



Journeying Together

With Jesus on the Path of Faith & Hope

DIOCESE OF FALL RIVER SYNOD REPORT



For a synodal Church
communion | participation | mission

INTRODUCTION

Diocesan Overview

The Diocese of Fall River is composed of 260,498 Catholics who worship at 72 parishes (80 church buildings). The diocese spans 1,194 square miles of land covering the south coast of Massachusetts, including Cape Cod & The Islands. We have 1 Catholic College, 4 High Schools, and 15 elementary schools, which educate a total of 19,248 young people.

The Synodal Process in the Diocese

In September 2021, the Diocese of Fall River began planning for the Diocesan phase of the Synod on Synodality after receiving initial information from the Holy See. This planning included:

1. Bishop Edgar M da Cunha, SDV — Bishop of Fall River — appointed Rev. David C. Frederici, Vicar General as the Synod contact person for our diocese.
2. Bishop da Cunha also appointed the then diocesan ad hoc revitalization committee to serve as the Synod team. This team included priests, diocesan staff, members of the Diocesan Pastoral Council, and other laity.
3. Bishop da Cunha commenced the diocesan phase of the Synod with a Mass of the Holy Spirit at the Cathedral of St Mary of the Assumption on October 17, 2021, with each priest in the diocese doing likewise on the same weekend in their own parishes.
4. To ensure that every parish was heard, each parish was instructed to select two individuals to serve as Parish Ambassadors. With their pastor's approval, these ambassadors were responsible for organizing the synodal process locally.
5. Parish Ambassadors were first invited together for a formation day on November 6, 2021. They were provided information that could be used to conduct

consultations with parishioners before being sent back to parishes to begin planning. Parishes were free to plan consultations in a manner most conducive to their situation.

6. Local Synod consultations took place between January and April 2022, with monthly zoom meetings offered to ambassadors by the diocesan Synod team during this time.

7. The diocese held its Pre-synodal Gathering on April 23, 2022, with final local reports submitted to Rev. Frederici, V.G. at the end of that month.

8. Members of the Synod team compiled the local level reports into this diocesan report, which was then presented to Bishop da Cunha for approval.

Information regarding the Synod on Synodality was shared through multiple means, including the diocesan website and social media accounts, articles in The Anchor (the official diocesan newspaper), inclusion in Bishop da Cunha's blog, clergy emails and zoom meetings, and ambassador emails and zoom meetings. The use of the Mass of the Holy Spirit in every parish to mark the opening of the Synod's diocesan phase allowed every parish to learn that the Synod was taking place. Materials for announcements, petitions for the Universal Prayer at Sunday Mass, talking points, the Synod prayer, and a guidebook - which included information on what a synod is, the synodal process, and consultations - were shared with leaders and made public on the diocesan website on a Synod specific webpage. These materials were made available in English, Spanish, and Portuguese, given the needs of our diocese.

INTRODUCTION

Overview of Demographics from the Diocesan Phase of the Synod

We estimate nearly 5,000 individuals participated in our diocesan phase of the Synod.

Of the 72 parishes in the diocese, 69 parishes (96%) designated ambassadors for this synodal process, and 54 parishes (75%) submitted final reports to the diocese.

In addition to Synod consultations at local parishes, and as recommended by the Vademecum, consultations also took place at other entities within our diocese. Additional reports were received from local universities - The University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth, and Stonehill College; The United Interfaith Action Group of Southeastern Massachusetts; St. Peter's Gay Spirituality Group; My Brother's Keeper - a service outreach ministry; an Ecumenical consultation; and Holy Rosary Church Portuguese Community.

Parishes reported communicating the Synod and consultations through bulletin and pulpit announcements, being present after Masses with information, emails, physical mailings, text messages, flyers, newspaper ads, and word of mouth.

Various parishes reported difficulty or confusion with the proposed Synod questions and themes, discerning to draft new or more simply worded questions instead.

