

# How do I recognize synodality?



I can't tell you what it is, but I know it when I see it! Read on so you can recognize synodal practices.

Deborah Stollery

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## **PART ONE: General Descriptors**

This eBook is a compilation of five blogs written in the Spring and early summer of 2024 partially in response to a question that emerged in two different places almost at the same time: How would we recognize a synodal parish or organization? Or, if synodality is at work, what would we be seeing and hearing in a parish or other Catholic organization? So, while theologians and other thoughtful members of the Body of Christ are at work defining synodality in theological terms, these blogs start to operationalize the word into observable and sometimes measurable behaviors. The other reason for this compilation of blogs? Too few US Catholics are hearing a single word about synodality. Most would say, "I wouldn't know synodality if it sat down next to me on the bus!" So, if that's the case for you, read on to see what we've been discovering as we start to name specific characteristics of a synodal parish. (Here's some early work we did...still valid...just incomplete.) And just so we're clear, these next identifiers are also incomplete, for the Spirit is still teaching us all what synodality will look like as it takes root. Here's what we're identifying now as constitutive of a synodal parish:

**The People of God know their gifts, where they are being called to use them** in the parish and beyond its walls, and it's easy to connect with and serve in the parish. There are many tools available to assist parishioners in identifying their gifts. Here are two tools other parishes have used and continue to use with good results: [Strengthsfinder](#) (now known as the CliftonStrengths talent assessment) and the Siena Institute's [Called and Gifted assessment](#). Want to take a look at how easy it is for someone to engage with your parish? Check out our [blog](#) and suggestions for [ways](#) to make it easier to join. What are you investigating? The synodal sign of called and gifted parishioners who engage with the parish and with the world!

**The parish has structured, regularly scheduled ways for the People of God to talk with leaders** about what they are experiencing. There is a safe space for the People of God to share their truth in love, for the good of the parish. A synodal parish is a listening parish. Not convinced about how important this is? We did a series of blogs on the science around listening. [Here's](#) the first one. But here's the outward sign that listening matters: there are regularly scheduled encounters between the People of God and leaders, where safe spaces are the norm, speaking truth in love is the purpose and Conversations in the Spirit is in use. A second outward sign is the parish teaches, and increasing numbers of members practice, good listening skills. Here's a [quick checklist](#) of effective listening techniques to get you started!

**The baptized (from baptismal preparation, through OCIA, and Christian formation to those already sitting in the pews) understand their rights and responsibilities as the baptized.** A synodal parish invests in developing knowledge and understanding of the changes baptism effects, beginning with parents of infants and embedding this understanding throughout the formation of the all the people in the parish. Explorations of the theological and canonical implications of baptism are part of a regularly occurring emphasis in a synodal parish. Want some help beginning on this path? [Contact](#) us. We have a [parish retreat](#) for adults and consultants who can assist you with this.

**Parishioners have a clear sense of who is in the parish, what its mission field is, and how the parish is serving those on the peripheries, just as Jesus did.** This means leaders have good data about both who is registered in the parish and who attends but is not registered, and leaders know how to interpret that data in light of larger data sets like the demographics of the city or county in which the parish/organization is located. Leaders share this data with the parish at large, so that all understand who the parish is and what God has collected together to carry out Christ's mission. This means that leaders are clear about the mission field entrusted to it, known as parish boundaries. They know what the boundaries are, who and what is within them, and have acquired the data that will help them understand their assigned mission field. For more on the importance of knowing who's in your mission field, check out this [article](#) from Protestant church planter Matthew Fretwell. Leaders then share this information with the parishioners. Finally, leaders identify their specific peripheries/margins: geographic margins, economic margins, sociological margins (such as race, gender, sexual orientation, age, nones and dones), and share these with parishioners, on the way to becoming especially attuned to those who dwell on the periphery and so are Jesus' preferential concern. One more important missional consideration: if your parish is well-off, then your mission field may well include an abiding relationship with a parish that is struggling, close by or across the waters. Your peripheries and poor may very well include people who do not speak your language or live on your continent, for those who are given a lot have a lot expected of them in Jesus' view of the Kingdom (Luke 12:48).

In the next chapter, we'll take a look at parish structures and processes with an eye to characteristics that would let you know they are synodal.

To discuss with others:

1. Which of these characteristics do we see signs of in our parish right now?
2. How can we make sure these existing practices continue and expand to other areas of parish life?
3. Which of these characteristics does the Spirit want us to work on exhibiting next? How do we know that?
4. Which of these characteristics do we need to learn more about? Look for more deliberately? Pray about?

