



# Synod on Synodality

## National Synthesis for Canada (2022)

### 1. Introduction: Companions on the Journey

1. The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops comprises four Regional Episcopal Assemblies: Western Canada, the Province of Ontario, the Province of Quebec and the Atlantic Provinces. The national synthesis that we are submitting on behalf of the Conference is based on the four syntheses of these four Regional Assemblies.<sup>1</sup> Obviously, not all the ideas, suggestions and reflections of each of these four reports will be found in the national synthesis; we have retained what was most present in the four reports in order to establish as realistic a picture as possible of the exchanges that took place during the synodal process in the Church in Canada.

2. Great faith and love for the Church was expressed by the participants at the various discussion tables. Most of the respondents expressed their appreciation for the synodal process, as well as the desire to continue the same type of meetings and exchanges well after the synod in Rome in October 2023. This form of “walking together” as the Church was greatly appreciated. Some expressed doubts about the outcome of the synodal process due to their perception of the Church as a rigid institution unwilling to change and modernize itself, or due to a suspicion that the synodal outcome had been predetermined. Yet in spite of this, hope was always present.

3. Each of the regional reports manifested the particular character of their communities. Although none of the issues raised are unique to particular regions or provinces, differences in emphasis were noted. Thus, in Western Canada, the significant population of Indigenous people and many immigrants offers a unique diversity, although Catholics remain the largest single religious group. Here, the issue of reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples has taken on particular importance, as has the desire for a humble church that is concerned with reconciling and bringing people together. In the province of Ontario, questions were often raised about the internal organization of the Church: structure and hierarchy, internal relations, faith education (the question of Catholic schools) and the need for catechetical formation. In the province of Quebec, strongly marked by the secular character of society, there is a desire for urgent change in order to regain – or preserve – what remains of the Church’s relevance and mission. Here, the gulf between society and the Church – whether on the moral, ethical or even religious level – is such that it seriously threatens the future of Christian communities. Finally, in the Atlantic provinces, there was a desire for greater leadership and shared responsibility. A lack of being heard during similar engagements resulted in some doubt about the possible outcome of the synodal process and what fruits could be hoped for. However, numerous sustained and varied efforts were made to share and listen. Thus, across the country, there was participation, hope and a desire to continue “synodal” sharing at the local level.

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<sup>1</sup> The Reports of the four regions are available from the respective regional assemblies.

4. This national synthesis is therefore a condensation of what was heard during the various diocesan sessions across Canada. It is presented as a small contribution toward the initial phase of the synodal process: one of listening to people from across the world and from all walks of life. The various suggestions and proposals contained herein represent what was heard and are not necessarily official positions of the Church in Canada. Rather, they are presented in the context of the synodal process so that the whole universal Church, united to the successor of Peter, may prayerfully discern what new ways the Lord might be calling us to walk together in following him.

## **2. Listening**

5. The theme of listening was naturally a very common theme. In order to be credible missionary disciples we must learn to listen, welcome, and discern in an authentic desire to meet the other. Respondents indicated a strong desire to reach out to the peripheries and to proclaim the Gospel. Many felt that a witness of joy and integrity was crucial and that a culture of listening and inclusion would help people feel welcome throughout the Church. This witness includes moving outside of our own parishes and structures to welcome and stand with those who suffer from injustice.

6. Listening is intrinsically connected to welcoming. To authentically listen is to open a welcoming space for dialogue and trust. Without necessarily agreeing with everything people might say, it is nonetheless important that the listening and welcoming community listen in an open and non-judgmental way so that each person might feel part of the family and welcomed. During the synodal process, many expressed that they had experienced positive transformation through the experience of listening. It was sometimes suggested that listening alone is not enough; it must also be accompanied by respect and action. While there were many opportunities to speak during the synodal process, some felt that the Church's capacity to listen was poor and that concrete responses were rare.

7. Although the synodal sessions gathered together a wide variety of people, there was still concern that they did not always attract individuals of certain demographics, particularly those on the peripheries, and those who do not regularly attend church. In many cases, there was a desire that the Church not only be a teaching Church, but a listening Church. This may imply forms of pastoral accompaniment characterized by unprejudiced listening, the recognition of differences, and focusing on the genuine good of the other person. This will also mean genuinely listening to what that other person has to say and learning from their experiences. In many cases, this will mean listening to those on the margins of society and particularly the poor.

