

Our local diocesan synod story began in July, 2021 with the appointment by Bishop Felipe J. Estévez of co-chairpersons for a steering committee: Fr. Clay Ludwig and Ms. Erin McGeever, with Msgr. Haut as a consultant for the committee. A short time later, after consultation, the steering committee members were invited and accepted to start the journey. This committee is representative of the diocese regarding age, race, vocation, and ethnicity.



The first action was that of formation for both the laity and the ordained. Fifteen bulletin announcements were provided, in Spanish and English beginning in early July and running until the opening Mass on October 17, 2021. These contained information on the development of the concept of synods and synodality. During the same timeframe, various documents were provided to parishes and clergy for further study.

“We need to develop listening hearts.”

(heard at Synod session)

The second action was the first gathering of the steering committee to create a plan for enactment of the local phase. Discussed at this meeting was a need to focus more closely on three -four of the ten questions provided by the Vademecum document. We consulted our committee, Diocesan Pastoral Council, Deans, Consecrated Commission, the Diocesan Secretariat Members, the Deacon Board, and Presbyteral Council. After receiving their preference of which questions should best capture the story of our Diocese, the Bishop made the final decision. This reflected a true synodal approach because after we consulted the stakeholders Bishop made the final decision selecting the three questions the Diocese would discern together after allowing the major committees to be a part of the decision-making process. These questions were made available in the most prominent languages of the diocese: Albanian, English, French, Haitian Creole, Spanish, Tagalog, and Vietnamese. Throughout our process so far, materials have available in these seven languages.

A third early action was to ask pastors to send the names and contact information for 12 ambassadors from their parishes to represent their parishes at the opening Mass. This invitation for these 12 (or more) ambassadors included a request to not pick staff or the usual people, but rather seek those who might not be active and with an emphasis on young people, including those to be confirmed this year. These ambassadors would become the parish advocates for the process.

A fourth early action, which occurred somewhat simultaneously with the first three actions, were presentations to key stakeholder groups, providing not only formation on the concept of synodality, but also making known the local process that we would be following. Fr. Clay and Erin McGeever

visited with the following groups: Presbyteral Council, Diocesan Pastoral Council, diocesan staff, clergy in the five deaneries, Catholic School Principals, Catechetical Leaders, with the priests in the deaneries, Youth Ministers, high school students, the consecrated of the diocese, the deacon board, and the college campus ministry group in Jacksonville. A two- page summary of our process focused on the three elements of Communion, Participation, and Mission was provided to all in the seven languages as part of these formation sessions.

Our opening Mass was celebrated, as recommended, on October 17 at our largest parish St. Joseph. All parishes and missions had reserved seating. Following the celebration of the Mass, the concelebrating priests joined with their parishioners to hear three witness talks on the elements of Communion, Participation, and Mission. Three members of our steering committee provided these witness talks. The Mass was attended by representatives of every parish, including large numbers of youth and young adults. The program ended with Bishop Estévez sending those gathered out on a mission to spread the word on synodality and with the singing of the Litany of the Diocese, rewritten for this occasion, “singing” the parishes out onto mission.

Our model for engaging the diocese was one of small group discernment within our deaneries with the Bishop Estévez. We estimate that between 100 and 200 attended each session. The three questions were provided ahead of the sessions in seven languages so that all could participate. Prior to these sessions, group facilitators and scribes were trained to lead the small groups in the actual discernment. We sought facilitators and



scribes of various ethnic cultures per each deanery so that language would not be a barrier. Our discernment sessions started in church with quiet prayer, reflection, an opening address by Bishop Estévez (Communion). Then, participants were randomly assigned to a small group with a facilitator and scribe. Each group began with the universal synodal prayer, and the consultations began (participation). Bishop actively moved from group to group to be present to them. Each session lasted appt 90 minutes with Bishop Estévez closing each session with gratitude and prayer. (mission)

At the end of each of the discernment sessions, we asked the participants to share, in one word, how they were feeling. Most heard words were: hopeful, optimistic, enthusiastic, listened to, encouraged, solidarity, communion, grace-filled, openness, honesty to name a few. This part of our story was enriching and told us that going forward we need to model our conversations in line with the key elements of synodality. We have also gathered electronic feedback for those not able to attend any of the six diocesan gatherings. This was done via our website and an electronic format available in seven languages.

