



# DIOCESE OF ARLINGTON

## DIOCESAN SYNODAL SYNTHESIS REPORT



The faithful of the Diocese of Arlington enthusiastically welcomed the call to help prepare for the 2023 General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops by engaging in local synodal gatherings. People from all walks of life participated prayerfully and wholeheartedly in many synodal listening sessions, during which common concerns emerged, and from which a desire for—and a commitment to—continued synodality was affirmed, with faithfulness to the Lord, in the heart of the Church.

### **INTRODUCTION: THE SYNODAL EXPERIENCE**

The diocese in general, and its many institutions in particular—parishes, schools, charitable organizations, and other communities—used all the means and media at their disposal to convoke the faithful and those on the margins to scores of in-person listening sessions, at which all were invited to share their thoughts on the Church’s experience of journeying together. Every listening session took place in an atmosphere of prayer and of mutual collaboration, respect, and charity. People were invited to and did speak freely from their hearts, and many expressed sincere gratitude for the opportunity to share their thoughts about how the Church is accomplishing her mission. Everyone, including pastors (the bishop and priests), received constructive, helpful feedback regarding the Church’s current experience and future priorities.

Following this adaptation of the foundational synodal theme - “A synodal Church, in announcing the Gospel, ‘journeys together,’ by proclaiming, celebrating, and living the Gospel as we make our way to the Promised Land of Heaven” - the following are the particular questions that were prayerfully reflected upon at all listening sessions in the diocese:

- “What experiences of ‘journeying together’ in your local church bring you joy and hope? What difficulties and obstacles have you encountered to ‘journeying together’ in your local church?”
- “How do we most effectively witness to the truth, goodness, and beauty of the Gospel? How effective are we in our three-fold mission of proclaiming and teaching the faith, of celebrating the liturgy and sacraments, and of service in charity?”
- “How do all the members of the Church—laity and clergy—collaborate in their common mission? How well do we dialogue—listen attentively and speak up candidly—within the Church and with the wider community?”

A synthesis of the fruits of the prayerful consideration of those questions, garnered from the various listening sessions, was reflected upon at the diocesan Pre-Synod Meeting, and a synopsis of the fruits of all those sessions follows.

## **FRUITS OF THE SYNODAL PROCESS**

Seven main themes emerged as fruits of the listening sessions and are summarized below: Welcome and Community; Evangelization and Communications; Doctrine and Formation in the Faith; Liturgy, Sacraments, and Prayer; Clergy and Vocations; Service and Charity; and, Family Life and Youth. Each quotation used below was chosen inasmuch as it is representative of repeated statements to that effect.

## **Welcome and Community**

The greatest number of comments concerned the importance of the Church in general, and of parishes and other institutions in particular, of being places where people feel welcome and where they find opportunities to come together for fellowship through experiences of community rooted in faith, following the example of the Lord Jesus.

A common refrain emphasized the priority of “providing a welcoming community to greet newcomers, and reaching out in small ways to those we do not know in the community to help them be more connected.” Paraphrasing Pope Francis’ promotion of a “culture of encounter,” it was said frequently that the Church must “cultivate a culture of welcome.”

People spoke of many wonderful existing opportunities for fellowship, often stressing the community aspect over the content or subject of any meetings. Group Bible studies, men’s and women’s groups, small group fellowships, prayer groups, and other opportunities for gathering with others were all held up as effective ways of fostering a sense of belonging and unity in the Church.

Hispanic, Vietnamese, and Korean participants especially highlighted the joy of being received into their parish communities, as was described by a parishioner: “The parish welcomed me as a daughter when I arrived from my country, especially in the prayer group where I got to know many sisters and brothers.”

An ecumenical representative noted his positive impression of his encounters with Catholics: “My experience is that Catholics who I serve with in the community of faith communities are sensitive to all religious traditions and find the commonality that exists between them and colleagues of other faiths.”

At the same time, many people asserted that the Church needed to do a better job in creating an atmosphere of welcome and community. For example, the faithful in parishes with both English and Spanish Masses noted “the feeling of a divided congregation due to cultural and language differences” and advocated more efforts to bring people from diverse backgrounds together. It is to be noted that most ecumenical and interreligious representatives did not respond to invitations to participate in synodal listening sessions, indicating the importance of continued outreach to ecumenical and interreligious partners.