8. On a more specific issue, many Catholics are calling on Church leaders to take more decisive action with Indigenous peoples to assist in the healing of those wounded by the Church, particularly by the Indian Residential School system and its legacy. There is also a general desire to listen to, and walk with, Indigenous Peoples (the theme of the Summer 2022 visit of Pope Francis to Canada's Indigenous Peoples is "Walking Together"). Many expressed a desire for the Church to walk in greater humility, in a restored relationship with Indigenous Peoples and with all of creation.

9. In general, listening was seen as difficult to implement as a pastoral approach. Several reasons for this were proposed, including: the general busyness of today’s world, other pastoral responsibilities; the increasing workload and administrative responsibilities of the clergy; and the clericalism which may be more or less present in certain communities.

### **3. Speaking Out**

10. Among the themes raised, speaking out in the Church was seen as important. Although many noted their appreciation for the freedom to speak out during the synodal sessions, some indicated a more general difficulty in speaking out freely and authentically in the Church, whether because of fear of being “shut down” or fear that their contributions would have no effect.

11. One sign of hope across our country is the presence and activity of small groups whose members engage in sharing their faith and studying the scriptures. These groups, because of their size, foster genuine listening and sharing. When people are heard, they grow in boldness in speaking out. A greater use of such small groups could contribute to the renewal of Christian life in the Church. By allowing for inclusion and welcome, these groups make parish life more personal and attractive. It was also pointed out that such small groups could be a means for liturgical and spiritual renewal, for understanding what a Eucharistic community is, for allowing the Holy Spirit to work, and for putting Jesus Christ at the center of the life and work of the Church. This is because by fostering personal conversion and faith in Christ, as well as study of the Word of God, these groups provide ongoing formation to create disciples who are better-equipped to participate in the life of the Church and to speak out with *parrhesia*. The promotion of such small groups is therefore strongly encouraged.

12. With respect to the Church’s public role, it was pointed out that there is a general perception that the teaching of the Catholic Church is not welcome in our Canadian society. It is thus perceived that Church leaders are very hesitant to testify in public on issues of common concern, especially when the Church’s position is at odds with public opinion. It was often mentioned that the Church is too discreet in its dealings with the world and that it should make more public interventions on social issues. Some wanted the Church to be more active in promoting issues related to its traditional teachings not necessarily shared by secular society (e.g., the sanctity of human life, etc.), whereas others wanted the Church to join in promoting those causes already taken up by our contemporary society (e.g., the environment, women’s rights, protection of persons identifying as LGBTQ, etc.)

### **4. Celebration**

13. The synodal consultations revealed a general concern for, and awareness of, the importance of liturgical celebrations in the life of the baptized. Indeed, the liturgy is seen as at the heart of the celebration of our faith and therefore must be meaningful and nourishing for the faithful. Certainly, the place of the Word of God and prayer is seen as important in the spiritual engagement of the faithful because liturgy gathers the faithful around Christ as brothers and sisters. The role of the priest within the community was also seen as important in creating and encouraging a liturgical culture where clergy and laity “walk together” in celebration.

14. There was significant focus given to the place of the homily within the liturgical celebration. Comments were often heard that homilies are inadequate, uninspiring and disconnected from real life concerns and the challenges of today. It was noted that Scripture is often not well explained or portrayed in a way that is relevant. In addition to these concerns, some comments centered on the use of what was perceived as overly-theological language which is unfamiliar to people. Although the presence of clergy from different parts of the world is a great blessing for the Church in Canada and welcomed by the faithful, in some cases these priests may not be well understood because of language accent or cultural differences. Some respondents suggested that allowing the laity to give homilies could improve this situation.

15. The style in which the liturgy is celebrated was also of concern. Some comments criticized what is seen as a passiveness and non-participation on the part of the faithful. There were also differences between some who prefer a more traditional liturgy and others who desire greater liturgical freedom and even reform. Concern was also expressed regarding music and hymns, which should be carefully chosen and performed in order to give greater nourishment to the celebrations.

16. It was recognized that there is a need for an enhanced catechesis on the Eucharist and its meaning within the Christian community. Indeed, there is often a lack of knowledge of the sacramental life of the Church in general and this relates directly to how the Church celebrates its faith.

17. In addition, some expressed concern about how certain groups may be excluded from the Eucharist (divorced and remarried, people who identify as LGBTQ, etc.) and therefore may not feel welcomed in the Church. Finally, many dioceses have numerous communities where no priest is regularly present, and Mass is only celebrated occasionally. In some cases this has contributed to the creation of an attitude that Mass participation is unnecessary, or even that watching online is equally valid.

