



Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference

Synod on Synodality

Bishop's Conference Synodal Synthesis

Introduction

Process

The Southern African Bishops' Conference heeded the call of Pope Francis to engage on the Synod on Synodality. Because of the time frames involved, the diversity of the Church across the Conference area and the effects of Covid (which had greatly impacted on the Church) each diocese approached the process in a manner best suited to their situation. The important thing is that every diocese engaged in some way or another with the synodal process. Nationally, the synod prayer translated into the different local languages was prayed in small groups and gatherings.

Common to all dioceses was an introductory input about the Synod to the clergy, religious and lay people who were charged with the running of the process. In the majority of dioceses an opening celebration was held. This acted as a moment of motivation for the synodal process as it created the expectation of involvement. From the opening, the process moved to parish and group level with people meeting in parish groups and other interest groups to reflect together on the synodal or similar questions. Once the listening circles had finished their work reports were sent to the diocesan organizers who collated what was said into the diocesan reports. These reports were then sent to the SACBC Secretariat to collate and were presented to the Bishops at their August Plenary.¹

Responses

The responses received from the Dioceses indicated a variety of engagements with the synodal process ranging from enthusiastic involvement to opposition to the process. It was evident from the responses that great effort had been put into the Diocesan Reports by the different coordinators. The reports indicated that the engagements were shaped by the local situations and resources. Some dioceses used the questions sent by the Synod Committee while others adapted them and used simpler versions of them to enable all people to participate. This resulted in diversity of approach as well as response. Many different and varied groups came together to

¹ It must be noted that the Covid 19 pandemic and the effects thereof had a great impact on the process and so even the process was adapted to take these into account. Many parishes, communities and groupings were, at the same time as the synodal process, trying to rebuild and regroup. They thus faced the challenge of smaller numbers, the inability to gather freely, continued government restrictions and a sense of apathy that the pandemic seemed to cause while at the same time struggling to re-establish regular parish life. However, engagement with the process did rebuild a sense and appreciation of the importance of the local Church community



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reflect on what it meant for them to be disciples of Jesus.

Variety of responses to Synod of Synodality

Many of the responses had large sections devoted to practical local diocesan and parish issues e.g., establishment of youth groups, more altar servers including girls, more readers, greater lay involvement in the running of the parish etc. These issues are best responded at the local level by the leadership and so have been excluded from this draft. The practical suggestions have their place in helping the Church to reflect the desire for Communion, Participation and Mission but these should not become an end in themselves. There is the need to go deeper than practical suggestions in order to move towards a new way of being.

Social Context

It is important in the introduction to give a brief outline of the social context of the Synod in Southern Africa. The Conference finds itself encompassing three countries – South Africa, Botswana and eSwatini. What follows is shared to some degree or another by all three. The Church finds itself inserted into a context where relationships continue to be fractured in many ways racially, socially, religiously, economically, and politically. There are the issues of family breakdown, plurality, radical inequality, human rights, life issues, xenophobia, violence, unrest violence within and without the family, violence against women and children, general criminality, a decline in moral standards, poverty, and access to basic services. These fractures impact on the Church and the way Christian life is lived in context.

Southern Africa is also impacted by the international trends of secularisation, individualisation, and relativism. Issues such as the Church's teaching on abortion, contraception, ordination of women, married clergy, celibacy, divorce and remarriage, Holy Communion, homosexuality, LGBTQIA+ were raised up across the dioceses both rural and urban. There were of course differing views on these and it is not possible to give a definitive community stance on any of these issues.

Conclusion

The Synod offered the Church a wonderful opportunity to reconnect and to discover anew a way of being community. The milestones that were achieved in a post Covid19 setting were the coming together for opening ceremonies, as parish groups and other Church groups. These gatherings did not just have the benefit of drawing people together but also provided them with opportunities to pray and worship together. It was evident that there is a great hunger to once again come together to pray together whether that be in the Holy Mass or in more informal settings.

What follows next is the Body of this synthesis. It has been organised under different headings.



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Listening, Dialogue, Mission

The responses indicated the definite vision of a Vatican II Church. Whether conscious or not, there is the desire to grow this vision. If the ideas were tabulated, they would fit into the template that Avery Dulles laid out in his *Models of the Church*:

The Church as Institution. – The formal structure of organization with a body of teaching to be believed and lived. A deep love for the Church was expressed by the participants. There is an appreciation for what the institution represents but also a desire to see reform and change.

