For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission

Process for Facilitating Synodal Consultations

LEADERSHIP ROUNDTABLE
Service. Excellence. *Church Management.*

Synod 2021 2023
For a synodal Church
communion | participation | mission

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	p. 1
Living as a Synodal Church	p. 1
The Ten Key Elements of Synodality	p. 2
Being a Synodal Church	p. 3
Facilitating a Synodal Consultation	p. 4
Dialogue, Discussion and Discernment	p. 6
Structure of the Synodal Consultation	p. 7
After the Synodal Consultation	p. 11
Appendix 1	p. 12
Appendix 2	p. 14
Acknowledgments	p. 14

Process for Facilitating Synodal Consultations

Introduction

Pope Francis wants to hear from the whole Church about what is happening in local parishes. He and the bishops would like to know what individuals think we should all be doing to help make our parishes better. The way he has proposed doing this is a synodal process. Synod means “journeying together” and it involves listening to the Holy Spirit and to each other in order to discern the path we are called to walk together.

The synod "is intended to inspire people to dream about the Church we are called to be, to make people's hopes flourish, to stimulate trust, to bind up wounds, to weave new and deeper relationships, to learn from one another, to build bridges, to enlighten minds, warm hearts, and restore strength to our hands for our common mission.” Synod Handbook

Our basic question is:

What is the Holy Spirit saying to our Church today?

Living as a Synodal Church

According to the International Theological Commission in "Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church” no. 6, synodality is “the specific modus vivendi et operandi [way of living and operating] of the Church, the People of God, which reveals and gives substance to her being as communion when all her members journey together, gather in assembly and take an active part in her evangelizing mission.” The idea of synods is not something new; synods emerged from the early Church and the 2021-2023 synod process is not simply “another program” or a “new initiative.” Therefore, “having a synod” is just part of synodality. Synodality is a way of being Church, not just an event or program.

The Ten Key Elements of Synodality- from Synod Handbook

1. Be companions to each other on the journey
2. Listening to the Spirit and each other
3. Speaking out
4. Celebrating together
5. Sharing responsibility for our common mission
6. Joining dialogue in Church and in wider society
7. Participating in ecumenism
8. Each claiming their proper authority and participation
9. Being part of discerning and deciding
10. Forming ourselves in synodality.

Being a Synodal Church

The practice of living as a synodal Church means:

- The conversations lead to conversion to Christ and commitment to active participation in the mission given by Christ — **Communion**
- The people of God talk with one another and listen to one another about questions that matter — **Participation**
- The communion exists for a common purpose; mission flows naturally from the experience of communion — **Mission.**

Synodal Requirements

- Addressing the basic questions together
- Listening to the Holy Spirit
- Remaining open to the perspectives of other people
- "Progressively maturing" the fruits of the Holy Spirit over time.

Who Facilitates Synodal Consultations: Choosing Facilitators

Good facilitation has participants engaging with one another in meaningful dialogue on the given topic or question. The facilitator is not the center of conversation but rather a guide for the conversation. It is important to select and train excellent facilitators for this listening process. Strong facilitators are people who:

- Are at home with their Catholic faith
- Are prayerful and reflective
- Have strong interpersonal skills
- Have effective communication skills
- Are willing participants in the synodal process
- Are able to maintain a "big picture" view without injecting their personal agenda
- Can focus a conversation
- Can connect participants with each other without becoming the center of the conversation.

It is important to select facilitators with the experience and competencies needed, depending on the nature and makeup of the group.

- Volunteers can usually facilitate parish, diocesan, religious order, movements, or similar synodal consultations
- A Catholic professional facilitator — or someone else with higher level facilitation skills — may be needed on occasion when participants come from marginalized groups (e.g., different ethnic or cultural groups, abuse survivors, youth, LGBTQ, persons with disabilities, migrants/refugees, etc.) or when special interest groups are participating in a particular consultation
- All facilitators need preparation and training on the synodal approach, the synodal purpose, and the synodal process.

Facilitating a Synodal Consultation

As facilitator you will be asked to:

- Establish clear boundaries of time and topic for speakers
- Gently interrupt a speaker who talks disproportionately more than others
- Gently interrupt and redirect a speaker who gets off topic
- Gently re-focus a speaker who is preoccupied with an issue that is not pertinent to the topic or inhibits the participation of others in the group.