18. In general, many comments centered on the need for better liturgical catechesis and a more effective pastoral attitude and approach when celebrating the Church's liturgical life.

## **5. Co-Responsibility in the Mission of the Church**

19. In general, the synodal reports affirmed the importance of ecclesial governance formulated in terms of co-responsibility: between clergy and laypeople; and also between men and women. Complaints were often heard that clericalism is still very present, marginalizing the laity, and women in particular, in carrying out co-responsibility in the Church. There is a strong desire for greater communication and cooperation between clergy and laity.

20. For many, the synodal experience has provided insight into how clericalism can be overcome by the increased participation of the laity. In addition, the experience of co-responsibility, which has been a common theme in Canada for several years now and has been implemented to varying degrees in certain dioceses, has shown that laypeople, including women, can have an effective

role in the administration and governance of local Churches. In relation to this, all regional reports acknowledged receiving requests that women be granted access to ordained ecclesial ministries.

21. Living out co-responsibility in the Church remains difficult given the universal human tendency for appropriation of power. It was pointed out clearly that authoritarianism is not only the prerogative of clerics, but also of some laypeople.

22. There were also suggestions that the laity be better trained and equipped to work in collaboration with priests, thereby relieving the burden on priests, who are often overworked. In particular, this could be done with respect to administrative tasks within parishes and dioceses that do not require priestly ordination for their exercise.

23. With respect to carrying out the Church's mission, many pointed to the primacy of charity and service in the life of the Church. This presents a fundamental challenge for the rebirth of faith communities, since evangelization will only be credible when it is closely and clearly united to the preferential option for the poor and excluded and a strong proclamation of the dignity of the human person.

## **6. Dialogue in Church and Society**

24. The subject of the relationship of the Church and Society was of interest and concern throughout the regions of Canada. The marginalization of faith in society and feelings of alienation are realities that many Catholics live with on a regular basis. At the same time, there was recognition that a certain polarization of discourse exists within the Church itself.

25. Within the Church itself, it was noted that many Indigenous people have experienced a certain pastoral abandonment after many generations of Christian faith. In many ways and for varied reasons, marginalization is experienced by the poor, the elderly, the homebound and the imprisoned and others on the peripheries of our parishes. The lack of effective listening to people was noted as central in this question. Listening and welcoming are often perceived as insufficient in the Church and a lack of follow-up after listening is often seen as inadequate and discouraging to volunteers.

26. Looking outside of the Church, there is a growing distance between the Church and Canadian society. Many noted what they see as a lack of dialogue with the contemporary world, suggesting that attitudes within the Church can be self-referential, resulting in negative judgements on the world. At the same time, a negative image of the Church is often held by society, promoted in particular by media perceived by many to be hostile to the Church. The recent scandals of sexual abuse and the legacy of Residential Schools have enhanced this. There is often a general impression in Canada that the Church's teaching on sexual, family and moral issues are incompatible with a modern society, coupled with the impression that the Church is mute on important controversial issues. This contributes to a sense that the Church is not welcome in society and is even lacking in moral credibility.

27. The situation described above can contribute to intra-Church conflicts between those who wish the Church to be more reformed or “with the times” in its relations with the modern world, and those who believe that such a change in approach would compromise the faith. This leads some to fear that the result of the synodal process, by means of its exchange of opinions, could provide an occasion for the rejection of Tradition. Certainly, the climate of marginalization and the polarization of opinions has been the cause of a certain fear of speaking out and giving witness to the faith. It should also be said that there appears to be a need for greater catechesis in understanding our faith and its teachings so as to give a greater confidence and ability in witnessing.

28. Many comments on the topic of dialogue centered on the need to go out to where people are at and give a true and authentic Christian witness with joy and integrity based on attitudes of listening and inclusion. A focus on the poor, lending a voice to their causes and being their friends is important in the Church’s relationship with today’s society and culture. It should also be said that advocacy for causes that promote the sanctity of life is also central today. Finally, many noted that the Church must do more in the area of communications, not only being present in the media but developing its own means of communication.

## **7. Ecumenism**

29. As Christians, we are called to walk together on the path Christ has laid out for us. This naturally means that our brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ who share with us “one baptism” (Ephesians 4:5) are, and ought to be, our companions on this journey. This living out of the ecumenical dimension of synodality was most clearly evidenced in Western Canada, which has a rich history of ecumenical collaboration and initiatives.