Most Synod consultations occurred between January and April 2022. The breakdown of these meetings is as follows:

- 149 in-person and virtual sessions were held at churches, local halls, or private homes.
 - Large groups (~25-70 people) and small groups (~5-15 people) including pastoral and finance councils, faith formation students, Catholic school students and staff, ministry teams, and community-wide groups.

- Sessions were held throughout the diocese in English, Portuguese, and Spanish.
- Parishes and groups utilized both one-time and recurring sessions with an average duration of between 1 and 3 hours.
- 33 parishes held at least two or more sessions
- Surveys (electronic and printed)
 - 566 participants completed a Diocesan survey, representing the broad community in our diocese, including 49% non-Catholics.
 - Some individual parish surveys received between 100-280 responses each.

Some parishes noted poor survey completion rates, and several conducted both in-person/virtual sessions as well as surveys. A few parishes reported using only surveys or word of mouth for input.

Participant demographics included:

- Middle school students through retirement age (most were between 40 and 80 years old with the diocesan survey skewing much younger.) Younger participants responded well to session invitations geared explicitly to them.
- A balance of male and female participants.



St. John the Evangelist Church, Attleboro, MA

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Key Takeaways from Reports

Upon reviewing the submitted consultation reports, there were various joys, challenges, and needs shared by parishes and communities. What follows is a synthesis of the topics and themes shared in the reports, with adjoining quotes meant to bring to life participant voices. This report is based solely on input from our faithful and is not intended to represent an official diocesan position on any specific topic.

As one can imagine, synthesizing the wealth of information submitted and creating a synthesis of all that was heard and received at the local level, posed challenges in producing a final document. While every effort was taken to ensure the final diocesan report remained faithful to what was received, there was a need to condense responses. To that end and in the interest of transparency and sharing others' ideas —both things asked for in the consultation reports—all local level reports submitted to the diocese will be made available on the diocesan Synod webpage alongside a copy of this diocesan report.

Journeying Together Today

Despite the overarching challenges presented by the pandemic, it was evident that there are various ways in which churches and communities within the Diocese of Fall River are already proclaiming the Gospel together. Three main topics emerged:

The Mass

While answers on the topic of Mass and liturgical celebrations were not congruent across all reports (more shared in the subsequent section), the celebration of Mass was an example given several times by parishes and campuses for how they are currently journeying together. An appreciation was shared for the availability of Mass, music ministry, good homilies, and the positive impact that devotional

practices have on their community overall. Moreover, participation in Mass, the reception of the Eucharist, and the sense of community that comes from gathering for liturgical celebrations were shared as joys in parish life.

- *“Sacramental nourishment helps celebrate good days and get through bad days.”*
- *“[The] Eucharist guides prayer life, values, decisions, & creates Catholic community.”*
- *“We are journeying together by attending Mass, provid[ing] holy hours and bible study for all to participate.”*
- *“[Father’s] preaching is to be commended for both timely content and practical examples for daily living.”*



Bishop da Cunha
Eucharistic Revival 2022, Bishop Connolly High School, Fall River, MA

Existing Ministries, Small Groups, and Communal Gatherings.

Reports regularly listed various forms of ministries, intentional faith communities or small groups, retreats, missions, and Bible studies not only as examples of what is working locally but as ways in which individuals journey together. For several parishes, this also included naming annual parish festivals, dinners, and other communal activities as solid ways to grow a sense of community and pass on the faith. A more extensive list can be found in the addendum at the end of this report.

- *“[The Acts Retreat] has built up our Parish Community. It is an opportunity to not only grow in our relationship with the Lord, but also share our faith with others and truly have the sense of being a part of God’s Church.”*
- *“The Newman [campus ministry] group has been a huge impact on all of us.”*

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Service and Outreach Efforts

Parishes and campuses engaged in service outreach specifically noted that these efforts are both well regarded by their communities and a successful means of engaging the community at large. In particular, reports cited food pantries, My Brother's Keeper, St Vincent de Paul Societies, the Knights of Columbus, outreach centers, bereavement ministry, social concerns groups, food drives or collections, and service trips as positive aspects of church life.

