



## National Synthesis Document

In France, the synodal process called for by Pope Francis has involved more than 150,000 people. Synod teams met at various levels, including in dioceses, parishes, movements, spontaneous groups and religious congregations, between October 2021 and April 2022. Teams often chose to tackle a few of the questions sent by the synod office appropriate to their context. This was followed by a process of discernment and synthesis at diocesan level.

In many places, people were enthusiastic about the synodal process and felt they were taking part in an encouraging experience of listening and discerning as a community. However, this consultation also met with resistance of various sorts. Firstly, it was difficult to hear the most marginalised voices; secondly, it was difficult to contact and engage with teens and young adults; thirdly, some Catholics were fearful that the process would impose changes on their beloved Church; and finally, many priests found it difficult to see the benefits of the synod.

*The common denominator of all these contributions is undoubtedly how much people enjoyed meeting. People were glad to have been asked, glad to be able to respond to Pope Francis's call, glad to be able to discuss important and deep subjects in a friendly atmosphere, and glad to meet in fellowship and sometimes prayer with either old friends or people they had never met before.*

Diocese of Bordeaux

This synthesis brings together all the diocesan reports of the Catholic Church in France as well as several additional contributions sent to the Bishops' Conference of France. The contributions of religious congregations and movements have also been sent to the relevant dicasteries of the Holy See. They are not specifically identified in this document.

This synthesis outlines questions raised in the reports as honestly as possible, as well as the tensions and aspirations revealed by this process. It makes no theological judgements but seeks to inform subsequent discernment within the Church by clearly stating the challenges that have emerged from this consultation.

Many dioceses noted that the synodal process has coincided with the publication of the report of the Independent Commission into Sexual Abuse within the Church, which many Christians have heard as a call for change. At the same time, the Covid 19 pandemic has caused many people to stay away from church for lengthy periods and this has made the necessity of taking care of each other ever clearer. The diocesan reports make loud and clear the deep longing for a Church with a greater sense of community and fellowship. We have identified needs: the importance of drawing refreshment from the Word of God, the urgency of offering credible signs that speak to today's society and the necessity of providing places for fellowship and discussion. These needs have formed the structure of the three main sections of this synthesis. Each section starts with a 'small voice' so we can hear how the synodal journey proceeded.



*The thirst is there. What can the Church do to meet expectations? The question of a Church close to our brothers, to those in trouble, comes back again and again, and it's a real concern because the image of the Church at the moment is centred on preaching the Gospel and the Mass.*

Diocese of Besançon

## 1. Drawing refreshment from the Word of God

*Each time we meet to hear the Word of God and seek together to understand it, we form a community of the Church, even if those who are present never come to Mass. We move forward thanks to what each person brings. [...] Perhaps one cornerstone of the Church is the people who come together to read the Word of God.*

Fraternité de La Pierre d'Angle, Poissy

These extremely impoverished people identify within the communal reading of the scriptures a foundation of Church life. In meditating on the scriptures, participants expose their lives and words to the Word of God and are able to hear God's call to each of them and to the Church. In this way, all are able to find their place, whether they are very poor or not, a practising Christian or not.

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The diocesan phase of the synod has enabled many Christians to express the conviction that the Word of God is a wellspring from which it is profoundly good to draw. Through this source, the life of the church is continually renewed. Many synodal teams have also placed meditation on the Bible at the heart of their meetings. Following Vatican II, which called on all the baptised to love the scriptures that contain the Word of God (*Dei Verbum*, § 24-25), the diocesan reports emphasised the importance of drawing refreshment from the Word and called on the faithful to experience it more.

