diocese of Superior chose to focus our diocesan consultation by discussing synodality in the context of the urgent task of evangelization. After all, as the *Vademecum* says: “The Church exists to evangelize” (1.4).

The synod preparatory documents speak about three key words: Communion, Participation and Mission. Given our focus on the mission of evangelization, we sought to discuss as a diocese how evangelization relies on both communion and participation. After all, healthy evangelization is an overflow of our communion with God and with the Body of Christ, the Church. Furthermore, all of the baptized are privileged with the invitation to participate fully in this mission, by living out their vocation to holiness and their specific callings to apostolate.

## Scriptural Lens:

*“The objective of the current Synod is to listen, as the entire People of God, to what the Holy Spirit is saying to the Church. We do so by listening together to the Word of God in Scripture and the living Tradition of the Church, and then by listening to one another... -- Vademecum for Synod on Synodality, 1.3.*

Our synodal reflections were centered on Mark 2:1-12. In this passage, four friends bring a fifth man, who is paralyzed, to Jesus for healing. Undeterred by the crowd and the fact that there was no room in the house where Jesus was, they climb up to the roof with the man on the stretcher, tear a hole in the roof and lower their friend to Jesus. These friends serve as a perfect witness for the mission of the Church: recognizing the needs in their local community, knowing how and where to bring their friends to Jesus, and courageously persevering in this vital task. As a diocese, we prayed that, guided by the Holy Spirit, we might take the friends from this passage as our example; and that we might encounter the needs in our communities honestly and openly, build relationships, and live our call to missionary discipleship across the Diocese of Superior by bringing our friends to our Lord Jesus.



James Tissot (French, 1836-1902). *The Paralyzed Man Let Down through the Roof (Le paralytique descendu du toit)*, 1886-1896. Opaque watercolor over graphite on gray wove paper, Image: 9 5/16 x 6 9/16 in. (23.7 x 16.7 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Purchased by public

Whether individuals participated virtually utilizing our online portal or in-person at parish or parish cluster listening sessions, everyone was invited to begin the synodal process in prayer and reflection on this passage. The diocese provided a pre-recorded video, leading participants through a *lectio divina* meditative process. Together then we asked the Holy Spirit to lead us deeper into intimacy with Christ and passion for mission as we reflected on the following questions:

1. What stands out to you about this passage?
2. What do you notice about the four men? How would you describe them?
3. What do you notice about the Lord Jesus in this passage?

This beautiful passage was chosen intentionally to center these conversations on the person of Jesus Christ and on the Mission of making Him known and loved. The diocese believed that if these conversations had to be centered on the saving mission of Jesus and on discerning how we can all more fervently and more fruitfully carry out our own various roles in that mission. Making the heart of these conversations anything else, would have necessarily made them fall short.

Knowing that some are better led into pray through visual meditation, we also encouraged participants to enter into *visio divina* on this passage utilizing a portrait by James Tissot.

### **Synodal Questions:**

Given our focus on evangelization, communion and participation we tailored the questions to help lead our diocese deeper into fruitful mission. To use synodal language, the goal of these questions was to unify, strengthen and build-up the Church. As Catholics we believe that the Church is not a collection of individual members – but the unified Body of Christ. The questions were chosen to help us come together as disciples of Jesus and ask what He is doing in our lives and our communities.

### **Framework:**

A foundational principle of Catholic Social Teaching is the principle of subsidiarity, which teaches that the healthiest solution to any challenge is the most local solution. With that principle in mind, our listening sessions for this Synod as a diocese took place as locally as possible at the parish cluster level. The three stated goals of the Synod are increased communion, participation and mission. All of these areas are most authentically lived out at the parish level.

The diocese designed an extensive handbook to assist parishes and parish clusters in this process. Parish gatherings were designed to open the doors to rich, vulnerable and honest conversations about where the Church's members are thriving and where they are struggling. Accordingly, by holding these sessions in the parish clusters, our hope was that these conversations would lead directly to relationships, resources and renewal. Each parish cluster had the freedom to choose their own time and date, assign facilitators and scribes, arrange a welcoming environment, provide hospitality, and invite participation from all areas of the

parish community and beyond. We were pleased that almost every parish in the diocese hosted such sessions and submitted reflections to the diocese.

Following the local gatherings, Bishop Powers asked each cluster to select a few delegates to attend regional gatherings to share about their parish's experience with him, chancery staff and delegates from other parishes.

Throughout this whole process there was also an online portal open for anyone in the diocese to participate as fully as possible in our diocesan consultation. The portal featured videos from Bishop Powers and other chancery staff. We were very pleased with the volume of participation, with 183 distinct participants.

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## Part Two – What We Heard

There was a wide range of feedback that our prayerful consultation elicited at the parish gatherings, regional gatherings and in our diocesan online portal. The following items that were heard appear in no particular order. They were items that came up frequently enough to call our attention to them.

**Demographic Decline** – Being a very rural diocese, there are fewer and fewer young people staying or choosing to move to our parish communities. This has been noted and reflected on especially by the older generations. Many wonder what we are doing wrong or what we can do to change this. It is recommended that we need better catechesis, yet it is also voiced that strong catechesis is not supported by the families of the young people. There are many faithful teachers and catechists within the diocese. They work tirelessly to teach the faith, not just the rules, but also the mission – *to go therefore and make disciples*. Sometimes the mission gets confused or carried out in the wrong order. Some tend to think the mission is to “change the world”, but the first step is to know Christ ourselves and then help others to know him.

**Value of Community** – All of our parishes believe in a community of faith. They all recognize the church as a place of hospitality, welcome and hope. But, somehow, there needs to be more community within the Church. We need to provide service to and help people in all stages of their lives. Children and youth need to be led by strong mentors – whether peers, young adults or older adults. Many want to put all their effort into catechesis of children and youth, but at the same time recognize the parents are not leading and supporting their children in faith.