### **Evangelization and Communications**

Closely linked to the previous theme, people emphasized the crucial nature of evangelization initiatives and effective communications.

Hispanic participants repeatedly highlighted the effectiveness of primary evangelization in public places, as one parishioner explained: “Every two weeks my group goes out to evangelize in front of storefronts where we meet families who do not know where the local Catholic church is and who need the sacraments—and then we see them at the parish.” People also spoke positively of programs like “Alpha,” which draw in the unchurched.

Especially mentioned was the importance of improving the public perception of the Church, including the need to better use various means of communication to emphasize the Good News of Jesus Christ and the good works of his Church, which are not always apparent to society. Indeed, a great number of participants emphasized that every institution and individual in the Church should be equipped to demonstrate a loving and compassionate Church—to be the face of Jesus—to those who have a different impression.

That said, many people appreciated the great number and effectiveness of various national, diocesan, and parish media which address matters of faith such as podcasts, video channels, social

media, websites, etc. “Getting access to FORMED [online media resource] helped me understand the faith well.” “I’ve been impressed by hearing our diocesan podcasts, seeing signs on buses about ‘The Light is On For You’ [a Lenten initiative offering the Sacrament of Penance].”

### **Doctrine and Formation in the Faith**

People stressed the necessity of clarity in Church teaching and of solid and effective formation in the faith at every age and through various means: religious education for public school children, Catholic schools, homeschooling, teen apologetics, and adult faith formation.

Preeminent among these concerns was the conviction that: “The Church needs to put more of an emphasis on adult education and encouraging lay people to deepen their own understanding.” “There is a lack of knowledge and immersion on Church teaching among the laity. Catholics are unable to defend the faith when challenged by others because they have not been equipped.” In fact, it was frequently repeated that adult formation should be the priority, since the solid formation of children and youth is contingent upon the effective formation of adults who are entrusted with the formation of the young. It was stressed that formation should not be a merely academic exercise but should facilitate an intimate, personal encounter with Jesus.

Still, participants spoke often about the importance and challenges of forming children and young people in the faith. They specifically mentioned religious education programs in which parents are not engaged and children are only brought for sacramental preparation, the high cost of Catholic schools, and the desire for even more support for homeschooling families.

It was mentioned that our Catholic schools do a fine job of assisting parents in the formation of their children; however, our schools need to be made more affordable and available to a greater number of families across the diocese.

People noted with pride that the clergy, religious, and lay teachers of this diocese faithfully impart the dogmatic and moral teachings of the Church. However, a number of people mentioned their concern about division among, and the necessity of unambiguous doctrine from, the Church's pastors: "The teaching authority of the Church is the responsibility of the clergy. We need consistency and clarity from them because there is way too much public dissent in the Church."

### **Liturgy, Sacraments, and Prayer**

People spoke repeatedly of their love for the sacred liturgy and sacraments as the foundation of the faith, as the preeminent way of encountering the Lord Jesus, his life of grace.

Many participants shared that they were very pleased that the sacred liturgy is celebrated beautifully and reverently in this diocese, noting that inspiring music, art, and architecture are effective tools of evangelization. They offered heartfelt testimonies about the centrality of the Eucharist in their lives—in the Mass, in Holy Communion, and in adoration. Still, a significant number of people stressed that active participation in the Mass could be strengthened.

Quite a few participants expressed their gratitude for the generous availability of the Sacrament of Penance in the diocese, and also mentioned the importance of substantive and effective homilies.

Hispanic participants highlighted the key role of parish charismatic prayer groups, which serve as a source of inspiration, formation, and conversion. They also lamented the fact that many Hispanics do not participate in the sacraments, often because they are cohabitating couples who need to be invited to and prepared for the Sacrament of Matrimony: "In the liturgy, many lose out on the banquet and do not receive Communion because they have not taken the time to prepare. We need to work hard so that, one day, all can receive Holy Communion."

Several people spoke out in favor of retaining a generous availability of the Mass in Latin according to the *Roman Missal* of 1962. Indeed, it has been widely offered in the diocese and has quite a few adherents.

### **Clergy and Vocations**

People repeatedly referenced the diocesan clergy and vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life.

