



Thursday, March 28, 2024
Holy Thursday

Synod Interim Stage: Synthesis of the Consultation for the Archdiocese of Milwaukee

Introduction

In response to the request of our Holy Father, Pope Francis' call for additional consultation during the Interim Stage of the International Synod of Bishops on the theme of synodality, Archbishop Jerome E. ListECKI requested two consultation sessions with the People of God in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee. This period of local consultation was held in Lent 2024, in communion with dioceses around the world.

The Archdiocese of Milwaukee is comprised of ten counties in southeastern Wisconsin, covering 4,758 square miles and a population of 2,354,807, of which 533,962 are registered as Catholics at 189 parishes. Due to the geographic size of the archdiocese, with significant urban, suburban and rural populations, along with the limited timeframe of the Interim Stage consultation, two sessions were held: the first in the north central area, and the second in the south central area. Invitations, along with promotional materials (bulletin announcements, pulpit announcements, social media posts and communication resources) were sent to all priests, deacons, religious brothers and sisters, and lay parish staff, including bulletin editors and those responsible for parish communications.

The Consultation Process

The Archdiocese of Milwaukee utilized the *Conversations in the Spirit* methodological process for the listening sessions. Participants were asked to spend time in prayer, preferably before the Blessed Sacrament, calling upon the Holy Spirit. Additionally, participants were asked to read Romans 12:1-8 prior to the session.

Each session began with hospitality and fellowship, followed by a very short presentation by the facilitator, which covered:

- What is a Synod?
- The timeline of the Synodal process, and where this consultation was situated
- The questions for discernment
- An overview of the methodology, *Conversations in the Spirit*

Participants were seated at round tables, with a maximum of eight people per group. After the orientation to the listening session, those present entered into an extended period of prayer, during which they shared in five rounds of listening and discussion:

Five rounds of listening and discussion were held:

- Round One: Where have I seen or experienced successes – and distresses – within the Church’s structure(s)/organization/leadership/life that encourage or hinder the mission?
- Round One A: What word, phrase or sentence did I hear in Round One?
- Round Two: Where have I experienced, or witnessed, ways in which Church structures, leadership or life encourage and foster our shared mission?
- Round Two A: What word, phrase or sentence did I hear in Round Two?
- Round Three: What did I hear today? Where did I sense the Holy Spirit moving in our sharing today? What is needed to help all the baptized respond to our shared call to proclaim the Gospel and live as a community of love and mercy in Christ?

Approximately 200 people attended. Most people were lay; five priests, a dozen deacons, and a notably sized group of religious sisters also participated in these two sessions. By and large, attendees were older, and of European-American descent. The vast majority represented a small number of parish communities. Over half of the attendees did not participate in the first round of consultation in Spring of 2022.

Key Themes from the Archdiocese of Milwaukee’s Interim Stage Consultation Process:

The feedback received from the listening sessions during the Interim Stage Consultation Process closely mirrored the feedback received in the Consultation Process during the Spring of 2022.

One | The Role of Women in the Church

The role of women in the Church was a significant theme in every small group. By and large, participants commented that the Church’s structures impede women, and hinder the mission of the Church to proclaim the Gospel. Some lamented the inability of women to preach at weekend Masses in lieu of a homily. While some – but not all – participants called for the ordination of women and married men, most expressed the desire to see women serve in leadership roles and have a place in decision-making.

Those gathered spoke favorably about their experiences with women who serve in leadership roles in their parishes, in roles such as Pastoral Associates and Parish Directors (Parish Life Coordinators, Canon 517.2). Prayers, devotions and scholarly articles written by women, as well as formational and spiritual talks given by women add to the richness of the Church. Local religious orders of women were highlighted for their contributions and faithful service to the Church. Many were delighted to see women serve as voting members at the First Session of the Ordinary Synod of Bishops in October, 2023.

