



Diocese of Fresno Synod on Synodality Synthesis Report



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HISTORY, DEMOGRAPHICS AND THE UNEXPECTED SURPRISE

On behalf of our presbyterate, parishes and the many individuals who participated in the **Synod on Synodality**, I wish to express my gratitude and thanksgiving for this fruitful endeavor that was marked with an abundance of blessings. These blessings are not just for the current times in which we live, but more importantly will bear an abundance of good fruit in the future as our parishes and the diocese responds to the voices of our families, youth, elderly, and those who feel separated from the Church. In my pastoral travels throughout the Diocese these past months, many have shared expectations and concerns about the purpose of the Synod at their local parish community, the diocese, or the Church at large. They wonder if their thoughts and opinions really matter. The goal of this synthesis is to provide a report from the people and to authentically express how the Holy Spirit moved within each gathering as many shared their experiences, joys, sorrows, hopes, what it means to be a part of the Church now and in the future.

It was discerned that offering the reader a historical perspective of this vast territory that makes up the Diocese of Fresno would be not only helpful, but insightful. Located in the geographical center of the state, California has a rich Catholic history extending to 1769 when it was a part of the vast Diocese of Guadalajara, Mexico. In 1770 the first diocesan records were kept by the arrival of St. Junipero Serra, a Franciscan Missionary, and his companions who evangelized among the numerous Native American tribes of Alta California. In 1827-1846, the Mexican government claimed Alto California as their own, closed the missions and nationalized the Church's property. Yet, the Catholic identity of many throughout this vast territory remained strong. In the mid-1800's California experienced a large migration of settlers seeking the lure of gold or land with the hope to cultivate the land for farming or for the raising of farm animals. Many were European immigrants in search of a climate like their

homeland. They brought with them their Catholic faith and an eagerness to build a church to worship and gather in. The first Roman Catholic Church built in the current Diocese of Fresno was in 1857 in Mariposa County, soon to be followed by the building of ten more parishes by 1900, and twenty-one more Churches and six Missions built between 1905-1925. The Diocese of Fresno was established in 1967 after previously belonging to the Diocese of Monterey-Fresno from 1922-1967, and the Diocese of Monterey and Los Angeles from 1858-1922. Today the Diocese of Fresno has 87 parishes church's and 46 missions.

The Diocese of Fresno encompasses nearly 36,000 square miles with a total population of nearly three million people with over a third who claim to be Roman Catholic. The Diocese of Fresno has been populated by a diversity of cultures and races from its' earliest day and it continues to see an influx of persons from Latin America, Asia (China, Cambodia, Vietnam, Philippines, Korea, India), and Africa (primarily, Nigeria), bringing their unique cultural experiences and Catholic religious traditions with them enriching our parishes and the many ministries that have been developed throughout the Diocese.

Currently, the Diocese of Fresno has 134 active priests with a ratio of 1 priest to 7,599 parishioners. This is a challenge for many of our priests and the communities they serve often without the facilities that can accommodate the pastoral and sacramental needs of a large parish. We have 88 permanent deacons assisting our pastors/administrators and are blessed with the presence of 63 religious women working in our Catholic schools, parishes, and with the migrant communities. In addition, there is a thriving cloistered monastery for religious women within our diocesan boundaries.

In researching the demographics of the eight counties that make up the diocese as reported by the 2020 US Census Bureau it was very surprising to discover that the average age of the populace was 36.4 years, which is considerably younger than who is seen in the pews on a regular basis. One county, known for its large number of retirees has an average population age of 51.7 years and the median age of the other 7 counties was 34.4 years of age, with 15.49% of the total population of all 8 counties that are over the age of 65 years. The average parish demographics do not resemble these numbers at all, in fact the opposite may be closer to reality. The number of parishioners over the age of 50 is the majority and the number of those under the age of 40 are the

minority. This particular demographic will be an extremely important consideration in assessing how the diocese and our parishes are currently meeting the needs of our young children, high schoolers, college-aged, young adults, and families with young children. This particular demographic is an extremely important consideration in assessing how the Diocese is now and in the future meeting the needs of our young children, high schoolers, college-aged, young adults, and families with young children, especially with regards to pastoral planning, development /implementation of ministries to evangelize, catechize, and building stronger faith communities all while encouraging the over 50 year old's to engage and integrate their faith, wisdom, and life experiences that can benefit this much younger populace.

Other notable statistics are foreign born population is 17.8%, with 89% who are US citizens. Average of reported races are: Hispanic 46.33%; White (non-Hispanic) 40%; Asian 4.7%; and Black or African American alone is 3.12%; and 3.3% reported to having two or more races. It has been the diocese's experience that our Hispanic population is significantly over 50% with many mono-lingual Spanish speakers or those with Spanish as their first language. These statistics appear to be in accordance with what is visible in our parishes.