*A thirst for the Word of God was very strongly seen in all the contributions, either to nourish daily life or to be shared in groups, as well as to provide a better foundation for the work of the Church. It is one of the first needs to have come out of this synodal process.*

Diocese of Nanterre

Among the spiritual practices cited, meditation on the scriptures in small groups seems central. It is seen as a form of personal spiritual enrichment and a way for the Church to respond appropriately to our contemporaries' quest for meaning with a practice that combines depth and freedom. It is also identified as a way of strengthening community life, because the call of God on our communities can be discovered in communal listening to his Word. Furthermore, the missional aspect is notable: many informal Bible study groups manage to include people who do not feel comfortable in more formal services.

On the other hand, there are strong feelings about homilies. Many people are disappointed when the preaching does not sufficiently draw on the Word of God and does not nourish the daily life of the congregation. A recurring demand is for an expansion of preaching at the Eucharist to include laypeople, specifically female voices. People would like better Biblical teaching for



ordinary Catholics and proper training in homiletics for pastors; this would also be needed for all laypeople called to a preaching ministry.

Finally, many of the reports asked for Services of the Word to be offered and encouraged.

*“Services of the Word” could be offered more frequently in the parish. They would allow us to bring everyone together, even when the Eucharistic Sacrament is unavailable. They’re a real place of unity. They offer laypeople – men and women – a real opportunity to interpret scripture, and the form of prayer can be freer and more spontaneous.*

Diocese of Marseille

## **2. Give credible signs of the goodness of God and the equal dignity of all the baptised**

*The marginalised, that's us. The pillars of the Church, that's us!*

Disabled people in the Diocese of Rodez

Can those who are marginalized be pillars of the Church, those who support the whole edifice, thanks to whom everyone can meet, whom we learn to see at the top yet who anchor us in the ground? This dream can be seen in many ways in the reports. They show how much the Church needs to give credible signs that really translate the Word of God and speak clearly to today's society. These signs are not an end in themselves: they serve to build a more fraternal Church that honours the equal dignity of all the baptised.

### **2.1. Continuing the experience of synodality**

*Walking alongside the most fragile and the most damaged is the best way to walk alongside everyone, but especially Christ.*

Diaconate of the Diocese of Fréjus-Toulon

Parishes generally admit that the most marginalised are absent from their communities and struggle to go beyond a few set prayers about the place of the poor and the most afflicted. However, when the contributions of the marginalised were sought out and accepted they often reminded us that they were indeed there and outlined a promise: if Christians take care to walk “alongside the most fragile” they will see the presence of Christ and hear his call more clearly. Learning to walk and listen in this way was central to the synodal experience.

At the diocesan level, this has been very widely identified as a joyful experience of communion. It is a happy experience of speaking freely, in truth and without going back over disagreements under the guise of hasty compromise. Hopes have risen when Christians discovered the benefits of paying attention to voices that they would not normally hear.



*Laypeople would like to be heard more and for there to be fewer hierarchical relationships between them and between laypeople and priests. In this way they will gain the freedom to suggest new ideas to the whole parish and expect that these ideas will be welcomed.*

Diocese of Belfort-Montbéliard

Synodality is a learning journey because listening, discussion and discernment will deepen as we continue along the road. There are already places where fraternal discussion takes place within the Church, in parishes, deaneries and dioceses. When discussions are welcomed, these are the places where the synodal journey is effective, and this can be seen in the reports. This learning to be synodal should lead to change: for example we can learn from the way the Word of God is received by the baptised that it is better to open doors rather than to give answers.

*Allowing oneself to be converted “to be shaken up” is also absolutely essential.*

Diocese of Évreux

This synodal experience is different from an opinion poll. Those who took part mentioned how carefully they tried to put themselves under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. To this end they often rooted their discussions in meditation on the scriptures. To do this they had to break through a widely shared scepticism of the Church’s capacity for real reform, capacity to live out synodality through actions as well as words. The reports contained a widely expressed desire for the experience to continue after the synod is over, especially for continued mutual listening. People have expressed a hope and we must be careful not to disappoint them.

