

SUMMARY

CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS IN BELARUS

ACCORDING TO THE RESULTS OF THE DIOCESAN STAGE

THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS ON THE SUBJECT

"FOR THE BENEFIT OF THE SYNOD CHURCH:

COMMUNION, PARTICIPATION AND MISSION"

Minsk

27.07.2022

Step up

On October 17, 2021, the diocesan stage of the Synod of Bishops began in all Catholic dioceses of our Fatherland on the topic: "For the benefit of the synodal Church: communion, participation and mission", which lasted until July 27, 2022. The method of the synodal process is listening, the goal **is** recognition, and the way **is** participation. At the first stage of the Synod, the practical participation of all those who wish involves answering the questions of the questionnaire. The results of the questionnaire were processed by the diocesan Synodal commissions, and then **by** the commission at the Conference of Catholic Bishops in Belarus.

This Synod became the first occasion in the recent history of the Church to speak about it ecclesiastical problems to all who wish. A wide range of questions and the opportunity to speak on any topic contributed to an open and honest dialogue, helped pastors to listen to the voice of God's people and better understand their expectations, suggestions, critical remarks.

In addition to the organizers, in the diocesan stage of the Synod took part relatively a small group of clergy, monastics and believers. As it can be seen from the questionnaires, this group was made up of the most active practicing Catholics who are interested in the life of the Church and try to make their suggestions. Unfortunately, it was not possible to interest the Synod in other categories of the population: non-practicing Catholics, adherents of other denominations or religions, non-believers, etc. Therefore, the answers to the questions of the questionnaire **are not complete**

representative: they reveal the views of a relatively small group of people – the most active believers. Despite this, the results of the synodal consultation will be useful for the better development of the Catholic Church in Belarus.

I would like to emphasize the positive aspect of the diocesan stage of the Synod of Bishops: Belarusians are not used to speaking frankly in public, as they often feel fear and lack of trust in their interlocutors, so it is necessary to appreciate their participation and thank those who spoke honestly and courageously about synod topics. It can be seen that the respondents have a certain trust in the Church, dare to be frank, open to dialogue. This is already one of the fruits of this Synod for the Catholic Church in Belarus.

1. FRIENDS OF THE JOURNEY – In the *Church and in society, we are close to each other, walking one way of life and faith.*

a) When we say "our Church", who are its parts/ members?

The majority of survey participants understand *the Church* as a community of all the baptized who profess the true faith, practice the holy sacraments and recognize the authority and power of the church hierarchy. Many note their affiliation to the local Church (diocese, parish), prayer community or monastic order. At the same time, the interviewees show a strong and well-founded awareness of the personal dimension of the Church, its ubiquity and their own belonging to its community.

b) Who in our diocese are those with whom we "walk together", who are close to us?

When answering this question, survey participants most often name members of their families and parish communities, priests, monastics, catechists, members of prayer and pastoral communities, emphasizing their authority at the same time. A very important factor in this context is the practice of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, activity in parish life and testimony of faith. Some respond more broadly, noting that they walk with every member of society, regardless of faith.

c) Who is asking us to be a "companion"?

A significant part of the respondents answered that Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, the Apostles, the Mother of God, Pope Francis, bishops, and priests call for a communal journey. At the same time, some have expressed critical remarks regarding the fact that the appeals of bishops, priests, and monastics are often not accompanied by concrete actions, and the faithful do not always know what path to choose if there are no such appeals from the clergy. Answers of this type show the willingness of believers to testify to their own faith and the desire to help other people meet Christ.

d) Who are our companions outside the ecclesiastical reality?

Most often, this category includes those who do not practice or profess another faith among members of their own family, acquaintances and people they meet in everyday life. Some interviewees consider cultural people familiar from virtual space (social networks, clubs, computer games) as their companions, as well as all people of good will who are not against Christ and feel moral responsibility in life.

e) Which people or which social groups could we invite on our journey as a diocese?

Most often, the answers concern different categories of believers, adherents of other denominations and faiths, non-believers, those interested in faith, indifferent, non-practicing, social workers, representatives of the authorities, those who have lost hope, all people of good will, all those who wish. Some respondents emphasize that no one can be forced, participation should be voluntary.

f) What people or social groups are we as a diocese leaving on the sidelines of our journey, whether on purpose or by accident?