Practical Suggestions for Successful Facilitation

1. It helps to set ground rules and expectations at the start of the consultation by emphasizing the need for broad participation and safety. Some examples of boundary-related ground rules are:
    - One person speaks at a time and the others listen attentively
    - Discernment means speaking, listening and prayerfully reflecting so pausing in silence between speakers to consider what is said is a good approach
    - Speak when you can add to the conversation, not when you are trying to intentionally end it
    - Stay on topic
    - Keep your comments reasonably brief so others have time to participate
    - This is a forward-leaning conversation, so lean toward solutions
    - If someone offers a comment in the form of a complaint, ask the person to reframe her/his comment in the form of a hope or aspiration.
2. If you have to interrupt a speaker, it helps to acknowledge their contribution by providing a brief synthesis of what you heard them say and thank them for their contribution.

Examples of Ground Rules for Synodal Consultations

1. This consultation is a safe place to talk — we will treat each other and what anyone says with reverence and respect.
2. One person speaks at a time.
3. We all will listen with an open mind.
4. We will be stopping the conversation at certain intervals to reflect and pray
5. Our primary mode is dialogue: When we speak our purpose is to advance the conversation. Please avoid arguing or comments that seek to advance a personal agenda.
6. We limit how long we speak so that everyone has time to share.
7. We only speak once until everyone has had an opportunity to share.
8. We will be reporting the themes and experiences to the (arch)diocese and bishop's conference as they emerge from the consultation discussions without indicating the names of individual participants.
9. As participants, when we tell others of our experience of the consultation, we will not attribute anything we share to particular people or groups.

Dialogue, Discussion and Discernment for Facilitators

Dialogue is the foundation of all synodal consultations. Dialogue does not happen when there is arguing or diatribe. However, conflicting perspectives may be presented. We may not all agree upon what is discussed in the synodal consultation, but we all acknowledge that what we discern through this process has the potential to be the will of God for the Church in the future.

It is helpful to distinguish between the different types of exchanges:

- ***Dialogue*** is two way, cooperative, and its purpose is to build relationship and exchange perspectives between participants
- ***Discussion*** is a process of talking about something in order to reach a decision or to exchange ideas
- ***Debate*** is two way and competitive, where the purpose is to convince another
- ***Diatribe*** is one way and its purpose is to browbeat, inspire, shame or emote.[1]

Dialogue comes before discussion in synodal exchanges. These two activities can lead to true discernment of what the Holy Spirit is saying and leading.

- Dialogue expands possibilities and insight into possibilities
- Discussion holds those possibilities against one another, helping to reflect upon them, and narrowing toward realistic, doable solutions, and steps forward.

Practical Suggestions for Dialogue, Discernment, and Discussion

As facilitator, you will help the group engage in dialogue on the topic until they make an explicit decision to move into discussion. It is okay for you as facilitator to ask the group to stop talking for a short period of time in order to reflect and pray about the dialogue before moving to discussion.

1. Wangle, David. 2016. "The Four Types of Conversations: Debate, Dialogue, Discourse and Diatribe."

- A facilitator can help stimulate discussion by offering to synthesize the comments made from time to time or when the flow of conversation seems to be stuck
- A facilitator helps the group by holding them in discussion until a pattern of recurring themes are emerging and making an explicit decision to move into prayerful discernment
- Discernment begins in prayer: "Your will, not mine"
- A facilitator can call the group to prayer for guidance by the Spirit, to sharing reflections on what they see as emerging in the dialogue and discussion
- A facilitator can call upon the group to share the themes that they hear surfacing and that they believe should persist into the future of the local and universal Church as a result of this consultation
- Likewise, a facilitator can call upon the group to name ideas or topics they have heard that they believe should not persist into the future local and universal Church
- A facilitator can name any yet unresolved issues or topics that may need to remain unresolved
- A facilitator can call upon the participants to detail what sticks out to them as a result of the consultation, ways to be in stronger communion with one another, ways to participate more fully in the life of the Church, or ways to be more missionary.