Looking for someone with whom to talk about all of this? The Pentecost Vigil Project offers a free one hour of consultation and synodality is our FAVORITE topic! Contact us [here](#). Photo is of the baptismal font at St. Agnes Catholic Church, Shepherdstown, WV. Credit Deborah Stollery.



## **PART TWO: Synodal Systems and Structures**

In my parish, the pastor and some of the other leaders are telling us we are acting synodally in certain areas of the parish. I'm not sure that description is actually communicating anything meaningful to most people and I am sure that for those of us a little further along the #synodjourney, we are wondering in what capacity the word is being used. Let's just say we'd like to know more, but alas, that's not forthcoming. Perhaps this is your situation as well...the word is in use, but you are not sure what it is describing, and if it's being used with a shared understanding. That's what this eBook intends to address so that we will have a few more road signs along the way, road signs whose meanings and direction we mutually understand.

The first part named four signposts that synodality is being practiced:

- Parishioners know their individual gifts, where they are needed in the parish and it's easy to enter into parish activities with their gifts.
- There's a regularly scheduled, structured way for parishioners and leaders to listen deeply to one another, in safe spaces where the norm is speaking truth in love, for the good of the Church and where, often, Conversations in the Spirit is the method.
- Parish leadership has sound data on who claims the parish as their "spiritual home" as well as who and what lives within the parish's boundaries, sharing that information freely with the People of God so that all understand themselves and their mission field.
- The rights and responsibilities of the baptized permeate Christian formation at all ages.

This section will focus on systems and structures within the parish, the "how we do things around here" signs. Again, we are still learning, but here's our start.

**The parish has a Parish Council and other governance structures (staff, Finance Council, Advisory Groups and Committees) that each seek to allow the Holy Spirit to guide them.** Signposts that this is in place include they use discernment practices determine membership; they have initial and ongoing formation directly related to their service; they pray together during meetings and on retreats; and, they engage in theological reflection around their activities.

**The parish has established expectations for the baptized in order for them to identify what it means to be a registered member, co-responsible for the way in which Christ's mission is carried out through the works of the parish. Secondly, the baptized have clear expectations of how the parish will equip them for a life of missionary discipleship.** Co-responsibility is a hallmark of a synodal parish. As such, co-responsibility has to have clear expression. In a synodal parish (which by definition is mission oriented), each baptized member from childhood (age 7 or so) through the elderly understands what their co-responsibilities are and how to carry them out. They are formed for this work and for carrying it out. They are affirmed, guided and corrected along this journey. There is no one among the baptized who is just along for the ride, just an observer, just registered so they can get sacraments or be buried. If you've never set expectations, this in itself is a journey. You might start with highlighting engagement. And [here's an example](#) of a parish's expectations. Right now, I don't know of any parishes who have begun the process of asking their baptized people what they expect from their parish but these conversations happening is a sign of a synodal parish. Suffice it to say, for now, that co-responsibility is not possible if we don't know what to expect from one another, and we don't agree we can expect action because we are baptized.

The parish sees itself as on a conversion journey. Therefore parishioners and leaders acknowledge that what has been in terms of attitude and practice is, at best, minimally working, to create and empower missionary disciples. Parish leaders have collected the data, identified how the parish fits in the trends, and where elements of the parish's life must change if all the baptized are to be equipped to build the reign of God on earth as it is in heaven. In other words, they've taken a loving look at the real. These synodal parishes have given up on the attitude of just working harder to fix the issue of disengagement, and they are not blaming those who are not participating. Synodal parishes are looking at themselves systemically and asking the Holy Spirit to help them discover the answer to, "What do we need to be doing to help all the baptized become students of Jesus (disciples) who share in his mission of the Kingdom coming on earth as it is in heaven (apostles)?" [Here's a paper](#) from the USCCB to start your thinking around this.

**Synodally-minded parishes spend most of their energy looking outward into the mission field entrusted to them.** They have processes to learn from and about those on the peripheries. They desire to be in grace-filled relationships with the last, the lost and the least: listening, learning, and welcoming one another into a fuller share in the Body of Christ. Further, they are asking what it will take for the baptized to turn their attention to the peripheries and margins, to the places Jesus went to share good news. And they ask, what do they need to do to equip the baptized for these relationships, the works of charity and justice, these encounters with Christ? A synodal parish is being very intentional about **forming a people with hearts of flesh** who share God's preferential option for the poor and believe that God desires God's kingdom to come now, however incompletely, beginning with those whom God most desires to be protected and cared for. And as a result, synodal parishes celebrate nourishing, forgiving, empowering Eucharist.