THE DIOCESAN SYNODAL JOURNEY

The Synod process began with Mass on the Feast of Christ the King in November 2021 and all 87 parishes were encouraged to speak about the Synod and extend an invitation to their communities to get involved either as a facilitator, notetaker, or as a participant. Numerous online training sessions were offered to equip those who wished to take a leadership role and resources were developed for parish use on the diocesan website. Most of the listening sessions were affiliated with a parish or a cluster of parishes within a vicariate. A few special interest groups met, including victims of violent crimes, youth groups, lay organizations, and a local Assembly of God Church who was very thankful for the invitation to participate. An electronic link was created to receive individual responses specifically targeting high school youth and college aged young adults and those who felt disaffiliated or alienated from the Church.

Synod resources were available in English and Spanish, and the Synod questions were available in English, Spanish, Vietnamese, and Portuguese. A few listening groups began to meet very early in the process, with most of the listening

groups meeting March through May. The parish/group responses were due to the Synod Committee on June 1, 2022. It is estimated that 2300-2500 individuals and 44 parishes participated in the Synod listening sessions. Overall, the consensus of those who participated in the Synod process felt that this endeavor was positive, worthwhile, and a long overdue. Many expressed a desire to continue this type of process for the good of their parish.

MOVEMENT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT – JOURNEYING AND LISTENING

In reading the responses it became apparent that the Holy Spirit had a significant presence throughout this process, most notably in the repetition of certain themes, thoughts, and feelings. One noted comment was a sense of gratitude for the safe space that was created to share thoughts, opinions, hopes, disappointments and sorrows, without judgment or prejudice, even when thoughts conflicted or were the opposite of someone else's. Some responses focused on what was happening at their local parish, while others looked more broadly to the diocesan, state, national, or world-wide perspective. A common theme expressed was the universality of our faith and that what happens at the highest levels affects their experience of faith and what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ and a member of His Church. Many placed importance on relationships with each other, their priests, bishop, and the necessity of a lived faith with respect and adherence to the whole Truth, all while evangelizing and inviting others to come as they are. Inclusivity and welcoming did not mean watering down the faith or changing Church doctrine and dogma but meant taking the time to meet people where they are and welcoming them as Christ would. The Church is open to all who wish to encounter Jesus Christ and His Church. Just as many expressed a feeling of welcome as those who did not feel welcomed. Those who felt welcomed appear to be those who volunteer or participate in the social or spiritual activities offered at the parish. Those who do not feel welcomed were not engaged outside of Mass attendance.

In summary, there seems to be two definitions of Church: those who say that the Church does indeed journey together with those present at Mass and who participate in the community, and others who do not feel invited to be part of the community; especially the poor, those who do not speak English, divorced and separated, teens, young adults the elderly, and the LGBTQ+ community. As one respondent stated, "listening is the first step, requiring an open heart and mind, without prejudices."

SPEAKING OUT IN COURAGE AND BOLDNESS

Another frequent theme was the need to improve the communication between the pastor and his congregation. Many felt that there is no avenue or means to dialogue with their pastor or the office staff about their concerns, needs or thoughts. Many feel that they have no input and if they speak up, they are seen as a complainer, and are shut down. Most want to know how decisions are made and who has input in the making of decisions; is it the parish staff, or the pastor? Many parishes mentioned they do not have a pastoral council and that if they did it would be a good opportunity for the community to have a voice and to be heard. Poor communication was a frequent concern mentioned in parishes that do not offer ministries for spiritual growth or social-service groups outside of serving as a lector, usher, or an Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion. Many of the respondents want bible study programs, retreats, guest speakers, social-service groups, and their priest to talk more to them about deepening their knowledge of their faith so that they may have a better understanding of what it means to be Catholic. As one participant said, "I want to know that it is important to him that I go to heaven. I want someone who genuinely is wanting to shepherd me and help me grow in holiness." For those parishes that have separate language ministries, it appears to create a lack of unity among the community and can create feelings of favoritism depending on the language the priest is most comfortable speaking. The desire to have further listening sessions was mentioned repeatedly and was thought to be a positive means for new parish growth and vitality. Parishes that have a pastoral council, faith growth opportunities, or have social -service groups to participate had a significant higher level of satisfaction in their pastor and feeling that they have a voice and are listened to! There needs to be a better way of communicating, "I may not agree, but I hear you." We must find ways that welcomes the hard questions from those who left the church. Those parishes that have a parish council, bible studies and other opportunities to participate in the life of the Church were noticeably complimentary of their pastor. Good communication between priest and laity is essential for the overall level of satisfaction in one's personal relationship with God and with their parish community.