The Church as Sacrament. – The Church as visible, tangible sign of the presence of God in this world. While this vision of the church is not theologically widely understood, there is the understanding that one of the roles that the Church does play is making visible God's presence in this world through the sacraments as well as through pastoral outreach. There is also the recognition that the brokenness found especially among the leadership of the Church does damage her.

The Church as Herald of God's Word. – The Church as the official messenger of God's Word for evangelisation. The importance of preaching and the role of the preacher is recognised. This is shown in the desire for good preaching and the requests that the preaching circle be opened to allow lay people and women to preach.

The Church as Servant. The Church in service of the wider community has always been a precious dimension of the Southern African Catholic Church and this social outreach continues today. It is an expectation that the Church ministers in this way.

The Church as Community of Disciples. - The idea of the Church as a community is important in the Southern African context. Ubuntu is an African philosophy that says people exist in community not in isolation. We are human because of our interconnectedness with others. This Ubuntu serves as the spiritual foundation of African society. It is a unifying vision enshrined in the Zulu or Xhosa maxim much valued, which is "umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu", i.e., a person is a person through other persons. There are principles of Ubuntu that have Christian values in them such as communality, respect, dignity, value, humaneness, sharing, social justice, co-responsibility, solidarity, compassion, joy, love personhood, morality, conciliation etc. No one exists in isolation or in an individualistic way. Therefore, Church as a community is not foreign to Africa and in our episcopal Conference. The liturgical experience is important. There is the desire for good liturgies which bring people together and connect them with the divine.

These models are about being in relationship with God, others and an organised faith community and kept surfacing under different guises.

While there were some responses which were harking back to a past that has largely disappeared, there was no concerted attempt to impose such a vision on others. It was more of a "remembering of the good old days." There was the general realisation that things (world,



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Church, circumstances, awareness) have changed, that there are new realities and it is within these changed realities that we live our faith.

Process for transformation

We must not assume that Communion, Participation and Mission are absent from the life the Church. They are lived in various and different ways across the Conference Region. As a pilgrim people and as a community of believers, the Church, is constantly striving for the ideal. The Synod represents this striving.

Relationships as a way of being

One of the challenges with a consultative process is that often the results get unavoidably skewed in either direction – no change or change. There is also a danger that suggestions for change can simply be read as just critical of the current situation rather than through the lens of seeking a better way forward. This is a tension that has to be constantly held. There is also no way to gauge the weight that should be given to suggestions – how many support it or do not support it.

Leadership

Bishops: There is an appreciation of Church leadership and what they do within the Church and in the wider society. However, for some there was a desire for a change in leadership style from the tendency to being autocratic and bureaucratic to being more listening, open and consultative. This was a desire from both lay people and clergy. Some criticism of leadership included lack of transparency about sexual and financial crises, lack of leadership in terms of international and national events, the way clergy-abuse crisis was handled and a poorly projected public image of the Church. The general feeling was that there was the desire to see more visibility and leadership.

Priests: In terms of priests in the parishes, many were happy with the ministry that they received but, as far as priests are concerned, issues such as relationship with their bishops, leadership styles, pastoral care, communication from Chanceries and the lack of implementation of decisions came up any number of times. The development of greater priestly fraternity is something that needs attention with certain expressions of difficulty in belonging and building unity being made. There is a desire for pastoral care and outreach between priests.

From the side of the laity, a great deal was shared regarding the clergy. These concerns included financial abuse, low moral standards, lack of liturgical and preaching preparation, apparent poor education and lack of basic pastoral skills, variety of attitudes taken towards women, youth, LGBTQIA+ community, difficulty relating to other men, lay involvement and priests not able to minister in communities they are assigned too, poor example and behavior of the clergy impacts



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on vocations and the happiness of the laity. There also needs to be a movement away from clericalism and a clergy centered community to greater involvement of all in the life and running of the Church.

Deacons: The role of deacons emerged in those dioceses where the diaconate has been revived. There is deep respect for the sacrifices that they make as married men with families and their ministry is appreciated. There is a recognized need for deacons and clear guidelines for them. There is a call for the acceptance of women to the diaconate and the ordination of married deacons to the priesthood. Ongoing formation for deacons was requested.

Consecrated Persons

In the process followed by the Church in Southern Africa, the contribution of the consecrated people to the synod was mainly through a consultation among the religious and was sent directly to the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life in Rome. The report was shared with the Conference Secretariat. Some religious women did also participate in the diocesan process. What came through in the diocesan responses was a concern regarding the decline in vocations, the lack of involvement of religious especially women in diocesan structures and the life of the diocese. There was also a call from religious women to be taken more seriously and acknowledged for their contribution to the life of the Church and not to be treated like second class members.