- *"We serve everyone who comes in here - we have to take care of people's basic needs, and then we're able to connect people to the Church...we're catechizing them."*
- *"There is a natural inclination in members of the parish to reach out to the people who are sick, infirmed and on the periphery through the different organizations in the parish."*

Challenges, Observations, & Needs

After sharing ways that their communities are already journeying together, reports noted various challenges, observations, and needs to best move forward on a fruitful path of proclaiming the Gospel. What is shared here relates to how communities reported that they, or the Church at large, could better journey together. In particular, the following trends and topics emerged:

Engagement with young people should be the highest priority.

The most consistent theme across reports centered around the loss of youth and young families in parishes. Finding ways to attract and activate these groups is viewed as critical in order to not only maintain but also grow our Church.

- *"[While] Faith Formation is going strong and enjoys participation of much of our youth; parishioners express regret that while children participate in Faith Formation, few of them attend Mass regularly."*

Some specific challenges and goals shared included:

1. Finding a way to have a more authentic voice that resonates with our youth.
 - *"Youth want authenticity, the Church must put into practice what it teaches."*
2. Focusing on reaching the whole family, especially parents, to draw youth to the Church.
 - *"The home is where your faith is developed and the main catalyst as to your future involvement with the Church."*
3. Becoming a destination and "home" for our young people, providing opportunities to evangelize them.
 - *"Our Parish and the Church as a whole need to go beyond formation and education to become more of a center for youth opportunities and culture."*

There is importance in prioritizing a relationship with God and first focusing on Jesus.

Participants recognized a reliance on God as necessary for the synodal process to realize its optimum impact. Most importantly, they recognize the need for the power of God to move in people's hearts and within the Church. Even the best-laid plans and strategies will not bear fruit without the Lord's hand at work. As a result, Catholics need to be rooted in Christ so that they can be Christ's instruments for conversion, healing, and renewal.

- *"Show those who may not go to church our love and joy in Christ and be good positive role models. If we don't show joy, why would they want what we have?"*
- *"I dream of a church that is united around Jesus, not just the actions of its members."*

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Significantly better communication is essential.

This response manifested itself as a lack of communication at the parish level and uncertainty as to what communication is expected from the diocese and global levels. Overall, individuals care about what is happening in their parish, including decision-making and the future of their parish. They want to know what other parishes or communities are doing that is working and want to proactively be given resources, tools, and suggestions to help them. There was agreement among those in parishes and outside of the Church that digital communication are critical, with some noting the success of implementing new means of communication during COVID and others documenting the ramifications of not having updated websites and media.

- *“The diocese needs to highlight the accomplishments/events/activities of parishes that are truly journeying together so other parishes can get ideas.”*
- *“Honest communication is a 2-way street diocese to parish...Parishes are sharing Pastors, there is an unease about the future and the possibility of a parish closure. Parishioners are hesitant to make commitments such as time and money.”*
- *“We were unaware of just how much our parish communities do - there needs to be more effective communication about the positive aspects of our Church.”*



Bishop da Cunha
Portuguese Festival and Blessing of the Fleet 2022, Provincetown, MA

Connection with and visibility within our larger communities are desired.

Outreach in the broader community caused participants to celebrate what they already do and yearn for opportunities to do much more. To support people in the community, and to "get outside of the church walls," was a common theme. They want to be a community that notices people's absence and responds by reaching out through personal invitation, whether it be to those on the periphery or those who are less active in our parishes. Participants want their parishes to be seen as doing God's work helping others. Moreover, there was recognition that Catholics may not see this as their responsibility or, at the very least, need help knowing how to be invitational and communicate with others outside of the Church.

- *“We need to do more to meet the needs of our community.”*
- *“We feel that the Holy Spirit is inviting us to all personally reach out to those who have stepped away from the Church (or who feel left out in some way) through a much more ‘organic community process’.”*

There is a need and desire for more in-person connections, especially after COVID.

The COVID-19 pandemic is still impacting how people interact and where parish ministries are willing to dedicate time. Yet, many participants mentioned their desire to see in-person social events restored to being much more regular occurrences.