If this feels like a lot, it's because it is both a LOT and perhaps very different from the weekly/monthly calendar of activities within your parish. I know these activities are not currently reflected on my parish's calendar, so if some are doing this work, the rest of us don't know about it nor will we, if past practice is an indicator. And that's not the way of a synodal parish either. A synodal parish believes that we share what we are learning in order to create a fertile ground for discerning in common what the Spirit has in mind. While we all cannot know everything, we can be generous in sharing what we do know, wonder about and encounter on the way to hearing what the Spirit is trying to say to us today about our work and how to do it. Remember those regularly scheduled gatherings where truth is spoken in love? This is where all of this can be regularly shared so that we all see more, hear better, listen more attentively and eventually discern together.



The next chapter will focus on synodal leaders and the kinds of signs we will see when leadership takes on the synodal mantle.

To Discuss with others:

1. How are our leaders seeking the Holy Spirit's guidance?
2. To what degree do we as a parish/organization understand and live out our baptismal identities as priest, prophet and king?
3. To what extent can we name and give examples of our rights and responsibilities as the baptized?
4. Do our parishioners know what is expected of them as members of the parish? Why or why not?
5. How hard is it for us as a parish/organization to stop doing what we have been doing and embrace something new? Why?
6. Who most needs to be touched by Jesus within our parish boundaries? How can we find this out if we do not know it? How are we responding if we do?

Photo: Canakkale Turkey (c) Deborah Stollery 202



## PART THREE: Recognizing Synodal Leadership

Leadership: it's the key to moving a parish/organization from here to there. Leaders have the responsibility to see the direction, understand the first steps and inspire the people to go in that direction. Pope Francis is leading our Church into synodality. For the US Church, the question is, "Do our lay and ordained parish leaders understand what synodality is?" If they don't, then how is our parish supposed to join the #synodjourney?

I think it's fair to say that as I was writing this on May 15, 2024, most parish leaders still did not understand what synodality is. Most clergy did not participate in the first global consultation and so did not learn the method "Conversations in the Spirit" and did not see how the results of those global listening sessions informed the work of the first assembly of the Synod on Synodality. Most parish staffs and other lay leaders did not participate either. On what is this conclusion based? Sheer numbers. About 700,000 people in the US participated. Sounds like a lot until you know that according to the [Pew Research folks](#), about 72 million people identified themselves as Catholic in the US in 2021. Yep. 700,000 participants out of 72 million potential participants. For those of you who like numbers, that .0097% of the people. So that's how I came to the conclusion that too few of our parish leaders understand synodality. They simply haven't gotten on the journey yet.

But that does not mean there are not plenty of signposts for US Catholic Church leaders as they begin to follow Pope Francis' direction for the Church in the third millennium. This section is going to concentrate on leadership behaviors (signposts) that, when practiced and observed/experienced by the people, point to leaders embracing synodality.

**Synodal leaders practice listening to the People of God, those who share leadership with them, the cries of the poor and the signs of the times.** Yes, there it is again...one of the hallmarks of synodality is the regularly scheduled, structured practice of [deep listening](#), heart-to-heart, to hear what the Spirit is speaking through each of these constituencies. There are several components to this listening: the firm belief that the [Holy Spirit dwells within all the baptized](#) and so they have a Spirit insight to offer, the acquisition and practice of [sound basic listening behaviors](#), experience participating in and facilitating [Conversations in the Spirit](#) and the ability to sift through (the root meaning of [discern](#)) the messages to determine when more listening needs to take place before any decisions are made or that it is time to make a provisional decision and test it.

**Synodal leaders respect and therefore cultivate sacred silence within the community.** [Dominican Paul Philibert](#) says this of communal silence, "...an attitude of silence helps create conditions for deeper conversation....We have to desire to listen to others, to hear about their experience, to acknowledge it. ...Silent prayer and the development of interior silence make the quiet moments of common prayer resonate with the deeply felt awareness of the presence of God....Silence is a necessary condition for listening to God, to our neighbor and to our own hearts." There's plenty written about the role of silence in the liturgy. Synodal leaders embrace silence there, but also see communal silence in the midst of meetings as part of making space for the Holy Spirit to be in charge. It's not wasted time. It's creating sacred space for the Spirit.