Many spoke of gratitude for, and in support of, their local clergy, their parish priests, and permanent deacons: “Our priests and deacons have always been attentive to parishioner needs.” Participants mentioned the great availability of the priests for confessions and their solicitude in visiting the sick. People were thankful for the presence of full-time diocesan chaplains at three of the universities and all four high schools in the diocese.

Both veteran and newly-ordained priests expressed great satisfaction with serving in the diocese, with one another, and with so many committed faithful: “It gives me joy to see myself as a bridge for people to encounter God.” A religious priest noted: “I am new to this diocese, and I have a warm feeling about the Arlington diocese. We discuss what's going on in the parish, and the workload is shared equally. When the faithful come to Mass and offer to help, there's a good connection...It's a sign of a good diocese.”

Indeed, participants highlighted the exemplary spirit of collaboration between the clergy and lay faithful of the diocese, although some said cooperation could improve. An ecumenical representative offered: “I have served with several priests from the Catholic Church as well as laity, and I have found them delightful to work with and collaborative in every way.”

The faithful saw the many vocations in the diocese as an indication of fruitful Church life now, as well as a sign of hope for the future. That said, Hispanic participants spoke of their desire

for more Hispanic priests to serve their communities and that greater pastoral care for the Hispanic faithful in general would result in more vocations in particular, vocations with an intimate knowledge of their language and culture.

### **Service and Charity**

People were proud of the selfless service given by the faithful through many charitable works. They highlighted the centrality of these works to the mission of the Church and their importance in showing the face of Jesus to all.

Those served by various Catholic Charities institutions were uniformly grateful and complimentary: “The Church helped me by giving counsel, encouraging me, meeting me where I was at mentally, spiritually, financially, emotionally, just like Jesus did. When you need it, they are there. I am grateful for the life skills building programs that have changed my life and the life of my children.” In doing so, the institutions are faithful to their Catholic identity: “The Church can help residents who wish to explore their faith, whether Catholic or not: they incorporate faith opportunities and the opportunity to speak with a priest.”

The youth were especially enthusiastic about engaging in the corporal works of mercy.

Still, people thought more could be done, emphasizing continued outreach to the homebound, the elderly, the sick, the grieving, and the imprisoned. Very many people highlighted the need for more volunteers in parishes: “We can help by serving in our parish, and not just by putting money in the collection.”

A compelling voice stressed that the feedback of the marginalized and needy should be amplified, given that they are often reticent to speak up and that their numbers are not always accurately represented.



## **Family Life and Youth**

People emphasized the importance of having strong families in general, and of supporting the youth in particular, noting that diocesan family and youth apostolates were effective.

Many spoke of the irreplaceable role of parents as children's first teachers of the faith, in fostering the life of faith in the domestic church of the home. A very common refrain was parents expressing dismay that their young adult children had fallen away from the faith.

A significant number of participants highlighted the excellent clarity and compassion of the pro-life message of the Church in general and in this diocese in particular.

Young people participated passionately in the listening sessions. On one hand, the youth spoke of feeling at home in the Church: "The Church gives me a home everywhere in the world. No matter where I go, there are people who are my family and there are churches that are my home." Still, they thought the Church could do more to serve the youth, mentioning specifically: the need for more support with mental health struggles; understanding the challenges of witnessing in a culture that does not accept the Church and her teachings; and teaching the faith in a way that is personal, involving discussions which apply the faith to life. Indeed, the youth and young adults repeatedly noted their struggles to keep and defend the faith in their schools and workplaces, requesting resources to help them highlight the good works of the Church so she may be better perceived to be the face of Jesus, a loving institution which is compassionate to all peoples.

Adults said they were inspired by the youth: "Seeing young people active in the church through WorkCamp and religious education programs brings me joy and hope."

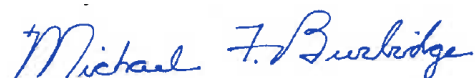
Immigrant (Hispanic, Vietnamese, Korean) parents spoke of their particular challenges in transmitting the faith to their children given the cultural differences from generation to generation.