- *“[We are] a large, active parish that has been stifled during COVID...Many participants yearned for...stifled ministries and activities to be restored to their former vitality.”*
- *“There is a desire for more chances to come together for ‘fun’ and pure socialization, which would strengthen the bond between the communities.”*

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The Church needs to be more welcoming.

Participants defined “welcoming” in one of two ways: the first focused on hospitality around Mass and parish activities, and the second focused on the need for inclusion of specific populations in the Church.

Regarding the former, while several reports noted that their communities were open socially, they still recognized that more could be done to build community. Various individuals emphasized the success of the greeter ministry begun during COVID restrictions that then remained, noting that it helped them to know others’ names as they checked in for Mass. Yet, this has not always been the case. Different attempts for hospitality have either fizzled with a lack of interest or not effectively generated a sense of welcome to churchgoers. Nevertheless, the topic of hospitality was deemed important, both by those actively engaging in it and those who don’t.

- *“Welcome people and help them know how they can become involved.”*
- *“Some of us do not feel comfortable in the church. We feel like intruders.”*

Regarding the latter, groups that were perceived as excluded or judged included:

1. **Women** — Many participants mentioned the lack of women in leadership and decision-making roles at the local, diocesan, and global Church. While we recognize that a few women have recently been placed in more than strictly secretary roles, making those individuals more visible could help with this perception. A few participants mentioned the idea of female deacons or priests as an opportunity to balance roles. Others mentioned the use of language on this topic as a source of division.
 - *“Women need to have more of a role in administration and in church leadership.”*
 - *“I know females who feel alienated from the Church.”*

2. **Divorced/Remarried** — Church teachings on annulment requirements and remarried individuals being excluded from Communion were recurring comments. The sentiment shared was that Communion should not be used as a judgment tool, quoting Pope Francis: “[Communion] is not the reward of saints, but the bread of sinners.” These participants believe we are losing faithful Catholics for something (annulments) that are either not fully understood or seen as a significant amount of time, money, and red tape. While comments regarding marriage at times also included the topics of artificial contraception or cohabitation, they were predominantly focused on the perception or participation of divorced/remarried individuals in the Church.

- *“People are scared that we judge them.”*
- *“The diocese should develop a plan to offer information on annulments and clear and specific steps people can take to pursue this. This needs to be done in a positive way that will result in people making peace with the Church and returning to the Mass and Eucharist.”*

3. **LGBTQ+** — Being inclusive of the LGBTQ+ community was shared as a need - with the Church’s perceived views on this topic shared as an obstacle - toward feeling welcomed in a community. Various reports noted that participants found the Church’s teachings in this area as harsh, not loving, or not understandable.

- *“[I want] a welcoming Church community - one that does not talk down to a certain group.”*
- *“As a mother of a gay child, the Church’s stand on gays is horrible.”*
- *“The Church is not living like Jesus did.”*

Several participants noted the need for better pastoral outreach and ministries to serve those who are divorced/remarried or are a part of the LGBTQ+ community.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The Mass can be a missed opportunity.

As mentioned in the previous section, responses regarding the Mass were not congruent across reports. While various reports named the Mass and liturgical celebrations as a source of journeying together, others viewed the Mass as a missed opportunity to welcome, relate, and educate. Many participants challenged the relevancy of homilies, a lack of explaining “Church rules,” and the quality of the worship experience when people come to Mass. Participants wish their clergy had a greater understanding of “real-world” challenges and concerns. Areas suggested for focus in preaching included loving others, how to pray, greater emphasis on the Eucharist, and building our relationship with Jesus.

- *“When you can relate to the readings and the Gospels it impacts you more and gets you to think about your life and the decisions you are making.”*
- *“There is the feeling that parishioners are not being spoken to or taught about our religion, instead we are being lectured to, at which point they do not take anything away with them.”*
- *“The Church is not reaching the young because Mass is boring...others should be able to speak at Mass and have better worship music. We cannot ask people to come to Mass and then not provide good spiritual talks or sermons.”*

Our laity wants to be more involved; they just need to be asked.