*This distrust is rooted in the past experience of broken promises.*

Diocese of Rouen

## **2.2. Ministries in the service of meeting God and meeting people**

*The Church must always have an open door. Jesus opens his arms to us with help from the priests.*

Groupe Amitié Espérance Arc en Ciel, Diocese of Pontoise

This group of Christians with mental health difficulties associates the help of priests with the opening of a door as the sign of Christ’s welcome. In fact, ministry is a sign of how the Word of God brings humanity together and how it works within the Church. This is why the most vulnerable people cite the irreplaceable role of ministers, but also problems in their relationships with them. To open the door to faith and accomplish their mission in the world that we know, what ministries does the Church need and how can we improve the way they are delivered?

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The dioceses show a real recognition of the value of priests and their engagement in ministry and we read this as a precious sign. We sense that the difficulty of the priest's mission is due to the many and contradictory expectations that are placed upon them.

Specifically, the question of the burden placed upon parish priests makes people are sad that it is difficult for them to be available in expanding parishes. The baptised seem to be calling them



back to their vocation: they are there to walk alongside people rather than to run a parish in the same way you might a company. Relationship problems were widely raised: authoritarianism; problems relating to women; an overbearing rather than a friendly attitude (to the point that many reports openly raised serious concerns for the wellbeing and health of priests) and the difficulties priests from other cultures had in finding their place in the Church as it exists in France.

The training of priests was often raised. This covered two aspects: On one hand, many people suggested a common formation for ordained ministry, licensed ministry and all baptised people. On the other hand, the reports suggested that future priest most needed improved formation in personal qualities such as relationships, mental health, leadership and communication skills. A frequent desire was for priestly celibacy to be left to the personal choice of the priest concerned, to the extent that priestly ordination and marriage are seen as compatible.

*Behind the clearly expressed demand for a rebalancing of responsibilities between the clergy and laity is a thirst for a true spiritual companionship between the baptised in different states of life. There is a frustration with not being able to share enough with the Religious and with having priests who are too wrapped up in managerial tasks to be able to spend spare time together.*

Diocese of Paris

We find astonishingly few references to diaconal ministry, the specificity of which is not raised in the reports. However, many Catholics did not spontaneously talk about the bishops either when they talked about the Church. When they did talk about them, we infer either a suspicion of groupthink or unresolved tension (even if only implied) in some dioceses.

Designated ministries (lectors, acolytes and catechists) are mentioned with pressing calls for dioceses to take advantage of them so that these ministries can also be credible signs of the Word and presence of God. This is now an urgent matter for the bishops. These ministries, which now open to both men and women, must be clarified and properly implemented.

### **2.3. Men and women: living out the equal worth of the baptised**

*The Church must make its heart larger.*

Shirelle, Catholic Chaplaincy to Travellers, Province du Nord

Like others, those Travellers who contributed brought out the image of the Church as a place that opens the heart of its members (making it infinitely precious) but simultaneously as a place where many regrettable examples of narrow-mindedness can be found. This dichotomy is clearly also true in the case of the place of women.

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On the place of women in the Church, the reports detect an urgency as well as innumerable injuries. The injuries come from difficult relationships with priests and bishops and the blatant disproportion between the number of women involved in the Church and the number who are in a position to make decisions. Although the service women offer is appreciated, their voices



seem to be ignored. This is a flagrant omission given that they contribute effectively to many good judgements within local churches. This is an urgent matter that has been identified in many of the reports. The way women are treated in the Church is not conducive to its mission at a time when equality between men and women has become self-evident in wider society. The hurts are all the more serious because they come from a conviction that the Church is depriving itself of innumerable charisms and real opportunities to extract itself from clerical isolation.

*“On the place of women, everyone is moving forward apart from the Church.” [...] We are revolted by the inequality between men and women in the Church, and it starts at a very early age. We want another model for our children.*

Mission de France (contribution from a group of women in their thirties)

We also read many requests for women to be ordained as deacons. Diaconal ministry was rarely identified specifically, it was more a case of the pressing need for a “symbolic first step” (*Promesses d’Église*) – and the request (mentioned above) that preaching by women should be allowed during Mass. Slightly less frequent, although still quite widespread, was the demand for women to be ordained as priests.