CELEBRATING AND PRAYING

An overwhelming response stressed the importance of wanting more prayer, individually and communally. The desire to enter more deeply into the liturgical

celebrations of the Church with a better understanding of what is happening was a frequent theme. Also, a desire to wanting adult faith formation opportunities. The diversity of cultural devotional practices, such as novenas, processions, holy hours, adoration, etc., were mentioned as important means of encouraging, supporting, and nurturing one's personal faith as well as strengthening the communal relationship with each other. However, since there are different devotions, it was voiced that this sometimes causes disunity. In a community that prefers praise and worship with song and others prefers silence before the Blessed Sacrament, there is a need for better communication between all. Often mentioned was the need for well-trained and educated leadership for the youth and young adults that will hopefully keep them in the Church, rather than leaving after Confirmation. The youth want more than a social experience and they hunger for an authentic encounter with Christ and His Church. Many are drawn to the Latin Mass and want to be able to participate without restrictions imposed on them. The last few years, the pandemic appears to have caused a greater disconnect among parish communities and lessened the number of persons who were formally engaged in volunteer activities as compared to the present day. Many parishes remarked that they have not experienced the same level of engagement or participation as was noted pre-pandemic. Many communities are brainstorming on how to revive their parish community through outreach and evangelization.

CO-RESPONSIBILITY IN THE MISSION OF PARTICIPATION

There is a need for understanding more fully what evangelization is and how to reach out to others. For example, the Diocese of Fresno has a significant population of those (migrant workers, undocumented individuals) who do not have some of the necessities of life such as medical care, food, adequate housing, etc., and to evangelize is not just to meet their spiritual needs, but also to acknowledge and assist with their basic needs. We need to reach out to those among us who needs help so that we can help each other in the journey. We are brothers and sisters journeying together.

Respondents from parishes that have ministries serving the marginalized, the homeless, food shelters, the homebound, migrant communities, etc., expressed more satisfaction and belonging, than parishes that do not have similar ministries. Those involved in some service ministry expressed that they are heard by parish leadership and each other.

Synodality is at the service of the Church's mission in which all her members are called to participate. We are challenged to grow in life giving faith. The Spirit of God is moving and we as a Church encourage everyone to accept the call to the mission of Jesus to become one. Religion is not a private matter, it is communal, however conversion which is personal and needed must be supported by the prayers of the community. Invitation and welcoming to others must be sincere and authentic.

DIALOGUE IN THE CHURCH AND SOCIETY

One of the most noted responses was the need for the people to feel that their priests are intentionally shepherding them; educating them about the sacraments, scripture, prayer, and genuinely caring about their growth in holiness to become saints. The isolating effects of the pandemic affected the sense of connectiveness with their parish and for many negatively impacted their faith. "Does anyone care? Is anyone there to help?" A profound sense of being forgotten and invisible affected many, especially the homebound, those suffering from mental illness, the handicapped, the elderly, and families of young children and teens. Parish offices appeared to be closed for an indefinite period during the first year of the pandemic and in some cases, no one could be reached in times of crisis or emergencies. Parishes that found ways to stay connected and offer help during the shutdown felt the gratitude of the people by their tithing and financially supporting the Church. One of the effects of the pandemic is that many parishes feel that they must do more to reach out to those in need and that ministries can and should be formed to meet these needs, which in turn has the potential to revive their Church and community! The laity do not expect their pastors to do all the work, but they do want their pastor to model, educate, motivate, and provide leadership for the kind of ministries that build up their parish community and the Kingdom of God. The people are plentiful and willing to move forward with leadership from their pastor.

Many felt that is the responsibility of every parish to adequately publicize opportunities to get involved or encourage participation for upcoming liturgical, para-liturgical or social events at the Church. Having this information is more likely to increase one's sense of invitation and participation that will build up the community. Many want to get involved but note that the current level of advertising is less than successful.

OTHER CHRISTIAN CONFESSIONS

An Assembly of God Church was invited by our Diocesan Retreat Center to participate in the Synod and thankfully they accepted the invitation. Their responses were not dissimilar to what Catholic's were sharing. One difference was that invitation was followed by the expectation that one would participate in the community of believers. Those who did not feel a sense of belonging mentioned that it was due to their differences (physical looks, politics, or being a young family, or a person with mental illness or special needs, having different cultures, languages, traditions, etc., that contributed to this lack of belonging and acceptance. The Church should be 'like a battlefield hospital that reaches out to bring healing to those who are wounded and suffering.' Focusing on the truth, not diluting the Gospel message is necessary. This denomination stressed service to others and living a life of committed discipleship to Jesus Christ.