Synod participants recognize that the laity should be more involved in operating and supporting parishes, but they don’t always know where their help is needed. The same group that continues to step up as volunteers need help and a succession plan that brings in more people as support. Participants also expressed a desire for more collaboration and shared decision-making with the pastor. Moreover, many individuals agreed that there is a great need for a personal invitation when asking others to become involved.

- *“Unfortunately, it's the same 7% that volunteer in these community activities. We should consider extending a personal invitation to others in our parish community.”*
- *“The Church must not be an obstacle preventing the lay faithful to use their God-given gifts and talents to build the kingdom of God, or they will go elsewhere.”*

Our Pastors should be prioritized as Spiritual Leaders.

Repeatedly, participants observed that their pastors have been overburdened. The consensus among participants was that attention to parish administration crowds out time for pastoral care, suggesting different staffing structures at parishes to support pastors and share workloads as appropriate. Participants also mentioned how challenging it is to share a priest with another parish, making the priest “overloaded.”

- *“[there is a] need for an administrative manager as the Pastors are unable to do their clergy work plus the needed day-to-day administrative management.”*
- *“The collaborative model [of] sharing clergy is not working. For a parish family to succeed, we need a strong spiritual leader in place that will be the cornerstone of the parish family.”*



Father Ryan Healy
St. Francis Xavier Parish, Acushnet, MA

KEY TAKEAWAYS

There is a desire to grow formation efforts and rethink previous models and methods.

Various parishes noted the need for, or desire to expand, what is offered for catechesis and ongoing formation. In particular, the desire for more adult formation was consistently listed across many of the reports. Some recommended that parishes join together with other nearby parishes to accomplish this.

- *"Our parishioners want to continue to learn and be inspired."*
- *"Individual members of the Church need to be better educated, reform can't come in the universal church until then."*
- *"We hear so many faithful Catholics share misconceptions, misunderstandings and misinformation with regard to the tenants, teachings and traditions of the Catholic faith."*

Additionally, several reports noted the need to evaluate and rethink current faith formation efforts:

- *"All religious education programs must teach our children that they have been call[ed] by God to be not only disciples of Jesus themselves but to help make disciples for Christ, which is their role in the Church."*
- *"The diocese needs to be open to change. We cannot expect new results if we continue to do things the same way."*

Our Church continues to struggle with transparency.

Participants often raised the lack of transparency at the local, diocese, and global levels. While the Church has made strides to improve, more consistent sharing, education, and personal outreach about how the Church works is desired. Greater transparency was asked for by participants regarding parish pastoral and finance councils. At this time, significant over-communication is needed to try to bridge that gap.

- *"It is unclear about the roles and activities of the Parish Council, and unclear about the church's decision-making processes."*

- *"Our parishes would welcome more visits from our Bishop, giving the general congregation more chances to meet him."*
- *"There is a lack of clarity in how decisions are made by the Church and our parish community."*

Clergy sex abuse has not been addressed sufficiently.

The clergy abuse crisis remains at the forefront of participants' minds—with many asking for more information on what the Church is doing to address the past and protect the Church of the future. Continued sharing and clear communication via many channels is essential to ensure that any actions the Church has or will be taking are getting through to the faithful.

- *"The sex abuse scandal and cover-ups have turned many away and has inhibited those who want to seek the Catholic faith."*
- *"Has the church apologized or truly recognized all of the pain related to the sexual abuse scandals?"*

Multilingual communities desire more support.

Multilingual communities noted that their cultural heritage helps them share their faith. However, their reports expressed the challenges of incorporating different ethnic communities into one parish and a lack of opportunities and priests who speak their language. Moving forward, participants mentioned that more diocesan-wide retreats and days of reflection that are bilingual would be beneficial.

- *"[We have] several ethnic communities... and it is both a blessing and a challenge: 'blessing because we learn from each other and there is a fondness for the multicultural feasts and traditions... 'challenge' because we need better and more frequent communication between the groups themselves."*

CONCLUSION

In reflecting upon this synodal process as a whole:

The synodal process was received with mixed emotions.