It was noted by the majority of votes that the Church tries not to lose anyone outside with your attention. Often abandonment can be the result of a lack of knowledge, practice or experience of the Church, insufficient training of the clergy. The following categories of people were identified among those left on the sidelines: the poor, the homeless, the disabled, orphans, pregnant women, middle-aged people, non-sacramental marriages, LGBT people, alcoholics and drug addicts, the sick, non-believers, atheists, agnostics, indifferent to faith, some professional groups, representatives of subcultures.

g) How well do we know our local reality (work, entertainment, sports, cultural offerings, community experiences, etc.)? What is happening in our area and what are people doing and interested in?

The answers to this question are very different and contradictory. Some interviewees emphasize people's great interest in sports, culture, and active pastime. Others write about citizens' indifference to community affairs, cultural and sports events. They believe that most people care only about the financial support of the family, and are not interested in intangible values.

In this context, some participants of the questionnaire emphasized the dependence of many people on gadgets, the Internet and products of mass culture, the danger of globalization, the decline of cultural values. There are also some critical statements regarding the detachment of the Church from reality and the problems of daily life of believers.

h) How involved are you in community and religious initiatives?

Most of the participants of the questionnaire noted that they actively and fruitfully participate in religious events. Some admit that their participation is insufficient for various reasons and indicate that they would like to correct this. If believers take part in public actions, they do so out of duty, and the action should not contradict Christian moral values.

2. LISTEN – *Listening is the first step, but it requires an open mind and heart, without prejudice.*

a) To what extent is the voice of lay persons listened to in our diocese, especially to young people, women, minorities, to persons excluded from public life?

Opinions of questionnaire participants on this issue are very different. Some believe that the Church always listens to the voice of the listed persons, takes into account their proposals, meets their expectations and wishes.

Others claim that the Church is very authoritarian and does not consider anyone, not even the clergy, not to speak of other persons, imposes on believers what the hierarchy likes, ignores the voices of criticism and protest. At the same time, it is noted that the believers themselves are not always active, sometimes they do not want or do not know how to turn to the Church.

b) How do we in our diocese relate to the mission of monastic persons? Are we aware of their contribution to the activity of the Church in our diocese?

The attitude towards monastic persons in our diocese is very good - people are grateful to them for testimony and work, especially for active service in parish pastoral care. Believers are aware of the great contribution of monks to the mission of the local Church, although there is a lack of information about the mission and activities of the monastic orders themselves and a certain "indifference" on the part of priests and bishops, who sometimes see monastics as competitors rather than collaborators in the expansion of the Kingdom of God.

c) How do we listen to the social and cultural context in which we live?

Most of the interviewees claim that they carefully and critically listen to the social and cultural context of society and positively evaluate the position and activity of the Church in society, however, some notice, on the one hand, a certain detachment of the Church from people's lives, and on the other hand, a **certain** fear of engaging in social and social and political issues.

d) What needs to be done/changed for the proper formation of our communities (parish and those that exist within the parish)? Are we properly listening to the Word of God and the word of man?

Most of the answers in this context are aimed at formation, namely its improvement and better training of priests, monastics and lay believers. Many believe it is useful to more broadly and boldly allow the laity into the affairs of government

parish, teach them responsibility for some pastoral initiatives, activate the competences and rights of church councils and committees, educate them to work in a team spirit and communal responsibility, in order to come to a rethinking of today's model of parish functioning.

3. TAKE THE WORD – *Everyone is invited to express himself courageously and sincerely, gathering in freedom, truth and mercy are one.*

a) How to promote a free and authentic style of relations within our diocesan church community and its structures, so that communication takes place without hypocrisy and accommodation?

Most of the participants of the survey expressed the need to develop sincere and open dialogue in the Church at all levels, as there is a lack of such platforms for solving difficult situations and sharing experiences. There is a clear lack of awareness that all together – priests, consecrated persons and lay believers – form the community of one Church.

b) How to promote a free and authentic style of relations in the society to which we belong?

