



DIOCESE OF ARLINGTON

DIOCESAN INTERIM STAGE



DIOCESAN SYNODAL LISTENING SESSIONS SYNTHESIS REPORT

INTRODUCTION: THE SYNODAL EXPERIENCE

The faithful of the Diocese of Arlington once again welcomed the call to support the 2021-2024 General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops by engaging in Interim Stage local synodal gatherings. People from various backgrounds participated prayerfully and wholeheartedly in the listening sessions, during which synodality was embraced and common concerns emerged, with faithfulness to the Lord, in the heart of the Church.

In keeping with the desire of the Synod of Bishops and the guidelines of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), the Diocese of Arlington held three listening sessions presided over by Bishop Burbidge—two in English and one in Spanish—which were attended by 375 people, including laity from parishes, universities, high schools, and the needy served by Catholic Charities, and including priests, permanent deacons, and women religious. The sessions took place in an atmosphere of prayer and of mutual collaboration, respect, and charity, as people spoke freely from their hearts.

Having prepared by reading the *Synthesis Report* of the Fall 2023 First Session of the Synod of Bishops, and following the suggestions of the USCCB, participants in the diocesan listening sessions spoke to the following two guiding questions:

- *Where have I seen or experienced challenges and/or difficulties within the Church that hinder the mission, and how do I think the Church can better address these challenges and difficulties?*
- *Where have I seen or experienced successes within the Church that support the mission, and how do I think we can build upon these successes?*

A synthesis of the fruits of the prayerful consideration of those questions follows.

FRUITS OF THE SYNODAL PROCESS

Much was discussed at the Fall 2023 First Session of the Synod of Bishops, and the participants in the latest diocesan meetings reflected on the *Synthesis Report* of that session; still, a great amount of time has not elapsed since the 2022 diocesan listening sessions, so the main themes and concerns which surfaced from the diocesan synodal Interim Stage listening sessions understandably confirmed the mission priorities identified in the previous sessions.

Five main themes emerged as fruits of the Interim Stage listening sessions and are summarized below: Evangelization, Welcome, and Community; Formation in the Faith with Clarity for Families and Youth; Liturgy, Sacraments, and Prayer; Service and Charity; and Clergy and Vocations. The quotations used below were chosen inasmuch as they were representative of repeated statements on those topics.

Evangelization, Welcome, and Community

The greatest number of comments concerned the priority of evangelizing by reaching out and drawing people to the Church, to places where they feel welcome and where they find opportunities to come together for fellowship through experiences of community. “Each parish

should continue to form Catholics to go out and proclaim Christ and be active in evangelization.”
“Parishioners need to be more friendly and welcoming to others.”

People spoke of many wonderful existing parish opportunities for community, such as Bible studies, men’s and women’s groups, small group fellowships, prayer groups, and other opportunities for gathering with others: they were held up as effective ways of fostering a sense of belonging and unity in the Church. “Each parish should have a men’s program that is promoted by pastors.”

Formation in the Faith with Clarity for Families and Youth

People stressed the necessity of clarity in Church teaching at every level through solid formation in the faith at every age, but especially for adults, so that they may both know and live the faith themselves, then effectively pass it on to children and youth, particularly through parent-based catechetical programs. “We need continuing education for adults, who are the primary educators of Catholic children.” Participants noted that the diocese had robust Catholic schools and support for homeschooling families, as well as effective service programs for teens.

Several speakers noted the necessity of unambiguous doctrine from the Church’s pastors: “There is a lack of clarity on issues and, as a result, the Church is divided.” In particular, it was stressed that people experiencing same-sex attraction should be welcomed with charity while formed with clarity.

Liturgy, Sacraments, and Prayer

People spoke repeatedly of their love for the sacred liturgy and sacraments as the preeminent means of grace, and of the importance of celebrating them beautifully and reverently, noting that inspiring music, art, and architecture are effective tools of evangelization. Participants particularly expressed their gratitude for the generous availability of the Sacrament of Penance in

the diocese: “We are blessed by the number of Masses, confessions, and access to the sacraments.”

A few people spoke out in favor of retaining the availability of the Mass in Latin according to the *Roman Missal* of 1962.

Service and Charity

People emphasized the importance of the Church’s commitment to social justice and noted the selfless service given to the needy by the Church through many charitable works. A single mother with a baby testified how she was able to bring her baby to term and provide for her thanks to the support they received from Catholic Charities. The need for continued respect life advocacy and for mental health support was stressed: “Each parish should provide more access to programs for healing.”

Clergy and Vocations

People repeatedly spoke of their gratitude for, and in support of, their parish priests and saw the many vocations in the diocese as an indication of fruitful Church life now, as well as a sign of hope for the future: “We are blessed as a diocese with good and faithful priests.” Hispanic faithful were especially grateful for the efforts non-Latino priests made to learn Spanish and to serve them.

CONCLUSIONS

Again, the main themes and concerns which emerged from the diocesan synodal Interim Stage listening sessions seconded the pastoral priorities identified in the 2022 diocesan synodal listening sessions.

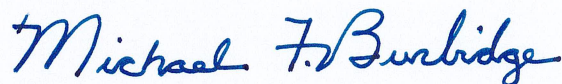
This statement offers a general summary of the central themes voiced at the listening sessions:

The Church does—but must better—welcome and invite people into community and fellowship with charity, then offer them formation in the faith with clarity and nourish them with the sacraments and inspiring liturgies: that is, draw people in by showing them goodness, then form them in the truth and move them by beauty.

Both diocesan experiences of synodality confirmed the importance of continued prayerful community discernment and listening, inasmuch as they evinced a consensus in pastoral priorities: promoting a culture of welcome—or a “culture of encounter,” as Pope Francis says—which then brings people together in comprehensive formation and in liturgical celebration.

The faithful who participated in the listening sessions enthusiastically embraced synodality, reflecting prayerfully, charitably, and openly about the mission of the Church, and that experience of journeying together in faith will continue to take place fruitfully in the diocese.

Respectfully submitted,



Most Reverend Michael F. Burbidge

Bishop of Arlington

March 28, 2024