Two | Clericalism, and the Formation of Clergy

Along with the role of women, clericalism and the formation of clergy was a concern raised in every small group. Overwhelmingly participants expressed concern that clergy are returning to what is seen as “pre-Vatican II.” Generational and theological divides were evident in the small group conversations, as older members of the faithful recall Catholic culture and Catholic liturgy prior to the Second Vatican Council, and see the Traditional Latin Mass, the celebration of Mass ad orientum, renewed devotions and a growing renewal of Eucharistic Adoration as movement away from the reforms of Vatican II. Apprehensions were expressed about seminarian formation, and perceptions of how it hinders the mission of the Church.

At the same time, many expressed pride in our local seminary, St. Francis de Sales, which is forming a record number of seminarians. Many of our parishes benefit from teaching-parish relationships, and enjoy accompanying seminarians through their formational journey to Holy Orders. Participants expressed their gratitude to Archbishop ListECKI and our seminary rector for their leadership, and called for a renewed emphasis in seminary formation on working collaboratively with the laity, especially women.

The sins of clergy sexual abuse continue to cause pain and suffering for both those who were victimized, but also for the community.

Last, those gathered shared concerns about the patterns or occasions when clergy misuse their authority, including when:

- New priests/pastors do not make adequate efforts to come to know their communities, but instead impose their personal liturgical preferences, which sometimes radically differ from the community's traditions and practice
- Priests seem to focus more on communicating "rules" than expressing pastoral care and concern for the individual(s) they encounter
- Priests avoid difficult conversations or conflict
- Priests struggle with mental health or addiction issues, and the concerns expressed by the laity do not seem to be addressed
- Priests and bishops disagree with Church teaching, causing scandal and confusion.

Three | The Future of the Church: Children, Youth, Young Adults and Families

Many participants expressed concern about the dwindling number of children, youth, young adults and families they see at weekend celebrations of the Mass. Decreasing numbers of children and youth attend Catholic schools or parish religious education programs.

The Archdiocese of Milwaukee is blessed with 101 Catholic schools, including 13 high schools. Hard work has been done to assist some schools in forming systems to make best use of resources. Participants recognize the benefits to systems, and also recognize that there are challenges, as schools may lose their unique gifts.

Quality faith formation attractive to families, such as family-centered catechesis, and young adult programming such as Cor Jesu and Brew City Catholic have born fruit in the Archdiocese. Participants recognized that more effort is needed, on the parish level, to invite people back to Church, and to ensure those who have fallen away find a warm welcome and engagement when they return.

Four | The Sacramental and Liturgical Life of the Church

Over and over, those gathered emphasized the centrality of the Eucharist in their lives, and the importance of participation in the sacramental and liturgical life of the Church. Some embraced the recent Eucharistic Revival in the United States, and were pleased to see a return to Eucharistic Adoration and other devotions. Others expressed concern that these efforts were taking attention away from the Church's social mission and other contemporary concerns.

Structures that hinder the Church's mission, according to participants, include when parishes "gatekeep" the sacraments, holding up burdensome, unreasonable or lengthy requirements for sacramental preparation. Those gathered spoke of the need for access to the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick, and most especially access to the Sacraments of the Dying for themselves and their loved ones.

Parishes of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee reflect a diversity of cultures and religions expression, from the celebration of the Traditional Latin Mass to the celebration of Mass that reflections a plethora of cultural backgrounds and languages to the celebration of Mass with contemporary liturgical music. Participants expressed that the Church's mission is hindered when limits are placed on celebrations of Mass that are orthodox and meet the needs of the community, and when liturgical abuses are not addressed.

Homiletics was raised in almost every group. Some commented on the excellent preaching by their priests and deacons that is grounded in Scripture and Church teaching, engages the listeners, and leaves a message for them to reflect on throughout the week. The lack of good homiletics hinders the Church's mission greatly. Participants have experienced dry, boring, poorly planned homilies with lackluster delivery. They see poor homiletic reflection as a barrier to the Church's mission, and note that people are leaving the Church to be "fed" by sermons in nondenominational churches, where services are perceived as more vibrant. Participants called for a renewed effort to train clergy in the art and practice of homiletics, and to create a process of evaluation to give feedback.