Some respondents felt that weddings, funerals, baptisms, Quinceañera's, or parish festivals have the potential for dialogue about what the Catholic Church or the community has to offer other Christian denominations; but most didn't feel comfortable carrying an in-depth conversation if the questions were above their comfort level or knowledge about Church teaching. Many others remarked that their parish does not have any interfaith dialogue.

As one respondent stated, "the Spirit of God is calling us to unity and to the table of dialogue and service together."

AUTHORITY AND PARTICIPATION

Many listening groups did not answer this question and some showed confusion, not knowing to what it referred. Those who did respond felt that there should be a place for the laity to have some say in the decisions that affect the community, rather than reading about it in the bulletin. Some felt that the disconnect between identifying a participatory Church and implementing a syndodal Church is palpable. Lay leadership and participation in a parish council would benefit the building up of the parish community with better collaboration, communication and promoting inclusivity. Transparency is vital to healthy, effective communication, participation and building of community.

DISCERNING AND DECIDING IN A SYNODAL STYLE

In general, our Church needs to help people understand what discernment is; that it is not a consensus, but a process that flows from the promptings of and obedience to the Spirit through prayer. This must be modeled by the pastor, staff, and all lay leadership. The people want their pastors to provide this spiritual leadership and be authentic, dedicated shepherds whose presence is visible in the community, especially when decisions are made by the pastor and/or his staff. Young people can benefit by seeing others modeling prayerful discernment. The youth are the present Church and the Church of tomorrow.

A synodal Church is a listening Church and this deliberate and intentional activity appears to be what the people are asking for. They want to participate in the mission of the Church in all the various means available to them as a vibrant, faith filled community, providing service to those who are marginalized or have chosen to be separated from the life of the Church. The people want to grow in knowledge and service, lived out in truth, love and mercy in relationship with their pastor and each other.

LIFELONG FORMATION IN SYNODALITY

There is a need a hunger among the respondents for more opportunities to grow spiritually through bible studies, small faith sharing groups and adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. The need for more than just attending Mass was important. The desire to learn and to grow in faith was a significant and repeated theme among the respondents. Some mentioned, that it feels like people are moving further away from the Church because it does not grab their attention or helps them to see it is important to their lives. Parents must show that their faith is more important than any curricular activities that their children want to participate in. The young and the elderly were two age groups of people who were identified as “not heard”, unwelcomed, and not invited. Yet, both groups have so much to offer any faith filled community. Wisdom, new ideas, creativity, maturity, patience, eagerness, vitality, experience... all virtues and attributes that are untapped reservoirs of gifts that has the potential to animate and bless a community.

CONCLUSION

The Synod committee offers these closing thoughts. The Synod listening process was a font of blessings...if only because it gave people the opportunity to come together

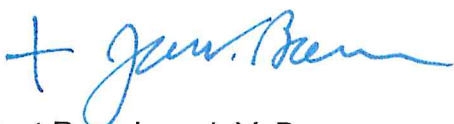
in a safe place, to speak among people they do not know, sharing and listening to each other about what it means to be a member of the Church, all while acknowledging and holding fast to revealed truth. They expressed the great desire to be an engaged, active participant in the mission of the Church to bring the good news to those they see as separated from the life of grace and mercy. They recognize that they may have inadequacies in faith formation and want to better their understanding of the faith to further the synodal journey of accompaniment with others and with their families.

The concerns that were elucidated in this report, such as wanting better communication between their pastor, and/or wanting parish pastoral and ministerial opportunities is not a complaint, as much as it is a desire to have a mutually healthy, life-giving relationship with their shepherd and with each other for the good of the parish. The desire for unity, even while respecting diversity in cultural, racial, life-style or societal status was profound. The Holy Spirit appears to be moving mightily in the hearts and minds of those who participated, and it would be prudent of our pastors and the diocesan pastoral offices to continue the momentum started by the Synod to animate, revive, and form parish communities that have the potential to initiate transformation, conversion and building up of the Kingdom of God.

The respondents mentioned their profound gratitude for their clergy and especially for providing the sacraments to them. The Eucharist is deeply meaningful and a cherished sacrament and the desire for more adoration time was frequently mentioned. The respondents recognized that there are wounded, hurting, disengaged individuals in their families and their parish's and they want to be better equipped and formed to be the hands, feet, and voice of Christ to others.

May the Holy Spirit fill the hearts of all God's children within the Diocese of Fresno and may God's love and mercy bless us all with an abundance of all divine graces. Amen.

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Joseph V. Brennan". The signature is written in a cursive style with a cross at the beginning.

Most Rev. Joseph V. Brennan