Structure of the Synodal Consultation

At the parish level, most synodal consultations last 90 to 120 minutes. Some groups may want to allow a longer time frame so that everyone's voice can be heard and brought into the discussion. A consultation at the diocesan level may last up to 180 minutes. The format can follow the example below. The facilitator should add time frames to each part of the consultation. As much as possible, the focus should be on smaller, table discussions so that everyone has a chance to be heard.

Sample Template for a Synodal Consultation

1. Gathering Prayer and Faith Sharing
2. Short remarks (perhaps by video) by Bishop or Pastoral Leader
3. Explanation of the Purpose, Roles, and Process
4. Focus the Consultation with Questions
5. Table Discussions
6. Large Group Feedback
7. Brief Evaluation
8. Sending Forth Prayer.

It is helpful for participants if you, as facilitator, can add time frames to each part of the consultation.

Sample Content Outline for a Synodal Consultation

1. ***Gathering Prayer and Faith Sharing***

    - Opening Song: All Are Welcome (or other appropriate hymn)
    - Word of God: Acts 2: 1-11, 14-19 (or other Scripture passage from the Synod Handbook or Preparatory Document)
    - Quiet reflection time: Experiences of the presence of Holy Spirit
    - Prayer to the Holy Spirit.

2. ***Short remarks (perhaps by video) by Bishop or Pastoral Leader.*** What is this Synod on Synodality, and why is it important? It should pose the basic question: What should we do to improve our parish (or other ecclesial community, etc.)?

3. ***Explanation of the Purpose, Roles, and Process***

    Explanation of the purpose

    - This synodal journey is a special time of prayer, listening, dialogue, and recommendations."
    - This is your opportunity to respond to the request from Pope Francis to dream about the Church we are called to be.
    - By gathering as a people of faith, we hope to weave new and deeper relationships, to learn from one another, to build bridges, to enlighten minds, to warm hearts, and to restore strength for our common mission.
    - By the end of our time together we aim to capture your answers to the basic question: What is the Holy Spirit saying to our Church today?

    Explanation of the roles

    - Main Facilitator – for large group
    - Table Facilitator – for table groups
    - Main Scribe — reporting on the large group discussion
    - Table Scribe – reporting on table discussion
    - Feedback – commentary/questions from within the large group.

    Explanation of the process

    - Main facilitator explains the questions
    - Gather in small groups with the table facilitator and table scribe
    - Meaningful exchanges between participants about the questions
    - Regather in the large group to report back from small group discussions
    - Gathering of the feedback and summary
    - Conclusion and sending forth.

4. Focus the Consultation with Questions

The main facilitator explains that the guiding theme of the discussions is a synodal Church, a Church that "journeys together." Participants should share their meaningful experiences (not opinions on each other's experiences) of the local Catholic "journeying together" in ministry. For example, outreach to the poor and vulnerable, prayer and reflection together, liturgical celebration, RCIA experiences, conversion experiences, and faith sharing experiences.

The small group discussions should focus on specific questions. The diocese or parish may have provided questions for this exercise. The main facilitator introduces these questions and explains that one good approach is to focus on experiences.

Sample Focusing Questions
(Your diocese may be providing specific questions for your synodal consultations)

1. How is this "journeying together" to announce the Gospel happening today in our local parish, campus ministry, university, religious congregation?
2. Who else do we need to reach out to, listen to and learn from, or to include in our synodal consultations and in our faith community? Whose voices are currently not being heard? Who is absent from these discussions?
3. What do you think would make our parish (or ecclesial community) better?
4. What can each of us do and what can we do collectively to make it better?
5. "Synodality" asks us to be energetic and involved ambassadors of our faith through conscientious listening and sharing of insights to advance Jesus' mission in the world. How do we see our parishioners becoming more aware of how much their faith and insights count — and need to be heard?
6. What steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow in our journeying together?

5. Table Discussions

Participants should be assigned to diverse small groups of approximately five to eight members using a random method. Each group should have an assigned table facilitator and scribe who are also invited to enter the discussion. If possible, the group should be seated at a table together for the small group facilitated conversation.

The table facilitator reintroduces the questions and then invites each person to respond. The facilitator proposes the recalling of experiences method (described below) as a useful way to guide the discussion. Between 45 minutes to an hour should be dedicated to this process.