*The place of women in the Catholic hierarchy must be completely reconsidered, urgently and in-depth – including theologically. Many contributions insisted on this point.*

Diocese of Périgueux



## 2.4. Governance: recognising and supporting charisms

What will help the Church?

*When I am accepted and can give. I like to bring something. It's very simple, but I like to give.*  
Communauté du Sappel, Diocese of Chambéry

These marginalised people express their longing to give as well as to receive. In this light, Church governance should not primarily be about good administration but rather about valuing people's gifts and welcoming what each person can offer the community.

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Church communities at all levels are in the business of shaping themselves according to the gifts of their members. This enables each baptised person to take up their proper responsibilities and play their part in mission within society and the Church. The reports raise many tensions in this area. Examples include the recurrent experience of abuse of power, pyramidal governance structures, a fear of conflict that leads people to hide problems rather than to address them, and the arrival of a new parish priest who imposes a new direction opposite to the one that was previously being taken in a parish.

However, balancing these tensions were a number of aspirations, including for clear and explicit mission aims, for time-limited mandates, and for regular reviews of mission and community life that were taken seriously. People did not expect all parishioners to do everything, but rather there to be a certain level of transparency in decision-making and finance.

*Joint responsibility flows from the fact that mission is entrusted to all the baptised (clergy and laity, men and women). It must not rest exclusively on the charge entrusted to the priest but on the baptismal ministry of all. Clericalism is a scourge and clergy and laity both have responsibility. [...] Joint responsibility is good for evangelism.*

Diocese of Coutances and Avranches

Of course, some aspects are paradoxical. Christians want to take on a greater role in reflection and more responsibility, but many of the reports recognise the difficulty in engaging for the long term.

*People worry about representation. There needs to be socio-cultural and generational diversity so that discernment can be as fair and objective as possible.*

Diocese of Évreux – Corbeil-Essonnes

At diocesan level there were three types of request. Firstly, for genuine new power structures – for example, councils made up of elected parishioners – because the synodal dimension of governance is currently dependent on the goodwill of the bishops. Secondly, for real subsidiarity with delegated decision-making at the relevant level and not merely delegated tasks. Thirdly, for laypeople called to responsible positions to be offered appropriate training, which could also benefit all Catholics. The issue here is reception of the Second Vatican Council's teaching on the Church.



## 2.5. The Liturgy: expressing depth and fellowship

*As soon as I enter the chapel I find my brothers and my sister, I am just one among many in a powerful sense of communion. All the difficulties of the week fade away like magic.*

Chaplaincy of Caen Prison

The devotion of this prisoner speaks of the liturgy as a concrete symbol of the reality of the Church. Worshipping God is revealed to be a profound experience that transforms the difficulties of day-to-day life and helps him to cope. It is also a time of fellowship and communion with others. This two-fold purpose is widely seen in the reports.

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Many of the reports mention how the Eucharistic liturgy is central to the living faith of Catholics. Some – such as those who are particularly attached to the Roman missal of 1962 (the old rite) – crave a celebration of the Mass that better meets their thirst for inward refreshment. The reports also highlight the fact that the Eucharist is essential to the very make up of communities. However, in many places the liturgy appears to be a source of tension between pastoral flexibility and attachment to ritual, and between respect for the treasures of liturgical symbolism and the questions raised by language that has become unintelligible to many. Many of the reports also note that the liturgy can be a good opportunity to draw people into the community. This is borne out with respect to the most vulnerable, especially when accommodating disabilities (such as deafness) where the hope of being welcomed like a sister or brother is often disappointed. The same is true of children: they often want to be included in preparing for and celebrating the liturgy but feel left out by communities that are dominated by older generations.