The answers of the majority of the respondents indicate that the society lacks a free and true style of relations between people. According to many, the political situation in the country is not conducive to sincerity and openness in society. However, there is a need to build relationships in this style in smaller communities: in the family, between acquaintances and friends, in the parish or prayer community, etc., in order to promote changes in mentality through the action of such small groups.

c) When and how do we manage to tell the community of the diocese what is important to us, what is in our heart?

According to some of the answers, lay believers do not have the opportunity to express themselves in the diocese, moreover, no one listens to their voice, and their needs are ignored. However, the majority of respondents believe that the opportunity to express themselves exists thanks to modern media, as well as during numerous meetings with bishops. The fact that the believers themselves do not feel the need to express themselves is problematic - otherwise today they would find an appropriate way to be heard.

d) How do we use the gift of the word in the means of communication (not only Catholic), in particular in Facebook, Instagram, Tik Tok, etc.?

The answers to this question emphasize the great importance of modern means of communication for evangelization, deepening of religious knowledge, prayer, community building, maintaining ties with brothers in faith, etc. The presence of the Catholic Church in the mass media is also evaluated positively to date, with a simultaneous call to more effectively use the possibilities of modern technologies in evangelization.

e) What relations have developed in the diocese with media (not only Catholic media)? Who represents the Catholic community in them and how were these people chosen?

Due to the current socio-political situation, the interviewees today critically assess the Church's relations with the secular mass media, as the Church and spiritual topics are almost absent from them. As for church mass media, they are evaluated positively, but they should try to use the potential of modern technologies even more in service of the Church, in a special way in building dialogue, and reflect an objectively complete picture of the life of the Church, not just the point of view of the hierarchy and the clergy. The challenge for the Catholic mass media today remains the thorough training of personnel.

4. CELEBRATE – *"Walking together" is possible only if it is based on joint hearing of God's Word and joint celebration of the Eucharist.*

a) How consciously and actively do we participate in the liturgy?

Almost all interviewees claim that they consciously and actively take part in the liturgy, appreciate it for their spiritual development, strive to understand its symbolism even better, experience each Holy Mass more deeply, and receive Holy Communion with even greater faith and love. However, in this context, the participation of a part of the believers themselves in the liturgy is critically described as inappropriate, disrespectful (due to lack of knowledge), as well as the superficial and careless celebration of the Holy Mass and other rites by the priests themselves.

b) How do prayer and liturgy actually inspire and guide our "communal steps"? How do they affect our most important decisions?

All interviewees emphasize the great importance of liturgy and prayer in their spiritual life. For many, it is a meeting with God, an opportunity to open their hearts to Him, to find a way out of difficult situations, to make good decisions, to become better, to convert, to better understand God's word, to open up to their neighbor and to the community.

c) How do we contribute to the beauty of liturgical celebrations? How do we promote the active participation of believers in the liturgy and in the implementation of the Church's sanctifying service?

In this context, most of the interviewees pay attention to the great importance of singing, music, beautiful recitation of God's word, presence and practical training ministers, diligence in the implementation of rites, on the posture and gestures of the priest during the celebration of the liturgy. At the same time, there is a call to even more actively involve believers in preparing the liturgy, entrusting them with various functions, and also taking care of liturgical formation of the laity.

d) What place is given to the ministry of lecturers and acolytes?

The answers to this question are diametrically different: from a positive evaluation of the participation in the liturgy of lecturers and acolytes, with the condition of appropriate thorough training (both spiritual and *technical*), to a negative evaluation of their service as formal - due to the weak development of the pastoral care of lecturers and acolytes, as well as reluctance of priests to transfer to the laity various functions during the liturgy.

5. GENERAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE MISSION – *The synodality is at the service of the saving mission of the Church, in which all its members are called to participate.*

a) How are all the baptized invited to be active participants in the mission of the Church in the diocese?

The awareness that all members of the Church are called to participate in its mission, which results from the sacrament of baptism, was expressed by a greater number of respondents. The appeals of the Pope, bishops, priests, pastoral letters, programs in the Catholic mass media, etc., remind believers of this. The mission that every Catholic must realize is, first of all, a personal testimony of faith, education of children and youth in the faith, openness to non-believers and those who are in search of the truth, daily life according to Christian values, sacramental life, good deeds.

b) How the community of believers supports its members who are engaged in service in society (having social and political responsibilities, conducting scientific research and teaching, promoting social justice, protecting human rights, taking care of the common home, involved in environmental initiatives, etc.) ?