Using "Recalling of Our Experiences" Approach

1. Focus the recalling
    - What are our experiences of journeying together in communion, participation, mission (Synodality) in our local Church?
    - What joys did those experiences bring?
    - What difficulties and obstacles have we encountered?
    - What wounds did those experiences reveal?
    - What insights have those experiences elicited?
2. Gather the fruits to share
    - What paths forward are opening up for our local Church?
    - Where in these experiences does the voice of the Holy Spirit resound?
    - What are the areas for change for our Church and what steps can be taken?

6. Large Group Feedback

The smaller groups should be called back to a general consultation by the main facilitator. The scribe of each group should be asked to give a summary of the group's conversation. After this is done, and depending on the time remaining, the main facilitator can invite individuals to give their personal feedback to the larger group. The main facilitator can suggest specific formats for feedback such as

- After listening to my group, I am wondering…
- The question that emerged for me from listening in my group was…
- An interesting diversity of views that emerged in my group was…

Gathering of the feedback and summary

The main facilitator explains that the information from the groups will be combined into a report that will be sent to the diocese. Every effort will be made to faithfully report what was expressed (including any contentious or complex issues) so as to respect the trust and communion experienced during the time together.

7. ***Brief Evaluation***

Participants should be asked to complete a brief evaluation of the process. It can be done before leaving the consultation or online immediately afterward. Evaluation questions should be limited to no more than 6 questions and could include:

- How well has this consultation allowed you the opportunity to listen and share your own experience of Church?
- What are your hopes for the Church as we "journey together" in terms of communion, participation and mission?
- What practical suggestions do you have for your faith community to continue the synodal journey and be a more listening, discerning, and participatory Church?

8. ***Sending Forth Prayer***

Sample:

Leader: Let us take a moment of quiet as we reflect on what we have done here today…

Reader: A reading from the Letter of St. James James 1:22
Dearest brothers and sisters: Humbly welcome the word that has been planted in you…[and] Be doers of the word and not hearers only.

Leader: Come Holy Spirit, we ask you, that by your inspiration, may all of our prayer and actions always begin from you and inspire others to know you more deeply. We ask this through Christ our Lord.

All: Amen

Leader: Let us go forth sharing a sign of peace.

After the Synodal Consultation

Reporting the fruits of your synodal consultations:

Reporting is both horizontal — reporting to the participants and community — and vertical — reporting to the diocese, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and to the Holy Father and Synod of Bishops in Rome. It would be helpful if the main facilitator could work with others to pull out some themes from the consultation and report that information back to participants, pastoral councils, pastoral staff, and the faith community as a whole. Table reporting is sent to the diocese for inclusion in the diocesan report using a standardized format or template provided by the diocese. If your diocese has not provided you with a template, please visit www.usccb.org/synod for a format you can use.

Appendix 1

Facilitating Potentially Difficult Synodal Consultations

As facilitator you may find some consultations are difficult because of people who have traumatic experience of Church through abuse, people who (often unknowingly) attempt to hijack a consultation for their own agenda, or who have few effective filters for what they might say. There are some ways to mitigate or respond to those situations.

1. **Preparation and clarity of purpose**

- Set clear expectations, process and purpose early and keep on topic.
- Set the tone as prayerful and reflective.
- What may be reported out of the synodal consultation is not what we all agree upon, but what we discern as having potential to be the will of God for the Church in the future. Even conflicting perspectives can be reported.
- Be clear that the synodal consultations are not equipped to provide the support that those who suffered abuse need, and at the same time we need to hear those who choose to raise the abuses by the Church as pertinent to our considerations of a future Church.
- Be clear that our purpose is to help form a more synodal and listening Church and that means keeping an open mind so the Spirit can work in all of us. Don't let our personal agendas limit our conversations.

2. **Responding to a speaker who talks of the trauma of abuse by a minister of the Church**

Tragically, some consultation participants will have had traumatic experiences of Church. Facilitators must take into account that those traumas are real and deserve our compassion above all. It is also true that the synodal consultation is not the place for long discourses of those tragedies. It is the place to recall and acknowledge that they happened, that they had a severe negative impact on individuals, families, faith communities, and the Church as a whole, and need to be prevented. For example, it is appropriate to recall that those tragedies happened and to talk about, for example, how a synodal Church might help prevent them happening again.

