



Synod on Synodality:

Interim Phase 2024

Synthesis Report

The Diocese of Nashville



Introduction

The Diocese of Nashville, with the Most Reverend J. Mark Spalding, DD, JCL as bishop, covers the geographical area of 38 counties in Middle Tennessee. Within its territory are 60 churches and 16 diocesan schools, serving roughly 110,000 registered Catholics. The diocese began planning and conducting its Interim Phase of the Synod on Synodality in January 2024.

Interim Phase Process

Preparatory Period (January 2024)

- Mrs. Erin Stracener, Director of the Tribunal and Vice Chancellor, and Dr. Brad Peper, Director of the Office of Faith Formation, continued as the Diocesan Contact Persons to lead the Interim Phase.
- Given the geographical size of the diocese, five diocesan-wide listening sessions were scheduled in strategic locations to provide greater opportunities for participation. An additional nine listening sessions were scheduled with various groups that are directly involved with the structure of the Church, such as members of the Presbyterial Council and Catholic school principals.
- Two interrelated obstacles occurred during the preparatory period. As evinced by the noticeable lack of participation in all but one diocesan-wide listening session, the limited timeframe allotted for the Interim Phase hindered optimal implementation and communication of the diocesan-wide listening sessions. Consequently, voices from various marginalized communities in the diocese remained underrepresented during the Interim Phase.

Consultation Period (February 2024)

- All sessions utilized the questions provided by the USCCB.
- Approximately 200 individuals participated in the fourteen sessions offered.
- Thirteen sessions were held in person, and one session was conducted virtually. Sessions were led either by the Diocesan Contact Persons or selected individuals who previously facilitated listening sessions during the Diocesan Phase. Facilitator reports were communicated to the Diocesan Contact Persons at the conclusion of the Consultation Phase.
- No online surveys were conducted during the Interim Phase. However, email responses were accepted and considered during the Synthesis Period.

Synthesis Period (March 2024)

- Reports from listening sessions were analyzed and synthesized by the Diocesan Contact Persons.
- The synthesis document was presented to Bishop Spalding.





General Observations

As in the Diocesan Phase, some participants expressed critical reservations concerning the degree to which the voices of Middle Tennessee might be heard at the national and international levels. However, facilitators and participants again found the synodal process a positive one and appreciated the opportunity to dialogue with Church leadership and with one another. As one observer noted, “The beauty of things like this was hearing the other side with respect, removing anonymity of social media, and allowing for natural conversation with those who are not alike. Those things allow them to see that their assumptions about ‘the other side’ are not true.”

The mutual respect fostered by the synodal process strengthened the common mission of the Church and reduced tensions based on differing liturgical and theological sensibilities among participants. As another participant reflected, “It made me think that we are all threads in a tapestry, some young and bright and others old and frayed...and if we are honest and humble, none of us knows what the tapestry looks like.”

A deep appreciation for the sacramental life of the Church in Middle Tennessee, specifically through a reverence toward Confession and the Blessed Sacrament, was revealed again during the Interim Phase. Participants in various listening sessions specifically cited the Eucharistic Revival as a source of great joy. Given the response to the Eucharistic Revival and its aim toward building a eucharistic people, the increased call for missionary evangelization was further emphasized during the Interim Phase. While the Synod and the Eucharistic Revival have been perceived at times as being incompatible, the continued call for both worship and outreach may suggest an implicit recognition by the People of God of the inherent connection between these national and international initiatives.

Key Takeaways

Lived Experiences: Successes and Distresses

Worship

- Although some participants expressed concerns regarding the tension among those with different liturgical sensibilities, there was a strong emphasis across sessions highlighting the growing sacramental life of the Church in Middle Tennessee. Many participants also voiced their gratitude for the diocesan and national efforts in the implementation and promotion of the Eucharistic Revival. The following are a few of the comments reflecting these sentiments:

What makes us special, unique – the sacraments. We cannot find what the sacraments have to offer anywhere else in the world. It’s the sacraments that give us what we need to be who God called us to be.

The Eucharistic revival has been a wonderful movement in the Church and the promotion of Adoration and the Eucharist. This is a huge, positive success for us, and the continuation of the Eucharistic Congress.





Support

- Many participants commented on the heightened intentionality of the diocese to promote parish life and saw this as a central focus of the bishop's pastoral activity. As one participant stated, "[Bishop Spalding] exhibits a true pastoral presence, and his people know him...He demonstrates a clarity of vision and good communication...Nashville has a familial feel; it is indeed a local church."