Opinions of the interviewees in the context of this question were divided: some notice the corresponding support, mainly prayer and moral, is criticized by others

the community of believers and claim that such support either does not exist at all, or it is weak and insufficient; however, in formulating a challenge for the Church in this context, the interviewees expressed unity and called for even more effective use of the Internet and social networks, as well as various communities and movements that already exist in the Church.

6. CONDUCTING DIALOGUE IN THE CHURCH AND IN SOCIETY – *Dialogue is a way of maturity and permanence, which includes silence and patience, but is able to collect the experience of individual people and peoples.*

a) How and where do we conduct dialogue in our diocese?

Based on most of the answers, we can say that we, as it is typical for Belarusian society, in the Church are also unprepared for dialogue. Unfortunately, this applies to both clergy and lay people, but when such an opportunity arises, it is very well received and serves to teach us to speak and listen.

b) How do we perceive differences in opinion, how do we resolve conflict situations and misunderstandings that arise in our communities?

Resolving conflict situations and accepting another person's opinion is a very difficult thing in communities. Often the faithful, out of respect for the priest, cannot contradict him even when he is probably wrong. To learn to accept the opinion of another, it is necessary to work on yourself.

c) How do we promote cooperation with representatives of monastic communities existing in the territory of our diocese, cooperation between them, as well as their cooperation with secular movements and associations?

Lay believers, representatives of movements and associations contribute to the activities of monastic communities within their parish. There are established contacts and help is provided to monastic communities, however certain problems are also noticed on the part of monastic communities and their abbots (abbesses), who are not interested in the development of associations and are not interested in their mission and service to the Church.

d) Do we have experience of dialogue and joint charitable (or other) service with believers of other religions and with non-believers?

Cooperation in the field of charity with non-believers or followers of other religions is almost non-existent. Certain manifestations of cooperation with other Christian faiths are noticed, but they do not have a permanent character and will continue to be a challenge for the Church.

e) How does our diocese conduct dialogue with various public institutions and what can it learn from them in the sphere of politics, economy, culture, creation of civil society, in the sphere of caring for the poor?

Many of the statements of the interviewees are very critical and due to the socio-political crisis in the country: a certain dialogue exists, but it is characterized by spontaneous nature and the lack of a clear strategy. In the current situation, the Church directs its activities more than anything to preserve what has been achieved, using the possibility of cooperation within its framework.

7. RELATIONS WITH OTHER CHRISTIAN DENOMINATIONS – *Dialogue between Christians of different denominations, united by one Baptism, occupies a special place on the synodal path.*

a) What kind of relationship do we have with our brothers and sisters of other Christian denominations?

In general, relations between believers of the Catholic Church and believers of the Orthodox Church are characterized as benevolent and tolerant. There are two in this relationship

distinctive features: firstly, in this case, Catholics are always the first to take the initiative, and secondly, among believers, these relations are based on mutual respect and honor, and among the clergy, especially the Orthodox, a conscious lack of interest is noticeable, especially now, during the socio-political crisis, and relationships are reduced to participation in the Week of Prayers for Christian Unity.

b) What areas do they relate to?

Contacts between Catholics and Orthodox concern primarily the sphere of family life, especially mixed families. There is cooperation in public and working life, in the spheres of education and upbringing, in the sphere of joint protection of conceived life and charity.

c) What fruit did this "walking together" bring?

The historical fact of the coexistence of different Christian denominations on the Belarusian land today provides a unique opportunity to learn mutual respect and tolerance, polite attitude towards each other, as well as mutual enrichment, forming during various public trials the consciousness of the unity of the Christian faith and community values.

d) What are the difficulties?

The various difficulties between Christian denominations are caused primarily by mutual isolation and fear. Prayer for the unity of Christians as a moment of spiritual unity between denominations is of a formal nature and has no confirmation in the life of clergy. Moreover, the negative attitude of Orthodox believers and clergy towards Catholics is noticed.

Pope Francis is an example of dialogue and readiness to dialogue with each denomination. However, his example, unfortunately, is not imitated by the Catholic clergy, or is imitated very cautiously.