What can a facilitator do when an abuse survivor speaks?

a. Acknowledge the trauma is real and deep.

b. Thank the speaker for their courage, acknowledge the depth of hurt you hear as they speak.

c. Set a boundary such as "I'm glad you had the courage to bring this tragedy up. While we cannot go deeply into the personal stories in this consultation, we do need to acknowledge the pain those abusers and coverups by Church leaders caused."

d. Set a direction such as "Those tragedies must be part of our considerations in these synodal consultations, which are forward leaning, looking at a renewed Church where such things cannot happen. As we consider the direction the Church needs to go, please keep the survivors and their families in mind. We do not want that abuse to continue."

3. Responding to people with agendas

It may happen that either individuals or groups attend synodal consultations and come with particular agendas. When a facilitator can recognize this, there are approaches that may help keep the conversation on track.

When an individual or group expresses absolute certainty, a facilitator can respond with curiosity: "Help me understand…," "I am wondering whether/if…," or "I have a question…"

When an individual or group blames others, a facilitator can respond by inviting other perspectives and developing consensus: "How could any of us make a difference here?" "Are there some steps we would agree together that would be helpful here?" "How could all of us be part of the solution?"

Sometimes it is also necessary to restate the purpose and nature of the synodal consultation. "The synodal consultation is forward looking, envisioning the Church of the future, and we are approaching this in a reflective, prayerful manner, keeping an open mind so the Spirit can surface the direction forward for our Church. Let us all please take a moment to place ourselves in an internal space where we can constructively participate by how we listen and how we speak."

4. Responding to people with no filters

Some people of goodwill speak without awareness of the impact they have on others by how they speak or the words that they say. It is more than just abrupt; it is doing harm to others even if they see it as "just being honest" or something similar.

The facilitator may need a graduated response to such people:

- Gently interrupt the speaker and remind them that we need to be respectful of others.
- Gently tell the speaker the impact they are having on some people in the room.
- Call upon the group to share how this speaker is impacting them (If you think they will speak up and if they are willing to share that through you as the facilitator).
- Ask the speaker to change how they are speaking (e.g., softer, more aware of how people are hearing them, focus on the question not the person).
- Suggest a break or a time for reflection and quietly approach the speaker and ask for a change in delivery or tell the speaker the group will be moving on after the break.

Appendix 2

Resources and Helpful Links

- Vatican Synod Website
- Vatican Secretariat for the Synod of Bishops
- United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Synod Website
- Fifth National Encuentro of Hispanic/Latino Ministry (English) and Español
- Journeying Together: A National Catholic Intercultural Encounter for Ministries with Youth and Young Adults
- Creating a Culture of Encounter: A Guide for Joyful Missionary Disciples (Bilingual)

Dioceses

Below are links that are samples of diocesan websites and resources set up for communications about the implementation of the synodal process. If your parish, diocese or organization would like to use or adapt any of the resources, please contact the person named to receive permissions, design files, etc.

- Archdiocese of Washington synod website and parish resources

  (Contact: Paula Gwynn Grant, grantp@adw.org)
- Diocese of Charleston synod website and parish resources

  (Contact: Sr. Kathy Adamski, kadamski@charlestondiocese.org)
- Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis synod website

  (Contact: Fr. Joseph Bambenek, bambenekj@archspm.org)

Acknowledgments

Many pastoral leaders are working diligently at the parish, diocesan, and national level to implement the synodal process and engage as broad a range of participants in synodal listening consultations. Leadership Roundtable would like to thank the following for their contributions to this facilitation resource:

- Sr. Donna Ciangio, OP, Archdiocese of Newark
- Sr. Kathy Adamski, OSF, Diocese of Charleston
- Dr. Jeannine Marino, J.C.D., Archdiocese of Washington
- Julia McStravog, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops
- Jim Lundholm-Eades, Patrick Markey, Kate Alexander, and Michael Brough of Leadership Roundtable

LEADERSHIP ROUNDTABLE
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In partnership with lay, ordained, and religious leaders and organizations across all sectors of the Catholic community in the United States and Rome, Leadership Roundtable seeks to elevate and implement best practices in management and leadership to establish a culture of co-responsible, servant leadership for a healthy, thriving Church in the U.S.

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