*Why is church sad? Mass is too long, there are too many words. You spend all the time listening and you don't understand. Prayer at KT is simpler, we sing, move, get things ready, it's better. Jesus managed to celebrate, he prayed lots.*

Children at catechism class, Diocese of Autun

These words bring together three aspirations. The first, which has already been mentioned, calls for a wider variety of liturgies to include Services of the Word, times of prayer that give a central place to reflection on the scriptures. The second, less frequently mentioned, recalls the importance of pilgrimages and popular piety. The third calls for a renewed liturgical formation to tackle what many of the reports record as the impenetrability of the language currently in use in the Church.

Finally there are so many comments conveying profound disagreement with the refusal to allow girls to serve at the altar, or women to enter the choir for liturgical services, that we are in no doubt of the real suffering experienced and the pressing need to address this subject.

## 3. Living as brothers and sisters in Christ



*The Church must be open and go out to people, take time to meet people and to listen. She must allow everyone to speak and be a Church that encourages all, so that light and peace can flood hearts and minds. A Church that does not judge anyone.*

Groupe Place et Parole des Pauvres, Diocese of Arras

The hopes expressed by members of the group 'Place et Parole des Pauvres' (Space and Word of the Poor) was widely shared. No doubt their situation made their thirst to be heard by the Church all the more urgent. It was linked to a desire to find non-judgemental support within Catholic communities. In a society that is saturated with images and activities, but with innumerable troubles and worries, the capacity to welcome and encourage is the best witness to Christ we can offer.

### 3.1. Offering fellowship

*We must not be afraid to go out and find those who are afraid to come in, we must not stop looking for the poorest and look differently so that the Church can be more welcoming to the poorest people.*

Fraternité de La Pierre d'Angle

The fear of welcoming, preaching the Gospel and meeting people can paralyse Christian communities. But the marginalised people who make up this group show how afraid other people are to approach the Church because they feel unworthy or undesirable. That both these things are true was widely expressed, and it inspires the Church to cultivate community.

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The reports frequently express a lack of closeness and a thirst for fellowship. For many dioceses, proximity is lacking in the current parish model, which is spread out across increasingly large areas. Many of the reports note that the missionary will to spread the Gospel and welcome people is dependent on the opportunity to form close pastoral relationships with identifiable people. Several rural dioceses sounded alarm bells as the recent history of the Church in those places has been experienced as a progressive withdrawal and this has caused real suffering.

As a result, a thirst for community has generated a wide variety of suggestions for fellowship at levels other than the parish. Movements have been mentioned in this context. These offer diverse opportunities for Catholics to meet together and strengthen their faith.

Above all, many of the reports support the idea that forming small fellowship groups would be a suitable scale for Church life today. They give examples of fellowship groups within a village or neighbourhood that might meet for reflection on the Word of God, or to support the vulnerable, or to meet with those who rarely find their place within the parish system. These are creative spaces for long-term fellowship.

*The joys of the Church are essentially linked to group experience (of service, prayer, etc.) in a small community or fellowship. [...] The joy is also that of being unconditionally heard and*



*hearing others. These small fellowship groups are friendly places where we can experience the togetherness we missed during the pandemic.*

Diocese of Quimper and Léon

On the other hand, the suffering that those who feel excluded from communities and/or the sacraments was also frequently heard. This included gay people, those who are divorced and remarried and those who witnessed such exclusions. According to a great many of the reports, these exclusions are a serious counter-witness to the Gospel.

*Many people emphasised that the Church's welcome must be unconditional, without judgement or prejudice and respectful, humble and kind. [...] Any exclusion from the sacraments linked to anyone's way of life aroused incomprehension and sadness and seemed opposed to the welcome that Christ practised.*

Diocese of Toulouse

In looking at the responses of the younger generations, there were no common threads although there were very clear emotional differences. Some teenagers or young adults expressed enthusiasm and confidence in the Church. Many others said they were hoping for a Church that was more accessible and friendly at all levels. They wanted language they could understand better and more open and welcoming communities that would be able to offer real spiritual refreshment.