After each of the small group discernment evenings, the scribes provided typed notes for their small groups to the committee. We engaged with two of our Echo apprentices from Notre Dame University, working here in the diocese, but not from the diocese to take the data from the 12-20 small groups in each deanery to do the redaction work on the data. Our raw data was upwards of one thousand pages, and so redaction work was quite necessary. We published these redacted reports as soon as they were ready to the diocese at large and remain posted to the website. The steering committee met with this redacted data and surfaced main themes that are a part of the entire story of the diocese. It is important to note that well over five hundred volunteers have been utilized within the process thus far. It is also important to note that several parishes also held local discernment sessions modeled after the diocesan model.

While the writing of our first draft was evolving, we hosted a small group discernment with some of our ecumenical collaborators. For this occasion, we altered our three questions to better reflect the audience. As we draft, we are also circling back to all stakeholders for input on this writing.

As we begin the narrative of what we heard, we have arranged the main themes around:

1. What are we hearing from the people of the Diocese of St. Augustine
2. What needs work
3. Suggestions going forward.

Before going into the main themes, it is important to note here that the people of God in the Diocese of St. Augustine have a great love for their Church. They came to these discernment sessions with some fear, some personal thoughts, some skepticism and yet such rich dialogues occurred throughout the process that is obvious to all who participated that the Holy Spirit was guiding the process for us. Meeting others from the local church and engaging in dialogue on topics of common interest will lead to future connections. People left the sessions convinced that this type of process would enrich all parish life if done on a regular basis with a similar format of coming to listen first, not talk first. We hope that this will become the norm in the diocese in our parishes for decision making and for the development of unity.

The centrality of the Eucharist in the lives of the faithful in the Diocese of St. Augustine was the most prominent thought throughout all the discernment sessions. We heard that the Eucharist is the unifying factor of all Catholics across the geography of the diocese. It the source of our strength and we need to focus on this as we build welcoming Eucharistic centered communities. The beauty of the Mass and a love for the full celebration of it is evident in all comments. The People of God have longed to be back “to normal” and are seeking to recapture the sense of community.



The cultural communities that exist in the diocese and the presence of young people are seen as gifts to the parish communities. Inspiring stories were told of the richness of cultural devotions and practices. Many have grown in their appreciation of the great gift diversity in the Church brings. There was stated a great appreciation for those parishes that take the shared parish model to heart and enact celebrations of the liturgy that highlight the gifts of all the parish community. Minorities are seen by all as a rich gift and yet their voices are not always heard.

“The Eucharistic Celebration is central, beautiful, reflects our identity, and calls us to love.”

(heard at Synodal Session)

The celebration of the Mass surfaced as a primary synodal model wherein all come with their gifts together with others in prayer and thanksgiving to our God. Calling forth these gifts from all the demographics of the parish is seen as both a challenge and an obligation. In particular, the people of God were looking for more ways to know one another, learn about one another, and engage with one another in prayer and solidarity. Important liturgical celebrations are the ideal time for this: Sacred Triduum, Pentecost, Christmas, when the Church is at her best.

There is a definitive call for all to have creative formation on the liturgy and the Mass in particular, something we hope will be accomplished by the upcoming Eucharistic Revival. In this manner, the annual Eucharistic Congress has done much to enhance the appreciation of the Eucharist and a regular practice of adoration in many of the faithful. This needs to continue in some fashion to build on what is already a strong foundation. Formation on the Eucharist will need to take many forms and would be for all age levels. Specific items brought up in the dialogues are: focus on learning or relearning the parts of the Mass, readiness for the hearing of the Scripture, understanding of how adoration flows from the Mass, and a genuine concern that these concepts are based on to future generations. The Mass itself is a primary formator.

There were many items mentioned that could lead to a better focus on the centrality of the Eucharist, besides formation. One that appears often in the scribe notes is a return to the primacy of Sunday for worship and a focus on family gatherings on Sundays both at the parish and in the home. This would also include enriching the welcoming aspect of each of the parish campuses making them appealing to all. Groups mentioned that need to feel this welcome: the undocumented, the elderly, persons with disabilities, the young people, those of various ethnicities, families with young children, LGBTQ and their families.

There is a strong call for the inclusion of youth and women in all aspects of the Mass as well as other leadership roles in the parish. Frequently noted was the absence of these two demographics in our liturgies throughout the diocese. There is a need to be open to new parishioners willing to serve in these liturgical roles as well as other leadership roles within the parish. This calls forth the challenge to be less exclusive and to be intentional in inviting members of these demographics to share their gifts with the parish.