8. AUTHORITY AND PARTICIPATION – The *Synodal Church is a Church in which everyone has the right to be a full member and to take responsibility appropriate to his status.*

a) How is power exercised in our diocesan Church?

All those interviewed agree that power is exercised in the diocesan Church by the bishop who decides the most important issues and bears full responsibility. Pastors are responsible for spiritual life in parish communities. The participation of secular councils in the management of parishes is very insignificant and generally invisible. The participants of the questionnaire expressed the wish that the bishop was primarily a pastor, and not an official burdened with administrative tasks, and that the faithful had free access to him.

b) How is the recognition of the goals to be achieved, the path to be followed, and the steps to be taken for this?

Believers participate in the process of planning and identifying goals only the bishops and their immediate associates, and to some degree every one of them separately. There is a need to create special meetings at the parish and diocesan level, during which laypeople will be given the opportunity not only to get acquainted with specific plans, but through dialogue to actively participate in planning, finding goals and ways to achieve them.

c) How are the priests' council and the diocesan pastoral council involved in the ministry of our diocese?

The purpose, way of functioning and activities of priestly and pastoral councils are not well known to the participants of the questionnaire, which creates difficulties in answering this question. However participants believe that these councils decide and make some important decisions in the life of the diocese.

d) What is the practice of community work and shared responsibility in our diocese?

Community work and responsibility for the affairs of the Church is most evident in the following sectors of the Church's life: material support through collection of donations, participation in various events, maintenance of parish shrines and care for them, preparation of parish holidays. Despite the active cooperation in the aforementioned sectors, it seems that the priests are not completely brave and open to allow the lay faithful to cooperate with them.

e) How does the participation of the laity in the pastoral councils contribute to the improvement of the life of the diocese?

Most of the respondents do not know about the activities of pastoral councils. In general, the interviewees believe that such an activity will contribute to a better distribution of responsibilities, will allow believers to show greater responsibility for the affairs of the Church. On the example of individual parishes and communities, revitalization can be seen when such councils gather and do something together. There are also suggestions that the leadership function in the council should always be performed by a priest.

9. RECOGNITION AND DECISION – *Synodality presupposes that decisions are made by discernment resulting from common obedience to the Holy Spirit.*

a) What procedures and methods do we use in the process of shared recognition and decision-making?

A cardinal important task on the path of synodality is the ability and ability to listen and listen to each other. Intensive dialogue and *cooperation* with the Holy Spirit is necessary in the process of developing a common path.

b) How do we promote participation in decision-making in hierarchically structured communities?

The participation of believers in hierarchical management is manifested exclusively in prayer of (spiritual) reality – spiritual support of those who make decisions. This does not always contribute to the activity and responsibility of believers for the Church. Diocesan synods as a result of joint work of the clergy and believers of dioceses can serve as a good tool of community management and participation of believers in decision-making and management of the diocesan Church under another organization.

c) How can the process of recognition and decision-making in the diocese be improved?

Participants of the questionnaire expressed many suggestions for optimizing the decision-making process: activation of already existing, but unfortunately only nominal structures of the Church (for example, parish, diocesan councils, etc.), establishing with the help of modern mass media constant feedback between the bishop and the faithful, frequent conducting of various questionnaires of the faithful with the aim of extensive discussion of important decisions at the level of parishes, then at **the** level of deaneries and the whole diocese.

10. BUILDING SYNODITY – *Spirituality of "communal journey"*

is intended to become an educational principle for the formation of the personality of a person and a Christian, families and communities.

a) How to teach people, in particular those who occupy a responsible role in the Christian community, to be more able to "walk together", to listen to each other and to dialogue?

People who are entrusted with management, according to the survey participants, should first of all be willing to let others walk along. Conditions for this are openness to the action of the Holy Spirit and constant individual formation. Believers should boldly express their opinions and not be afraid that they will be judged for it. Communication trainings and meetings for leaders would be much needed so that people can develop and share experiences with each other.

b) What process of upbringing, education and formation do we offer to recognize and exercise authority in our communities?

According to the respondents, in order for the aforementioned process to take place, thorough formation and special leadership training in the aspect of Christian service is needed. For this, it is necessary to train appropriate personnel who will have a good understanding of how to better respond to the challenges of the community. It is necessary to create more Christian communities and through their activities to form future leaders - people who will carry responsibility for others.

c) What tools help us recognize the dynamics of modern culture and its influence on our style of life in the community - in the Church?