**Synodal leaders embed substantive prayer into their personal lives and into their gatherings with the People of God.** It seems like this should be a given, but I've been in meetings (an appalling number of them, to be honest) with clergy and other leaders where prayer was either non-existent or "zipper prayer", defined as a quick Hail Mary to open and a rushed Our Father to close, were the nods to this important action. "There's just so much we have to do. We can't take time (or waste time) praying. We will just presume since we are about the Church's business that God's here and leading us." And from that point forward, the agenda, the clock, Father's capacity, wishes and mood, and a need to feel like we are "getting things done" allow little room for the Holy Spirit's ways of working. Synodal leaders adopt the perspective that "**we are too busy not to pray**," deliberately, intentionally, frequently and fervently.

**Synodal leaders engage in regular reflection.** How is this different from prayer? It might not be if the reflection is something like the Ignatian practice of **Examen**. However, reflection should include even more, done in the context of communal prayer or in solitude. Each individual called to lead within the Church also engages in practices of thinking and pondering the Scriptures, the Deposit of Faith, great spiritual writers, and the Saints, making space for the Holy Spirit to instruct them, to form their minds into the mind of Christ. At this level, this kind of reflection seeks to help the leader become more like Christ. Reflection is also an intellectual practice of questioning, of assessing processes and outcomes, of looking for the fruits of the Holy Spirit, of comparing decisions to mission and values, of looking for guidance and perhaps correction from the Scriptures and Tradition. Reflection makes space for the Holy Spirit to instruct, guide, admonish, affirm and inspire both the individual leader and their decisions. It does this through the process of investing the time to look back, to assess the present, and to evaluate progress in terms of the coming of the Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. First done alone, reflection is also fruitful when ecclesial leaders engage it together.

**Synodal leaders continuously check their ideas with others.** They have a fundamental disposition of humility, knowing that just as the Lord has given them ideas, so has the Lord given others ideas, insights and perspectives as well. It is in the dynamism of the community sharing these openly that the Holy Spirit sets hearts afire, corrects and instructs, sets agenda/direction and equips the faithful. Synodal leaders eschew unilateral decision-making unless it's an emergency. Synodal leaders know their work is to help the entire community hear the Spirit's call and respond to it, over and over again. Synodal leaders know the Holy Spirit is the One in charge and they create the communal conditions for the Spirit to reveal God's will...by continuously checking their ideas with others' ideas. Again, the call for deep listening and honest sharing!

So there you have five identifiers of a synodal leadership. It's time to start practicing these intentionally if you are an ecclesial leader. It's time to ask your leaders how they are already embracing these practices and encourage them to do so even more intentionally if you don't know if these behaviors are happening. And as a baptized member of the Body of Christ called to co-responsibility, it's time to engage in these practices yourself: regularly, intentionally. It may well be that synodality takes root this way: when the faithful embrace synodal practices and are then called by the Spirit to lead others.

To Discuss with others:

1. When, how and with what frequency are our clergy and lay leaders listening to the People of God? With what result?
2. When and how have we experienced sacred silence in the Mass and in our meetings? How was it received? Why?
3. How much time is spent in prayer when groups meet in the parish? How often do our leaders go off to pray alone or together?
4. When do our leaders engage in systematic reflection? How do we experience the fruit of it? What do we think happens when this is not being done?
5. Do our leaders, lay and ordained, openly "check" their ideas, perspectives and preferences with others? What fruit comes from this? If they are not, why not?

Still not convinced we need synodality? Purchase our [White Paper](#) on how synodality helps us navigate our Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous (VUCA) times.



Image: Courtyard St. John the Theologian Monastery Patmos, Greece Deborah Stollery (c) 2024

## PART FOUR: Synodality and Faith Formation

Our #synodjourney continues as we take a look at faith formation approaches and topics that will be found in a parish determined to become synodal. Why? Since the beginning of this process, every document, from the first descriptors all the way to the Synthesis Report after the first assembly and the *Instrumentum laboris* for the Second Assembly, has said EVERYONE will need formation in order to be able to be a synodal people. EVERYONE. We should understand that to mean we don't already understand how to participate in synodality. We need to be formed...not just given knowledge...formed, in synodal practices. The difference? Sharing knowledge about a subject tends toward the intellectual, the mind. Formation includes the intellectual, the spiritual and the practical: it's far more wholistic than just concentrating on the intellectual. There's already an axiom afoot about synodality that says something like "You have to DO it to GET it." Obviously, that's more than learning about it.