## **CONCLUSIONS: NEXT STEPS**

Coincidentally, and perhaps also providentially, the Diocese of Arlington had anticipated our Holy Father Pope Francis' call to greater synodality in the Church by embarking on a diocesan Strategic Planning initiative in the spring of 2021 involving the clergy, religious, and laity of the diocese in 150 consultation sessions which resulted in identifying pastoral priorities. Not surprisingly, and again providentially, the main themes and concerns which emerged from the Diocesan Synodal Phase confirmed the pastoral priorities identified in the diocesan Strategic Planning.

Both experiences of synodality, the Strategic Planning and the Diocesan Synodal Phase, confirmed the importance of continued listening, dialogue, and community discernment. Again, during the synodal listening sessions, many people stated that they were grateful for the chance to consider publicly how the People of God and those on the margins are “journeying together” and spoke of their hope for continued opportunities for synodal engagement. The most prominent theme articulated in the listening sessions was the desire to cultivate a culture of welcome, and it clearly dovetails with the wish for ongoing synodality: the faithful simply think it is important to bring people together to reflect prayerfully, charitably, and openly about the mission of the Church. That is precisely what happened so beautifully in the Diocese of Arlington during the Diocesan Synodal Phase, and it will continue to take place in the diocese in varied ways.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Michael F. Burbidge". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Most Reverend Michael F. Burbidge

Bishop of Arlington

## **APPENDIX: METHODOLOGY AND STATISTICS**

### **Timeline**

- October 2021: Inauguration of Diocesan Synodal Phase with Mass at Cathedral, Appointment of Synodal Team
- November-December 2021: Diocesan Synodal Phase Planning
- January 2022: Listening Session Resources Provided
- February-April 2022: Listening Sessions
- May-June 2022: Consolidation of Feedback and Drafting of Diocesan Report
- June 9, 2022: Diocesan Pre-Synod Meeting
- June 30, 2022: Deadline for Diocesan Report to be Delivered to USCCB

### **Methodology**

- Convocation
  - Diocesan, parochial, and other institutions used the media at their disposal (including websites, emails, social media, printed bulletins, pulpit announcements, etc.) to invite people to synodal listening sessions.
  - The faithful were encouraged to invite those on the margins of the Church and of society (lapsed Catholics, unbelievers searching for answers, the poor, etc.) to participate in the listening sessions.
- Sessions
  - All sessions were held in-person and included:
    - A facilitator
    - A notetaker
    - The bishop, the pastor, or another representative of the clergy
    - Participants
- Feedback
  - Notes taken at the listening sessions were forwarded to the diocesan Contact, reviewed by the diocesan Synodal Team, and finalized by the bishop.
  - Feedback collected in the notes were synthesized by the Synodal Team into the predominant themes.
- Report
  - Using the Synodal Team's synthesis, the bishop's report was drafted by the Contact and reviewed by the Synodal Team.

### **Statistics Regarding In-Person Listening Sessions**

- Parish Sessions: 70 parishes participated (100%), with a total of 127 sessions
  - 97 sessions in English
  - 27 sessions in Spanish
  - 2 sessions in Vietnamese
  - 1 session in Korean

- Special Sessions: 18
  - Recently-Ordained Priests (1-5 years): 1
  - All Priests (diocesan and religious serving in the diocese): 1
  - Permanent Deacons: 1
  - Women Religious: 1
  - Campus Ministries: 3
  - High Schools (3) and Diocesan High School Youth RALLY (1): 4
  - Catholic Charities: 2
    - Christ House Men’s Transitional Housing: 1
    - St. Margaret of Cortona Family Transitional Housing: 1
  - Ecumenical and Interreligious Representatives: 1
  - Diocesan Men’s and Women’s Conferences: 2
  - O’Connell High School Dads: 1
  - Courage Apostolate: 1
- Total Sessions: 145
- Sessions attended by Bishop Burbidge: 12
  - Parishes: 5 (1 urban, 1 suburban, 1 rural, 1 Hispanic, 1 African-American)
  - Priests: 2 (1 newly-ordained, 1 all priests)
  - Women Religious: 1
  - Diocesan Men’s and Women’s Conferences, O’Connell High School Dads: 3
  - High School Youth RALLY: 1
- Listening Sessions Feedback Reports: 115 spreadsheets (some parishes combined feedback from several sessions into one spreadsheet)