The church exists and operates in a specific cultural space and is called through a *vision* and *analysis* to recognize the changes taking place in it and always "wide open eyes" to look at the Christian upbringing of children and youth. It is necessary to learn to dialogue with representatives of culture and society, remaining true to one's identity and Christian values, precisely for the sake of their expansion and popularization in society.

Today, the participation of the Church and the people of the Church in the means of modern mass information, especially in the Internet space, and through this, the influence on them, is very necessary. The challenge for the Church in the future remains the need to show more activity and be able to conduct a dialogue with different categories of people, reaching out to them, in order to positively influence modern culture in this way.

11. OTHER – *In a community journey, everyone, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, has the opportunity to express their comments, opinions, and wishes.*

Proposals and wishes relate to specific affairs of the Church (liturgy, catechesis, pastoral care of families, work with parish groups) and its ability to open itself to the needs of believers and modern society. An open question remains the wider use of the Belarusian language in the liturgy and services, so that people better understand God's word, and not just try to "preserve tradition". Priests and parishes need to develop more evangelistic activities on the Internet and social networks. This synodal consultation should not be the first and last event in the history of the Church in Belarus, as there is a great need to continue the dialogue between the clergy and believers. It is necessary that lay believers and priests strive to create real parish communities. All stakeholders need to have more courage in

dialogue, in joint planning and, finally, in mutual responsibility in the service of the Church in Belarus.

Conclusion

Summarizing the results of the diocesan stage of the Synod of Bishops in the Catholic Church in Belarus, first of all we want to note the value of the received material for us, pastors. This made it possible to hear the voice of more active believers, understand their concerns, expectations, take into account their suggestions and constructive criticism, which will help to develop pastoral care in dioceses even more effectively.

The synodal consultations allow us to make the following concrete conclusions:

- laity care about the fate of the Church and its future, they should take a more active part in the life of the Church and solving its problems;
- reform and improvement of Church activity does not depend on the number issued documents, but from people and their spiritual formation;
- it sometimes interferes with the missionary activity of the Church and its openness to people bureaucracy;
- people have a great need for testimonies of faith and a desire for the value of the Gospel to be more visible, and for the Eucharist and God's word to be the center of the Church's life;
- the celebration of the liturgy, the pinnacle of church activity, requires a better one preparation and improvement;
- priests should prepare more thoroughly for homilies, and catechists - for lectures on religion;
- we need catechetical materials that meet the requirements of the time;
- there is a great need to establish parish Bible circles and schools new evangelization;
- relations between priests and the laity should be more brotherly. They should cooperate more actively for the benefit of the Church. A priest should be a shepherd, not a ruler;
- clergy should strive to lead a lifestyle in accordance with the evangelical principles they preach;
- it is necessary to use Catholic and secular media more actively for evangelization;
- life requires the creation of communities of Catholic teachers, doctors, psychologists, etc. for the purpose of their professional service to the people;
- The Church must defend the truth and express itself on topical issues based on social teaching.

We hope that the participation of the Catholic Church in Belarus in the synodal process of the Universal Church will be really useful, as it will allow to objectively show the reality of the Church's life and activity in Belarus, **and** this reality does not always coincide with the great challenges facing the Universal Church.

From the bottom of our hearts, we thank the Holy Father, Pope Francis, for the courage to convene the next Synod of Bishops on the topic of synodality, for his great desire to listen to the voice of all members of Christ's Church and to recognize in which direction we need to move together.

The Conference of Catholic Bishops in Belarus thanks all those who sincerely responded to the call to participate in the diocesan stage of the Synod of Bishops and dedicated their time so that through prayer, personal reflection, and later - through answers to the proposed questions to share his vision of the reality of the Church in Belarus with the aim of its further effective and successful development.

We express our thanks to the secretariat of the Synod of Bishops represented by His Eminence Cardinal Mario Greco for tirelessly supporting the synodal process at the diocesan stage.

May the Holy Spirit continue to guide our Church for the sake of the joint synod responsibility for all its members under the leadership of the only King - Jesus Christ.

Catholic Bishops of Belarus