Various participants and leaders alike expressed skepticism, confusion, or uncertainty at the synodal process, both locally and as a whole. These feelings were partly due to a lack of effective communication, timing, or (in)action from past Church initiatives. Participant questions included:

- *“What will eventually come from the Synod?”*
- *“Will the synodal process help people learn to listen to one another and to the Holy Spirit?”*
- *“Will individuals’ contributions make any difference or change in the life of the Church and its teachings?”*

Participants’ openness to the process revealed itself in different ways.

- *“We need to learn to listen to one another better.”*
- *“I was skeptical that what I had to say would really matter, but I am happy to have been part of this.”*

Additionally, there were concerns that there would be attempts to make changes to Church teachings or go beyond the scope of what a Synod can do.

Despite initial skepticism, reports noted participants’ appreciation for the opportunity to come together and be heard.

- *“Overall, the majority of the participants were extremely positive and honest...Some parishioners were reluctant to speak out at first, but the atmosphere created was very easy for participants to shake off their fears and speak up.”*

Several reports noted the desire of participants to continue the synodal journey and gatherings, with some already planning future opportunities.

- *“We feel that these consultation sessions are a great first step to achieving a synodal church. However, we believe this should not be a “one and done” activity. The church and its parishioners should always be looking for ways to improve.”*
- *“We plan on having more of those sessions, where our parishioners are able to speak freely about their thoughts in front of our pastor.”*

Additionally, there were individuals who requested more formation on what it means to be synodal and information on how to communicate this with others.

- *“Incorporation of ‘journeying together’ and ‘synodal’ terminology need to be integrated into sermons, in prayer during various gatherings, and possibly through adult education programs which will both enhance life-long learning and inculcate the concepts of journeying together and synodal into our spiritual thinking.”*

All the Church’s members must commit to working together and continue the discipline of listening, or in the words of one participant:

- *“To have a synodal church, listening has to occur in both directions.”*

RECOMMENDATIONS

While we have learned much, there is still much to do.

It is suggested that the Vatican more effectively communicate the next steps for and outcomes from the Synod, both from this phase as well as through the subsequent phases. This communication allows more time for the local level to respond and act. As mentioned earlier, this requires leveraging multiple communication channels, including digital and social, as well as messages for all audiences (ages, languages, etc.) to ensure the faithful see the fruits of their efforts.

It is recommended that the diocese, parishes, and other communities who shared in this diocesan synodal process:

- Share copies of the diocesan and local-level reports publicly and in their entirety to their respective communities.
- Prayerfully discern what was heard and the ideas shared to determine what should or can be addressed locally in the short term while prudently awaiting the final results and exhortations stemming from the 2023 Synod in Rome. Indeed, several reports noted that the feedback received from consultations is already being discerned or acted upon by local parish councils.
- Create or continue efforts for individuals to be heard and share feedback. Leverage parish ambassadors as leaders in the community to help facilitate regular checkpoints, ensuring feedback and ideas are shared with the pastor.

- At the very minimum, ensure that parishes have active parish councils representative of the entire parish and in keeping with the guidelines promulgated by Bishop da Cunha in December 2021 (see www.fallriverdiocese.org/policies-procedures/). While it is recognized that the pandemic significantly disrupted parish activities, including councils, the necessity of parish councils is founded in the fact that they are basic manifestations of synodality in the life of the local Catholic community. To this end, the Bishop has a Diocesan Pastoral Council, composed of clergy and laity. Additionally, non-parishes involved in this process should discern what opportunities they offer for members of their communities to be represented and have a voice at the table.

Ultimately, it is clear that for fruit to be born of this synodal process, we as a Church must become fully dependent upon the Holy Spirit and be willing to continually listen, while having the fortitude to act in tangible ways because of both of these actions.



Father Tom Washburn presenting at the Parish Ambassador Formation Day 2021
St. Patrick Hall, Wareham, MA



DIOCESE OF FALL RIVER

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