### 3.2. Nurturing listening and dialogue

*Our differences are not just over details. [...] Everyone should have the humility to recognise that what may be important for one person may be less so for someone else, but we are all brothers and sisters in Christ. It is not a question of living alongside one another and forming clans of similar people who don't speak to others. We must work together to move towards Christ and hear what everyone has to say, so we can be personally transformed through discussion. Places of welcome and opportunities to listen and share experiences can facilitate this communion.*

The Community of Taizé

The problems of engaging in dialogue with those who do not recognise themselves within the Catholic church is recognised, but dialogue is just as difficult between Catholics. Many of the reports mention these two levels of difficulty. The Church is invited to develop a culture of listening and dialogue so that Catholics are more likely to enter into dialogue with others.

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The synodal process has shown that listening, dialogue and forgiveness are essential to deepening relationships.

*The importance of group work, of experiencing real solidarity so we can truly be a community. Having a coffee together, drinks together... Having fun as a community.*



Diocese of Chartres

Many of the reports also highlighted the importance of ‘neutral ground’, places designed to allow dialogue with non-Christians, places where it would be possible to meet people who would not normally enter a Church. This is all the more important since the language used by the Church and its pastors appears so disconnected from the experience of daily life as to be difficult for many people to understand. Anything that enables Catholics to meet their neighbours or fellow villagers is highlighted in the reports as being important. ‘Neutral ground’ also includes places where a great many Catholics are engaged in social work supporting families at risk, those who are unwell, and migrants, etc.

*Catholic education appears to be an opportunity for the Church to be present and preach the Gospel openly.*

Diocese of Saint-Brieuc and Tréguier

Aside from mentioning neutral ground, the diocesan reports did not question the secular nature of public institutions, but did note that French secular culture makes it difficult for Christians to witness openly to the Gospel, or even for them to talk about the fundamental spiritual challenges of life with others.

In this context, the mission of the Church is almost always conceived along the lines of dialogue and sharing experiences for two reasons. Firstly, it is important to be open to the good things that the society in which we live can teach us. Thus we find several references to concern for the environment, which is shared by Catholics. Secondly, a considerable number of reports are imbued with an awareness that a profound humility influences the witness that the Church can give and the service that it is able to offer. Any attempt to give lessons is now unacceptable to precisely those to whom one would wish to speak. The many requests for training in listening and dialogue demonstrate that research is in order.

Finally, ecumenism is rarely mentioned other than as an unsatisfied aspiration. However, wherever it is experienced, it is found to be joyful and mutually enriching, and constitutes a hopeful sign for the fragmented society in which we live.

## **Conclusion**

*We dream of a Church [...] where the Holy Spirit can act and inspire new things. A Church that is ready to move with changes in our society, freed from some of the burdens in the way it works, advancing resolutely towards unity, where people can speak freely, always attentive to the little ones and those who have been cast aside, a praying Church that trusts in her Creator and her Saviour.*

Diocese of Chambéry, Maurienne and Tarentaise

We noticed two particularly stimulating aspirations in the reports that are closely linked: the Word of God (*part I*) and fellowship (*part III*). The Word of God is recognised as a source of meaning, spiritual progression and communion that the Church is called on to make more accessible. Hearing the Word together creates a sense of fellowship that can be seen in various



ways. The reports insist that maximum effort should be put into enabling this to happen as close as possible to people's homes. This sense of fellowship through listening and discussion, while seeking to faithfully respond to the leading of the Holy Spirit, is at the heart of the synodal experience.

To preach the Word of God through and in fellowship, the Church needs credible signs of the closeness of God (*part II*). These are not ends in themselves, but contribute to making the whole body of the church a 'sacrament' of the call that God makes on our humanity. There are already many paths towards making this 'dream' a reality. They nourish our hope and now invite us to embark upon new transformations.