Despite this recognition in the bishop's outreach, various participants from rural parishes felt peripheral to diocesan initiatives unless they involved fundraising. This feeling has caused some to perceive the diocese as more financially focused than pastorally motivated.

- Although acknowledging increased communication from some diocesan offices, many participants believed there is still room to improve both locally and nationally. In addition to more effective communication between the diocese and parishes, especially as it pertains to personnel and organizational changes, participants would like to see greater clarity and transparency regarding contentious and painful issues, such as the sexual abuse scandal and the blessing of gay couples.
- Increased opportunities and participation in parish and diocesan-based social activities were noted as successes in advancing the life of the Church. In particular, participants greatly appreciated the listening sessions during the Interim Phase, as well as on-going synodal activities at the parish level. Some participants, however, did feel that the heightened focus on risk management, as it relates to restrictions on communication and interactions with others, may be a hinderance to fostering community, especially with the youth.
- A repeated source of encouragement cited by many participants is the promotion of and growth in the diocesan seminarian and diaconate programs.

Outreach

- Participants cited as a source of encouragement a greater diocesan focus on integrating English speaking and non-English speaking communities, especially with the Hispanic population. In particular, the increased Spanish speaking members of diocesan staff, an increased focus on Hispanic vocations, and the requirement of seminarians to study Spanish were mentioned as points of improvement in this effort toward integration. Nevertheless, participants still expressed concerns regarding resource availability and media visibility for this rapidly growing population. As one participant stated, "Looking at the diocesan website, you would not know that Nashville has any immigrants here."

Despite diocesan attempts to be more inclusive of all Catholics throughout Middle Tennessee, some groups still expressed feeling marginalized. For example, the LGBTQIA+ community and their families voiced the desire for a more welcoming and understanding environment in the Church.

- The promotion and growth of Catholic schools in Middle Tennessee were seen as strengthening the Church and Her mission. However, some participants added that the financial impact of Catholic school tuition is significantly taxing for families, especially for immigrants.





- An opportunity for growth mentioned in most of the listening sessions is the promotion of a more missionary approach to evangelize those both within and outside of the Church. Related to this need, one participant stated, “Every Catholic is called to be a missionary disciple. Is the general person in the pew thinking they need to go out and proclaim the Gospel? Do people recognize their own personal call to this? I think the answer is no. The Catechism reminds us that the family by nature is to be missionary.”

Proposed Assistance: Structural and Organizational

Participants offered specific ways to utilize the structures and organization of the Church to enhance the successes and ameliorate the distresses expressed. The following suggestions, to be addressed either at the diocesan level or the national level, were repeated across multiple sessions.

Worship

- Create a web-based diocesan calendar for Masses, Adorations, and Confessions held at each parish
- Provide uniform standards for sacramental preparation
- Use liturgical events as catechetical opportunities

Support

- Offer programs to train parents as primary catechists
- Utilize deanery structures as central locations for diocesan assistance
- Distribute faithful summations of ecclesiastical documents to pastors and parish leaders
- Recruit more parish leaders as diocesan staff
- Clarify organizational structures of the diocese and include a regularly-updated list of roles and contacts
- Streamline diocesan branding and communications
- Increase lay involvement through consultative bodies, such as diocesan and parish councils
- Enhance and promote roles and leadership opportunities for women in the Church
- Provide ongoing formation to strengthen the interpersonal and administrative skills of the clergy

Outreach

- Create programs for separated, divorced, and widowed Catholics





- Clarify issues regarding gender, sexual attraction, and inclusivity
- Host more cultural festivals
- Provide disciple-based training for laity to evangelize the faith
- Establish parish or diocesan-based language classes (i.e. English, Spanish, Vietnamese, etc.)

Conclusion

Centering synodal discussions on the structures of the Church during the Interim Phase yielded fruitful conversations and generated ideas that may be implemented at various ecclesial levels based on the principle of subsidiarity. However, participants also reminded those within these structures not to overemphasize programmatic and stifling solutions at the expense of building organic encounters with Christ and others through the sacramental life of the Church. Two statements best reflect this overall concern.

We have gotten really ‘fatty’ on a lot of programming that has forsaken the idea of the sacraments. There’s a place for these things, but we need to grow and focus on the sacraments.

We often have to start with love and respect and accompaniment in order to get them into the Church. It’s hard for structures and organizations to do that.

This tension in balancing the universal and the individual, the structural and the relational, is endemic to the lived reality of the Church. As such, continued dialogue among the People of God is needed to ease this tension and to further the communion, participation, and mission of the Church.