There was agreement across all groups that well-planned liturgy – including homilies and music – planned in advance, and celebrated with care, are a priority for the Church's mission.

Five | Polarization in the Church and in the World

Participants recognized the increased division and polarization happening in both the Church and the world. People and groups who hold differing views and ideologies seem to no longer be able to converse civilly, listen to one another, or share ideas. In an era of "soundbites" and limited attention spans, people are quick to jump to conclusions. We see increase in the demonization and dehumanization of those who have different opinions or beliefs.

This polarization, particularly when politics spills into religion, divides the Church and tears apart the fabric of family life. Polarization is particularly difficult during times of civil elections, making it increasingly difficult to share the Church's social teachings on Faithful Citizenship and the formation of conscience.

Rising Christian Nationalism, where Catholics and other Christians seek to fuse religion with political ideologies, is a growing concern. Participants discussed the effects of Christian Nationalism on ecumenism, and on minorities, noting the damage particularly to our Muslim and Jewish brothers and sisters.

Some participants commented on the importance of ecumenical relationships, growing in knowledge and understanding of other faith traditions, and working together to address social issues.

Most participants commented on the power of the *Conversations in the Spirit* methodology, and how the structure used helped them to listen more deeply to one another, and allow space for ideas to be shared. They expressed that the Holy Spirit was palpable in the table conversations, and expressed hope that this very process might be a gift that the Church could offer to the world.

Six | The Lay Faithful

Many conversations centered on the role of the lay faithful in Church structures, but also in proclaiming the Good News to the World. The Holy Spirit breathes life into the world when the gifts and skills of the lay faithful are called forth and utilized in the Church. The very mission of the Church, to go forth into the world (MT 28:19-20), happens when the lay faithful live and share their faith in their workplace, their families, in the public square, and in other areas of their lives.

To this end, participants called for a renewed emphasis on adult formation, with a focus on Scripture, Church teaching, and evangelization. The lack of quality adult formation hinders the lay faithful from living their call to make disciples, both in the world and in their families.

Seven | The Church's Social Mission

The Church's social mission is a shining example of Church structures that assist the Church's mission. Those gathered spoke highly of the human concerns and outreach ministries in their parishes. Group after group highlighted such local ministries as the St. Vincent de Paul Society, Kinship Community Food Center, Capuchin Community Services, food pantries, homeless shelters and pregnancy resource centers as treasures of the Church. Participants called for renewed catechesis of Catholic Social Teaching.

Participants expressed concern for those who may feel marginalized in the Church – people of color, Native peoples, the separated or divorced, the disabled, those struggling with mental illness, immigrants and refugees, those with autism spectrum or related disorders. The lack of pastoral care and barriers to full participation in the sacramental life in the Church were noted.

Some expressed that they feel the Church's teaching, particularly related to LGBTQIA+, is "out of touch" or "backwards," and see this as a key point where the Church's structure – teachings, lack of pastoral care – impedes the Church's mission. Others expressed support of the Church's teaching on human sexuality, and concern that the Church is being unduly influenced by prevailing cultural ideas. Most were in agreement that the LGBTQIA+ community is in need of greater outreach and pastoral care.

Conclusion

The process of consultation for the Synod Interim Stage offered a testament to the faith and deep concern for the Church's mission within the Archdiocese of Milwaukee. Through prayerful reflection and open dialogue, participants offered valuable insights and perspectives on various aspects of Church life and governance.

The *Conversations in the Spirit* methodology allowed for fruitful conversations on critical themes such as the role of women in the Church, clericalism, the formation of clergy, Sacramental and liturgical life, polarization, the lay faithful and the Church's social mission. Discussion highlighted both challenges and opportunities for renewal and growth. The recognition of the Holy Spirit's presence in our midst and the desire to share the gifts of our faith with the world are sources of inspiration and hope.

We pray for our Holy Father, Pope Francis, for our bishops, and for all of the delegates who will gather this fall for the second session of the Ordinary Synod. May the Synod help us listen to the presence of the Holy Spirit, be responsive to the signs of the times, and be faithful in its witness to the Gospel.

Respectfully submitted,

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