30. It was noted that the Catholic Church could learn from the experience of other churches and ecclesial communities with respect to their living out of synodality. It was also pointed out that in many dioceses, praying and working together with other Christians has become a common practice – although this does not appear to be as widespread across the entire country. As a way forward, Catholics can and should join with other Christians in common prayer and, in a country that is increasingly secularized, proclamation of the Good News. Further, Catholics will find common cause with many Christians on pressing social and moral issues of our day. By joining together with them, we not only amplify our collective voice but build bonds of fraternity between us, thereby promoting the unity of Christians for which our Lord prayed.

## **8. Authority and Participation**

31. The concept of authority in the Church gives rise to a profound unease when viewed from the perspective of the norms of contemporary society. The perception among many faithful *ad intra*, as well as those outside the Church, is that this authority is concentrated in the hands of the ordained ministers (Priests and Bishops) without leaving room for the laity as a whole who form the majority of the Church. This authority is thus viewed as being frozen in time, leaving little room for

evolution, and paralyzing the Church. Since this authority is mainly exercised by celibate clerics, it is also often perceived as being cut off from the reality of families and the modern world.

32. The tragedy of sexual abuse by clergy, as well as the problematic history of Residential Schools and the intergenerational trauma associated with them, have been well-covered by the media, making many Canadian Catholics painfully aware of these realities. This has resulted in a loss of credibility among the faithful as well as among people outside the Church. This mistrust extends not only to the Church as institution but also to the witness of its ministers and pastoral workers. In general, treatment of the Church by the media is often reflexively negative and selective in the facts it conveys. For many, the status quo is increasingly difficult to justify with respect to allowing space for women in leadership positions. A desire is expressed for an authority of service; a sharing between clergy, and lay men and women, while respecting the sacramental character of presbyteral and episcopal ordained ministry.

33. Another symptom of this malaise is the low participation of youth in ecclesial activities and in parish Christian communities, which is particularly acute in some regions of Canada. This is exacerbated by the loss of Catholic schools in some regions, and the ongoing challenge of secularization in the Catholic schools that remain. The committed faithful who are counted on as volunteers are aging. In some cases, communication with the younger generations appears to be very difficult. With respect to young people outside the Church, many of their concerns – such as ecology and respect for creation – find little resonance in the language of parish communities, even though Pope Francis has emphasized these concerns in his letter *Laudato si'*.

34. In short, an authority of service should in its exercise involve the participation of a greater number of the faithful: ordained ministers as well as lay men and women. This could better place the Church on a path of humility and reconciliation with a world that suffers from the divisions and negative consequences of its recent history. The way in which authority is exercised has a direct impact on the people of God's desire to participate in the life of the Church.

## **9. Discerning and Deciding**

35. Synod participants expressed a deep and explicit desire to continue the experience of the synodal process in the Church. Having lived this experience, they want it to continue into the future. This experience of meeting and listening allows for discernment of the conditions in which the Church can proclaim the Gospel and the Kingdom of God; it allows for comparing different points of view, for consensus building and for initiatives that are the fruit of a shared decision in the community, between the faithful and ordained ministers.

36. Interesting initiatives and steps are being taken in the sister Churches, as well as in other ecclesial communities. With successes and difficulties, these non-Catholic communities live out councils, deliberative assemblies, and commonly-agreed decisions. These examples could prove helpful in discerning a way forward for the Catholic Church.

37. The synodal experiences have involved the participation of a wider assembly, with an important place for the laity, who form the core of the people of God. Our current “synod” experience has awakened in the lay faithful the idea of, and a desire to, get involved in the life of the Church, in its engagement with the world today, and in its pastoral work on the ground. Within this model, decisions no longer belong to a particular group of clerics or ministers; there is a sharing of the concrete responsibilities of leadership in the life of the Church: the pastoral government of the Church, the sacramental life mediated by the ministers, and the pastoral projects lived by the whole community, lay faithful and ordained ministers together.

38. What are the real decision-making levers in the Church? In whose hands do they rest? In considering these questions, it must always be recalled and maintained that the entire Church – a community of those who believe and pray – is the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit and not a kind of charitable organization or NGO.