Parishes: The challenge of communion is the building of more inclusive and welcoming communities open to people on the margins, divorced and remarried, homosexuals and LGBTIQ+, street people, those who do not currently feel welcomed, the deaf and disabled. In many communities there is the desire for an experience of community. In many of the responses this was spoken about but how it is to happen remain a challenge.

In terms of Parishes, while acknowledging a core of committed Catholics, many of the responses indicated a disappointment in the number of people actively involved in the life of the Church community. Those who responded to the synodal process wanted more involvement on their part, but the voice of the non-participant (in terms of synod and Church) was rather silent. Many good ideas for local revitalization were shared and these need to be taken up at the appropriate levels in parishes and dioceses. The average Catholic wants a good, holy priest pastoring and ministering to them and an alive and active community.

Participation – The Church has the necessary structures to encourage and allow for participation. However, there is the impression that these structures are not properly utilized to allow for full participation. It is perceived that either the priest, certain families or individuals dominate these



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structures, keeping others out. Small Christian Communities, Pastoral Districts, Parish Councils, Finance Councils, and Diocesan Pastoral Councils all provide opportunities for involvement. There are seats at the table. It is a matter of getting people to the table.

The kind of participation that is desired is one where the gifts of all members are used e.g. opening preaching to lay people including women, widening involvement in ministries and responsibility etc. In terms of the Synodal process, many people were happy to be involved in this process but in some dioceses the participation was very low and while there may be valid reasons for this, it is difficult to judge why. This should not necessarily be a damper in respect of the process or the results because this was not a democratic process where the more people who raise a point “vote on that point”. This is a process where matters are raised but not in a way that indicates any official position being taken. There was not vote to establish how many do or do not support a particular statement.

There is the request that lay ministries be developed but sufficient space must be given for the exercise of these ministries. It is also important that people see that they can participate.

The ministry around Justice and Peace and environmental issues did not receive widespread comment as many of the reflections focused strongly on the relationships within the parish or the diocese. This is possibly an area that needs reflection as the context of the Southern African Church remains fertile ground for this ministry. The issue of reconciliation in a region where it is most needed also received scant mention. Just because these were not focused on does not mean that they are unimportant and do not need to be addressed. However, these issues are reflected in the desire for the Church to play a more visible role in the society as was done in the past.

Faith Formation

There is a need for faith formation across the different sectors of the Church. The primary place where people get faith formation is through preaching but if that is not good, where is the faith is imparted. There is the need for parents to be involved in the formation of their children. This is an important point to remember as many of the responses indicated the Church's primary responsibility for this. There is the constant request for better catechesis and ongoing faith formation for all.

Mission of the Church

In terms of the evangelizing mission of the Church, the Parish has an important role to play and should not just be a place for Mass, with the doors closed for the rest of the time. It needs to reach out to the community and have a mission of welcome to all providing support to the wider community. Mission is sometimes hampered by lack of funds, but fundraising can be used as part



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of the outreach. The lack of ongoing formation from priest to lay minister, the shortage of priests, priests who make their own rules and push their own agendas, moral decay amongst the clergy, the lack of respect and participation, ministry to families, the failure to use resources properly, issues around baptism of unmarried mothers, divorced people etc. all hamper the mission of the Church. There is a desire for practical action which makes the spoken word of Jesus Christ real.

Ecumenism

There was mention that Ecumenism is of increasing importance. However, many of the responses in speaking of ecumenism showed a lack of denominational concern e.g., a desire for an open Eucharistic practice, especially when there is a coming together of various denominations, preaching to be open to lay people as in other Churches, confusion in liturgical celebrations and the idea that all denominations are equal. The ecumenical contacts are generally around weddings, funerals, cultural events, and family events. In some responses it was mentioned that non-Catholics do not experience welcome in Catholic Churches as they cannot receive communion. For some, religious ecumenism is the joint witness, where the Church acknowledges and cooperates with other Christian denominations. Prayer is uniting us as we come together to pray for the needs of the Church and world.

Interreligious dialogue

This was not a strong feature in the responses, suffice to say that it was mentioned it was in the context of respect and working together. There is also a confusion between ecumenism and Interreligious dialogue.

A self-supporting Church

This comes out in terms of parish support and of vocations both of which remain challenges in every community across the region.

