

Message for December 3-4, 2022

Here in Arkansas we have spent the last year participating on the local level in the Synod on Synodality called for by Pope Francis. We had listening sessions in many of our parishes, one-on-one conversations, online questionnaires and sessions with specific targeted groups, including diocesan organizations, parish ministry leaders, ethnic minorities and even the homeless. We asked people about their experience of the Church, what the Church could do to make them feel more included, and how they experienced the movement of the Holy Spirit in their life and in the life of the Church. In other words, what brings them joy in the Church and in their life. And finally, what was important for Church leaders to hear? Out of this emerged 11 major themes that recurred in many places throughout the diocese.

There have been 14 major world-wide synods of bishops in Rome since Vatican II. These gatherings usually end with the publication of a summary document, which the Pope then receives and to which he responds, usually in the form of an apostolic exhortation that builds on what the bishops have produced and offers insights regarding what to do next. In a similar way, the participants in our synodal process here in Arkansas have provided me with a very well thought out summary document of the themes and concerns that have emerged in our local discussions in Arkansas. I have received your input and now the time has come for me to respond. And while what I have produced in response obviously does not rise to the level of a papal apostolic exhortation, it is an attempt to glean the fruits of all of the work that has gone into this process and to then consider what steps we need to take now.

Eleven major themes emerged in the discussions held here in our diocese, namely: community/fellowship, youth and young adult faith formation, the desire for the faith to be taught from the pulpit, the need for Catholic support groups, the need for priests to be present,

accountable, transparent, inspire trust and be good communicators, also the perception that the Church engages politically, concern about the rigidity of Church law, especially regarding divorce and annulments, judgment vs. love, LGBTQ issues, rural parishes that feel abandoned, and issues regarding the role of women in the Church.

That's a lot for me to respond to! But I have done so in the Post-Synod Response document that is being provided to you this weekend. I have grouped my response to these 11 themes according to the 3 topics about which Pope Francis has requested input for the synod of bishops to take place in Rome in two sessions in 2023 and 2024, namely: communion, participation and mission.

Pope Francis' dream in calling for this Synod on Synodality was to create an atmosphere of dialogue whereby the issues raised in the course of our conversations could surface and then be addressed, which is our task for the coming years. But beyond the specific concerns raised, the ultimate goal was to model and foster a new, more consultative way of doing things. This could help clericalism cease to be an obstacle in the life of the Church. As our Eucharistic Revival unfolds over the course of these next few years, it is my hope that our local Church will become more "synodal" in everything we do. The word synod derives from two Greek words: "syn" meaning "with" or "together" and "hodos" meaning "road" or "way", the idea being that we "go down the road together" or "we journey together" and we try not to leave anyone behind.

I have also included discussion questions after each of the 3 major sections of the document in the hope that these will help people to gather and give further thought to the issues raised in our dialogue so far. I invite you to take your copy of this document home with you and reflect on its content and asking the Holy Spirit to guide all of us regarding next steps to be taken here locally. And I thank all of you who have participated so far. God bless all of you!