## **10. Forming Ourselves in Synodality**

39. To grow in synodality, the Church must offer formation at every age and stage of life so both clergy and the laity are equipped for today’s challenges. To this end, it was pointed out that there is a need to develop ongoing catechesis and education and to find new ways to engage families. It was also pointed out that parishes and, where they exist, Catholic schools, need to be more active in sacramental preparation so as to inspire Catholics, both in the Church and in those who have moved away from the Church, to develop a richer understanding of sacramental life.

40. A concern was expressed across most regions of Canada about the lack of formation of Catholics in general, given what many described as a cessation of formation after reception of the Sacrament of Confirmation, normally in adolescence. The importance of ongoing formation for lay and ordained ministers was expressed strongly in all regions.

41. In general, there was an appreciation for the synodal experience lived out over these recent months as well as a desire to continue this process into the future. Participants appreciated the group discussions that occurred and asked for more of the same opportunities with the hope that these discussions would result in changes to pastoral plans and practices. Such future practices could involve new forms of communal accompaniment where people are encouraged to listen to each other and grow in solidarity and compassion.

42. Elements of the synodal meetings that were particularly appreciated included: setting everything within the context of prayer, listening to everyone, charitable discussion, providing feedback to those affected, transparency, and the involvement of youth. For many, whether laypeople, parish staff, or clergy, there was a great joy in being invited to, and participating in, the synodal experience.



43. Within the context of the common baptismal call to holiness, there were repeated calls for more formation in theology and pastoral care being offered to both ordained and lay leaders. In particular, there is a need for training in Scripture, theology and liturgy for the laity so they can continue to journey with, and serve in, a Church called to live differently. It was also suggested that the culture of synodality should itself be incorporated into the process of formation.

44. With respect to living out and creating a synodal way of life, certain roadblocks were identified. These included a lack of catechesis and leadership, where laypeople are often “sacramentalized” but not catechized. Clerical defensiveness, poor leadership, and a heavy workload can also lead to resistance in participating in or establishing the synodal process. In some cases, fear of change and skepticism about the synodal process gave way to cynicism and the belief that the Church would not listen or that the process was set up to achieve a biased result. Others expressed a lack of trust in the synodal process, expecting, rightly or wrongly that particular voices would co-opt the process. However, responses indicated that Catholics cared enough to contribute. For some, these contributions were the occasion for great joy, while for others who had been wounded, these were seen as a new opportunity.

45. Several specific proposals were made. These include learning how to have healthy conversations, developing spaces for youth to talk, providing spaces for encounters between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians to promote healing, and to promote relationship building in synodal style with the Holy Spirit taking the central role.

46. Finally, as mentioned above, the emergence of small groups allows for a unique experience of synodality as these small groups allow and encourage people to listen, to speak out, to read the scriptures together, and to grow in faith. These groups also allow for activities that build social bonds and respond to human and spiritual needs as well as promoting authentic dialogue.

## **11. Conclusion**

47. The reports from Canada’s four Regional Assemblies indicate the commitment of the participants to their church. Despite difficulties related to health restrictions in the wake of an ongoing pandemic, meetings were held and various means of communications and surveys were utilized. The activity of the Synod, at the local level, demonstrated the willingness of the faithful participants to live as a Church for and in today’s world. They want their Church to be relevant, active and involved in the ongoing transformation of our world. They recognize the urgent need for the Church itself to undergo a missionary renewal and transformation.

48. The context of the meetings allowed the participants to speak freely. This freedom was not an occasion to attack the Church, the institution, or the current leadership of this Church. In the midst of the questioning, the challenges taken up, and the mission to be accomplished, the participants saw themselves as being challenged, called to greater engagement, and desiring to take initiative. It

is therefore not surprising that the desire to continue the synodal activity as a way of being Church, together and today, was underlined.

49. Christian communities already bring joy and consolation: meeting as an extended family, gathering together during the important moments of the year, working together with those most in need, becoming more aware and educating each other to respect our neighbor and creation, being protagonists in the development and peace of the world, proclaiming a world of hope saved by Christ. When the difficult moments of daily life arise – a death or a family crisis – the welcoming community is there. This community reality has sometimes suffered greatly from the merging of parishes or worshipping communities, but it remains the link that gives rise to participation, commitment and sacramental practice.

50. With a leadership more shared by ministers and committed faithful men and women, communities will be better placed to reach out to a society that is often anonymous and consumeristic. It is the joy found in the Church – the community of believers – that is here to be shared with the world. May each parish in Canada truly become “a community of communities, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey, and a centre of constant missionary outreach” (Francis, *Evangelii gaudium* 28).

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