Youth

A great deal of comment was offered on the state of the youth and their presence in the Church. The youth are not the future of the Church they are the present of the Church. They are involved in Church life through varied and different youth structures. In the synod process it was noted that their participation ranged from active participation to near total absence in the process. There is general concern that many young people leave the Church after Confirmation if they even get there. Some of the reasons given were hostility towards the youth, intergenerational conflict, role of parents, teenage pregnancy, Church's moral teaching, temptations in the wider world, lifestyle choices and lack of attractiveness of the Church. The relationship between young people and the Church is something that needs reflection and development in the areas of catechetical



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programs, good preaching, creation of an open environment, good liturgy, and a deeper spirituality.

Marriage and Family Life

Many of the responses included practical suggestions in terms of strengthening marriage and family life in the society. There were requests that the Church relook at such matters as divorce, remarriage, contraception, and Canon Law in respect of marriage. There are misunderstandings regarding divorce and remarriage in the life of the Church. Traditional marriage as an institution was still considered important and desirable. However, there is a strong need to look beyond the ideal of heterosexual marriage to other forms of being family – single parent, LGBTQIA+, multigenerational and blended families, and adoption. There needs to be more open space for discussion around issues affecting family and marriage without being shut down by the law or morals of the Church. People who suffer the breakdown of their marriage appear to be stigmatized.

More emphasis needs to be placed on the formation of the family as the domestic church. This should become the starting point for what we see as a universal call to holiness, and the Church's role is to support this spiritual growth through pastoral programmes that build up families as schools for holiness.

Conclusions: Next Steps

The process of the Synod must not just be measured by the number of people who did or did not participate, the answers given, whether agreed with or not, the responses provided and read but by the quality of the listening, dialogue and desire to relate in new ways. In a process like this it is easy to get caught up in responses that call for change especially change in terms of others, teachings and practice and forget that real change begins in the hearts of individuals and then flows out.

Living the Synod means becoming a community on all levels: A spirituality of journeying together, listening to one another, building strong relationships, unity, shared values, common understandings serving others, mutual respect, mutual recognition, shared responsibility, transparency, honesty, and humility. To achieve this there needs to be a change in style, formation at all levels for new ways to emerge.



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The next step in implementation is the putting into action on the various levels of the Church community the practical suggestions of this process, so that people feel listened to and their participation is shown to be valued. The feeling that we have said all this before, what was the point and why bother needs to be guarded against by working for real outcomes.

The whole issue of formation and training of Adults, Catechists, Liturgy groups, Parish Pastoral and Finance Committees, and Small Christian Communities needs to be realised. This is an ongoing task. Another area that requires attention is the issue of youth and their relationship to the Church. A great deal has been written about this relationship but there is still a disconnect between young people and the Church

The Pastoral Plan of the SACBC and Diocesan Pastoral Plans: This synodal process has been invaluable in helping reflection on the implementation of the Pastoral Plan. These two initiatives working together will help shape the pastoral priorities of the Church moving forward. The Pastoral Plan as well as the questions provided by the Synodal possess a framework for further listening and dialogue. The questions and discussions are not an end in themselves but provide a framework to working in the future.

The Diocesan Synod Reports need to be studied by the relevant Departments of the Bishops' Conference as well as by diocesan structures. On one level they need to look at the practical suggestions and ideas and see to their implementation as far as possible. A similar process can be undertaken on a National level. This will give people the confidence that there is action. The more difficult task is to change the culture in the Church where necessary to create an atmosphere and a practice that includes more listening and dialogue in the search for greater communion, participation, and mission in the Church.

In the conclusion of one report the experience of the Synodal Process is summarised in this way,

“This synodal process was a new process for us. It took us a while to learn what it was about and understand it. From the lessons we learned, we should have probably started with a very much simpler approach to the synod. Instead, we started with a sophisticated concept and process rooted in an ancient history. In retrospect, it might have been easier to make our starting point simpler (not simplistic) and build up the layers of sophistication from there. Having said that, the listening circles around our Archdiocese were, for the most part, successful and fruitful. We would like to have reached more people but are satisfied that we had good representation and we appreciate the many people who came forward with deep sincerity to participate in this process. We thank them for taking it seriously and for giving it much thought and for giving of their time. We have tried to represent their feedback fairly and unambiguously to ensure that their voices are heard, and the essence captured in this synthesis document.”



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We know that this is an ongoing process and that we are starting on a new journey of being Church, so this is the beginning. We need to ensure that, at all levels of the Church, this synodal process is maintained. The local parishes have provided their input. The next phases until October 2023 need to be communicated and reported on so that we, the People of God, can follow and participate in the journey of our collective message to Rome.”