Another enrichment request that is evident from all discernment sessions and electronic submissions is a call for homilies that are engaging, spiritual, and that focus on practical life application. This is heard across the demographics, and among the mature and the young. How do we answer our call to holiness was a theme mentioned that needed a proper place in homilies.

Drawing from these comments on the homilies at Mass, there were several comments regarding the ministry of the priest. For example, the people of God yearn to see a joy-filled priest. They desire a relationship with a priest outside of Mass. It was strongly shared that priests are not available to meet the needs of the parishioners outside of Mass and other sacraments because they are spread thin with many administrative tasks. We heard the lay faithful express that priests seem to be over-burdened by many administrative tasks, leaving them unavailable for their parishioners.

The people of God spoke positively about the presence of consecrated women in their communities. The presence of consecrated women and their engagement with all members of the parish was a frequent comment. There was a definitive call for attention to vocations for consecrated women and to a desire for a regular presence of consecrated within our parishes and schools. Many times, the consecrated women are present for only a short time and then are moved to another diocese or even country. It was suggested the commitments of the consecrated should be for a finite, but definitive amount of time to better serve the needs of the people.

Flowing from these comments on the centrality of the Eucharist is another central theme brought up in a variety of ways ~ **the call to holiness of the baptized**. We grouped related topics under this one heading for clarity of purpose. People did not mention the “call to holiness” directly, but it is what they were referring to when they spoke of the committees using the gifts of its members. Mentioned earlier was a noticeable lack of presence of youth and women in key roles in the life of the parish, but this is now expanded to all aspects of parish life. Also mentioned earlier was the need to welcome folks that we feel are often excluded or their potential is not being fully recognized: the undocumented, the elderly, person with disabilities, the young people, those of various ethnicities, families with young children, LGBTQ, and their families.



A key question and concern is how to engage these groups in a manner that is both dignified and that also helps them grow in their own holiness. Adding women to this group as well, how can the leadership skills of each group be used to their fullest potential in service to the Church as well as their own growth in discipleship? Synodality and a synodal church is based on collaboration and shared responsibility. Our parishes need practice to make this concept a reality by using the 3 components of synodality: Communion, Participation, and Mission. These three words are for all the People of God and not for a select few. We need to strive to engage every person in the mission of the Church, calling forth their personal gifts to be joined with the gifts brought by others. Mentioned in comments was a call for a better sense of trust and understanding between the laity and the clergy with an emphasis on shared mission and the call to holiness of all.

This concept of shared responsibility and collaboration crosses parish lines. A several comments from the discernment sessions mentioned a need for better communication and collaboration between parishes. These comments included the sharing of information, talent, and working together on various projects for the betterment of all those involved. Suggestions included: combined adult faith formation opportunities, youth opportunities, family activities, and spiritual activities. The phrase “shared responsibility” was used throughout our sessions, a phrase picked up from one of our questions.

A key component of the call to holiness of the baptized was the role of the parish pastoral council. It is thought that this body, among the other parish committees, could have the most impact on in calling forth the gifts of all, engaging with the unengaged, creating an atmosphere of formation, and networking with neighboring parishes. A well-formed and active parish pastoral council, with membership from a wide range of parish demographics, would be the initiative-taking instrument to create a synodal change. Since the norm in the Diocese of St. Augustine is to have a parish pastoral council, this committee is already in place and would be the best starting point for working on the objectives in this document.

A third area of emphasis in our sessions was the overriding desire for the people to truly engage in **missionary discipleship**. While this concept took many forms and different words were used to describe this concept, what was heard was this phrase. How can we be better trained in the area of evangelization so as to live out this baptismal responsibility to “go and make disciples.” People who participated in the discernment sessions told us of the great power of invitation and how a simple invitation can open people’s hearts to want to know and do more. This concept of invitation was seen in the previous two

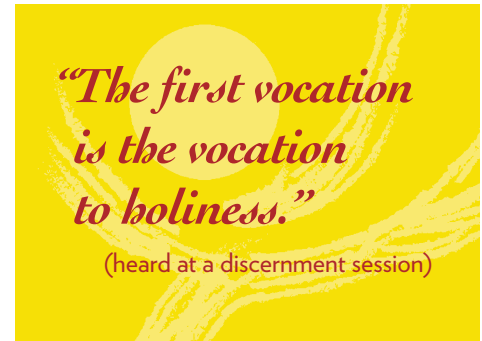




areas of the call to holiness and the centrality of the Eucharist.