Many parishes recognize that their focus needs to be on the adults, which includes parents. Young adults need other young adults to mentor them through life's struggles. Parents and families need to feel the parish is a community of support. Retirees, widows and widowers, those who have lost someone, and the elderly are hungry for formation and a community they can turn to.

**Importance of Service** – The active generations in our churches view faith as lived out in service. There are numerous community service opportunities that many within the parish participate in: clothing and food drives, community dinners, pregnancy help centers, hospice help, homebound ministry, homeless shelters and thrift stores. There are also many service and community opportunities within our parishes – breakfasts, prayer chains, stations of the cross, potlucks, and liturgical ministries. Unfortunately, many specifically Catholic service opportunities of the past, such as hospitals and schools, are now carried out by secular groups. Our churches not only have lost groups to conduct service, but they have also lost the sense of what it means to do service in and for Jesus Christ.

**Need for Healing: The Reality of Brokenness and Division** – There are many wounded people in our parishes. When these wounds are ignored or perceived rules are not attended to, people fall away or distrust the Church. Divorced individuals sometimes feel unwelcome or even condemned. There needs to be a clearer path for healing and reconciliation for their full participation. Families are divided. They are dealing with divisions, trauma, children leaving the faith, responses to COVID, political divisions, etc. One big issue for some is the persisting scandal of the clergy sexual abuse crisis. To bring Jesus's healing power, the Church needs not just programs, but individuals trained to walk with these individuals and families on this difficult journey. Many still think that the priest is the only one that can do pastoral ministry, but as our priests get extended further and further, the need for vibrant, deeply Catholic lay apostolate becomes ever clearer. As one parish report stated, "People are lost, the world is lost. There is tremendous need for Jesus' healing power in our small, rural communities." To help us embrace Jesus' healing power, another parish stated, "We need to return to the basics of our faith: what we do and why we do it."

**Ministry to Individuals Identifying as LGBTQ** – This topic came up a fair amount and in very disparate ways. For some, one of the biggest wounds is the perception that the Church judges and excludes individuals. The Church is seen as ostracizing those who live sexual lifestyles outside the Church's teachings. Some feel that the Church does not listen to the needs of those who identify as LGBTQ+ or their families. For many others, the wound spoken of in this area is a perception that the Church is watering down its teachings and bowing to cultural pressures instead of teaching and living the truth in love.

**Scandal of Division** – Some view the leadership of the Church throughout the country and the world as not being unified. Many of the laity struggle with the hierarchy because of these perceived divisions and inconsistent messages. Some noted that there does not appear to be enough transparency. Due to this disunity, the Church is seen as dishonest and hypocritical.

**Availability of Clergy** – The vast majority of parishioners are very thankful for the priests and deacons serving in the diocese. The gift of international priests has been a blessing to allow our parishes to continue to offer the sacraments. However, within our diocese, the priests and deacons are not available. They have very limited opportunities to visit with and get to know the parishioners because of the need to depart for another parish to celebrate Mass. The laity want more opportunities to be with their leaders - to be in community with them. They want to see reconciliation and Mass times offered during convenient times for the working class.

**Depth of Discipleship** – Many want to be led deeper into the faith. They want more adult opportunities to pray and be formed in the faith. They would like to hear homilies that address today's problems and guide them to live deeply as disciples of Christ in the world. The majority of participants specifically said that they want the truth to be spoken, not watered down.

**Struggles with the Concept of Sin** – There were also some who noted a struggle with the topic of sin, stating that they have a hard time reconciling judgment and sin with love and mercy.

**Lay Leadership Opportunities** – Some proposed that one solution to struggles with the Church hierarchy could be involving the laity more in the running of the churches. Giving the laity more prominent responsibilities and roles with the life of the Church appears to be a longing and desire of many. This desire also included, from a very small portion of the responses, seeing priests be able to be married and women become deacons.

**Return to Traditional Practices and Heightened Reverence** – Another common thread amongst some of the responses was a desire to see the Church return to more traditional practices. The message of more relevant, powerful and reverent liturgies was a theme throughout the majority of the responses. It was stated by many that we need to re-emphasize the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Some asked for greater access to the extraordinary form of the Mass.

**Universal Call to Holiness and Mission** – When asked “What steps do you hear the Holy Spirit asking us to take to deepen our commitment to the Church’s mission?”, all the parishes took to heart the need to discern God’s will, attract families, reach out to those in need and welcome

people back after COVID. The faithful of our diocese recognize the need to make the faith an important part of individual and family life. We may have different ideas and suggestions on how that can be done, but prayer and listening to God's direction is driving the path forward.

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### **Part Three – Conclusion**

The overwhelming majority of respondents were very positive about the future of our diocesan Church. Especially at the regional gatherings, the sense from the parish delegates was that there was a hunger for leadership from the diocese. One delegate stood up and said, 'We are ready to do whatever it takes. We just need some direction!' Another positive note was the excellent work being done to promote priestly vocations in our diocese. The faithful are deeply encouraged by our increased number of seminarians. Others noted the vibrancy of youth ministry programming through things like Extreme Faith Camp and *Totus Tuus*, which are thriving apostolates to children and teenagers that continue to grow each year.

The preparatory documents noted that the desired outcome of this process is not so much the creation of a document as the creation of a culture of listening. Many of the parishes' listening sessions were very fruitful in this regard. Furthermore, the only complaint at the regional listening sessions was that they were too short. To this end, Bishop Powers has frequently voiced his hope that this process teaches us to be more collegial in our approach, while always being faithful to who we are as Catholics in practice and teaching.