An invitation has power, needs to be personal, recognizes the gifts of the other, and creates great joy. In situations of language differences, a smile can be seen as a powerful tool for invitation.

The People of God felt a need to be better formed for the mission of building up the Kingdom by being better witnesses who can speak with understanding and conviction on the power of the kerygma in their lives. Repeatedly, the people mentioned that personal encounter and personal witness were the keys to both reaching those who may have left the Church or to encourage participation by those who have not yet come into relationship with Jesus Christ. This style of witness could help improve the effectiveness of homiletics as mentioned earlier.



Mentioned as a hindrance to this engagement in missionary discipleship is a sense of apathy that sometimes permeates the lives of believers. It is felt that sometimes the work of being a missionary disciple is too arduous and the gains are so small. Seen in the respondents, however, is a true sense of the mission of the Church to bring all into relationship with Jesus. The guidance of the Holy Spirit in all aspects of parish life would be a motivator for the actions of all.

An overarching component that touches on all the concepts enumerated above, would need to be the starting point for this actual work. This would be to rekindle the ancient tradition of the entire People of God called as a **community of discerners** attentive to the will of the Risen Lord as illustrated by the Council of Jerusalem in Acts of the Apostles. This is not a change in governance or hierarchy, but rather a return to our Apostolic Tradition in the manner our parishes, and hence the local church, listen to and perceive the needs of the whole. Everyone plays an active part though with various roles and contributions. Modeling after what Pope Francis has done with the calling of this Synod, starting locally, gives evidence to this importance of our Tradition of the practice of consulting with the People of God first. Why? The small group discernment sessions held brought people together from all walks of life for the sole purpose of listening to one another with openness and without fear. Those who have joined in this process in our diocese obviously have a desire for the Church to grow and to bear fruit.

Often during our consultation, we heard from the People of God that these types of discernment sessions, with the focus on Communion, Participation, and Mission, were life-giving and refreshing. There was a definitive call for the local church to take this synodal model going forward...gathering together in prayer, listening to the Holy Spirit, creating structures modeled after this process of sharing, giving feedback, and then discovering ways to move forward with common goals, building trust among the ordained and the laity. This return to our roots, led by the hierarchy and accompanied by the faithful would need to involve



formation in the skills needed for creating a church that listens first and then acts in communion with the Holy Spirit.

The key to success for a **community of discerners** is predicated on individual conversion to a new way of listening. This is not a call or a threat to doctrine, but rather a look back to the Early Church for guidance moving forward. Each baptized person, both lay and ordained, is called to be receptive to the voice of the Holy Spirit, which demands an openness to others, their thoughts, and perhaps most importantly their experiences. This may well be our most profitable action of the local synodal process, but perhaps the hardest to accomplish. The entire Diocese of St. Augustine must be willing to engage in this individual conversion that looks first to the Holy Spirit and then engaging with others in order to fully know the path forward.

As part of our story, we gathered key Roman Catholic key leaders with key leaders of the ecumenical community to prayer, discern, and give practical ways that we could be walking together in synodality. These small groups pointed to the shared baptism and mission of all Christians as a starting point. Independently of one another, each group mentioned the Great Commandment as a place for us to start our work. During the dialogue on what hinders our being able to listen to one another were the following obstacles: fear, lack of understanding, lack knowledge of the other, false information provided over time, and a certain sense of vulnerability in being open to others. As the conversation turned to how we can be better and break down these obstacles, the solutions centered around dialogue, recognizing the gifts of all, and listening to the Holy Spirit in prayer.

During the conversation, success stories were shared and showed that our Christian Churches are at their best when they are acting together for the common mission. A few activities mentioned: Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, Prison Ministry endeavors, activities centered around Scripture, and the myriad of social justice collaborations that occur on a regular basis. It is thought that building on each of these successes will help further the goal of unity and dispel disunity. Likewise, a common recommendation of more chances to gather for fellowship, prayer, and table talk in small geographical areas was heard from each of the groups. It is thought that the fears mentioned above would be lessened by smaller and more frequent collaborations.

Becoming a community of discerners begins with seeking the answer to the question:

“What is the Holy Spirit asking of us?”

(heard at the synod session)



As with our earlier synodal sessions, there is a definitive call for education and formation regarding the various Christian denominations and how they relate to one another. Misunderstanding comes the spread of either misinformation or fear. The gatherings in small groups listed in the above paragraph would need to involve not only the clergy, but also the laity so that understanding and collaboration could occur through different projects. The guests left this session feeling hopeful, enlivened, encouraged, enriched, and appreciative of the opportunity.

After the conclusion of our discernment sessions, we hosted the Diocesan Pastoral Council as well as the entire presbyterate in conversation with key diocesan directors to answer the following questions:

1. What surprised you in the data?
2. What did not surprise you in the data?
3. What concrete actions can we as a diocese embark on in the coming years.

What follows are what we plan to develop in the next couple of years.

The centrality of the Eucharist is a key element in who we are as a diocese and as church. The Diocese of St. Augustine will be fully engaged in the Eucharistic Revival. This includes formation at all levels, the encouragement of Eucharistic Adoration at all levels and of course continuing to build on our annual Eucharist Congress. A pilgrimage will be arranged to the national Eucharistic Congress in June, 2024.

Activities throughout the next 3 years will seek to engage all in an appreciation of the Eucharist, including those who have been separated from the Eucharistic table.

Parishes will be strongly encouraged to hold small group discernment sessions on key avenues of concern for their location. These would be

KEY AREAS OF IMPLEMENTATION:

- Continued Promotion of Eucharistic Centrality
- Parish small group discernment sessions
- Synodal Formation beginning with Parish Pastoral Councils
- Deanery Discernment Sessions with Bishop
- Discernment gathering with Bishop, priests, and Diocesan Directors



focused on the three components of the synodal process: engaging the Holy Spirit and utilizing listening first skills. These would be held on an annual basis or more often as the needs arise. The diocese, with the bishop as lead along with his collaborators, will host small group discernment sessions in each deanery based on the needs expressed by the parishes in their discernment sessions. The bishop will host at least one set annually within the deaneries. Parish pastoral councils will be the motivator of these sessions and the key catalysts to bring about the synodal process as a way of being church.

The bishop will call on his diocesan executive staff to gather with the priests at least once a year to discuss how we can improve communication and collaboration. This annual event will be a chance to also have casual conversations on concerns and needs expressed by both and to seek a synodal solution to any issues that have arisen.

Every parish will form and develop their parish pastoral council in the concept of synodality. Every gathering of the parish pastoral council will focus part of their meeting time on this endeavor, seeking outside resources as needed so that each parish pastoral council is able to consider itself a model of synodality. The diocese will provide resources, training, and support as needed through its own Diocesan Pastoral Council. Under the guidance of the pastors, parish pastoral councils will take the lead in forming other key committees of the parish in the art of prayerful listening.

In each of these action items, we are already aware that part of our growing into a truly synodal church is to engage with groups we have not always engaged with fully. In addition, encouragement will be given to the welcoming of youth, women, various ethnicities, consecrated women, and other communities at all levels of parish and diocesan life, making better use of the gifts these groups bring to our church.

*Walking together,
as the disciples on the road to Emmaus,
will allow us to become the Church the
Holy Spirit is calling us to become.*

APPENDIX A RESOURCES DEVELOPED FOR OUR PROCESS

Synod on Synodality (dosaf1.com)

Webpage of resources, including all Vatican and USCCB documents

Bulletin announcements leading up to the opening Mass (Spanish and English)

Two-page summary of the process of Communion, Participation and Mission (7 languages)

Invitations for pastors to provide 12 ambassadors from the diversity of their parishes

Program for Opening Mass with catechetical elements

Witness talk YouTubes

Livestreamed opening Mass

Questions available in 7 languages

Electronic submission forms available in 7 languages

Training for facilitators, scribes, and welcome committees

Schedule of sessions

Postcards mailed to all households inviting them to a deanery discernment session

Summary pages from each discernment session

Drafts of the document

Power point summary



APPENDIX B CONSULTATION GROUPS

Over the course of our local process, July, 2021 – May, 2022 we consulted with the following stakeholders, in addition to our diverse steering committee:

Catechetical Leaders

Catholic School Principals

College students of Jacksonville

Consecrated women

Deacon Board

Diocesan Directors (4 times)

Diocesan Pastoral Council (3 times)

Ecumenical Leaders

The Faithful

High School students and staffs

Ministry Formation Participants

The People of God

Priests and deacons in their regular deanery gatherings

Presbyteral Council (3 times)

Priests (all) during annual convocation

Young Catholic Professionals through Theology on Tap

Youth Ministers