So what is synodality? It's a way of being. The Synthesis Report says it this way: "Through it [the synodal way of being], the Holy People of God have discovered that a synodal way of being silent, praying, listening, and speaking, rooted in the Word of God and in joyful, if also somewhat painful encounters, leads to a deeper awareness that we are all brothers and sisters in Christ. An invaluable fruit of this process is the heightened awareness of our identity as the faithful People of God, within which each is the bearer of a dignity derived from Baptism, and each is called to differentiated co-responsibility for the common mission of evangelisation [sic]." (1,a) As you have noticed, there are plenty of formation topics embedded in this description.

What is synodality? It's a living communion. The Synthesis Document describes it this way a little further into Part 1: "In its broadest sense, synodality can be understood as Christians walking in communion with Christ toward the Kingdom along with the whole of humanity. Its orientation is towards its mission, and its practice involves gathering in assembly at each level of ecclesial life. It involves reciprocal listening, dialogue, community discernment, and creation of consensus as an expression that renders Christ present in the Holy Spirit, each taking decisions in accordance with their responsibilities." (1,h) Again, the subjects for formation are many, complex and not widely in practice currently.

What is synodality? It's a deeply spiritual practice. Again, the Synthesis Report says it this way: "The renewal of the Christian community is possible only by recognizing the primacy of grace. If spiritual depth is lacking, synodality remains cosmetic. What we are called to, however, is not only to translate into community processes a spiritual experience gained elsewhere, but more deeply to experience how reciprocal relationships are the place and form of an authentic encounter with God. In this sense, while drawing on the rich spiritual heritage of the Tradition, the synodal perspective contributes to renewing its forms: of a prayer open to participation, a discernment lived together, and a missionary energy that arises from sharing and that radiates at service." (2,c) Formation in the spiritual practices that undergird synodality and formation for mission arise from this description.



A parish determined to embrace synodality then is a parish whose faith formation practices are going to create a people who practice the elements of synodality regularly, who broaden and deepen their understanding of what it means to live communion, who invest in the spiritual practices that will enable the Holy Spirit to work in and through the community, and who are formed for and from participation in the mission. Since this is a blog and not a deep treatment of each of these elements, which I am hopeful faith formators have begun doing already, I'd like to share with you some of our Team's reflections on what faith formation might look like in a synodal parish. For simplicity...it's a list.

1. Faith formation has as its starting point the idea that the parish is a School of Discernment. Everyone in the parish desires to be guided by the Holy Spirit personally and communally and expects the parish to teach them how to live this way.
  - That means formation discovers the graces of baptism, upholds the dignity of all the baptised, investigates its rights and responsibilities and helps all ages of the baptised to see themselves as part of the Body of Christ on earth today, continuing Christ's ministry.
  - Formation also continues to discover what it means to be "sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit" in terms of honoring the voice of the Spirit within each baptised person. It is a formation intent upon discovering what the Spirit wants of the community, what gifts the Spirit has already given within the community, and what gifts the Spirit may be enabling that were not readily apparent, so that the mission can be undertaken.
  - Since the Mass is where Christ's presence through the Holy Spirit is regularly encountered, liturgical formation is mystagogical, helping the Body of Christ recognize the Spirit's presence in the Mass, and assisting them in their full, conscious and active participation as a response to the Spirit's presence. Mystagogical reflection on individual and communal encounters with Christ's real sacramental presence unleashes faith in the Spirit alive, at work within, among and around us. This creates fertile ground for discerning how the Spirit is at work guiding the community.
  - A School of Discernment teaches the practice of listening to the Holy Spirit. [Conversations in the Spirit](#) is one tool for this and is central in this School of Discernment. The School also develops its "curriculum" based first on practices that enable listening to the Spirit to happen. At all levels, a synodal approach to formation will include teaching and practicing listening skills within the context of prayer and of interpersonal relationships.
  - The People of God will need to be taught how to discern the Spirit's movements in their personal lives AND how to discern the Spirit's voice in community. Related to this are two practical expressions. The first is that the parish uses communal discernment to make choices that involve the whole community, thus living out of the fruits of a School of Discernment. The second is that individuals and families are taught how to discover the Spirit's movements in their life, to listen to the Spirit's call for conversion, and to hear the Spirit beckon them to put on the mind of Christ, to seek forgiveness for whatever is blocking that, and to adopt a new way of life when called by the Spirit.



2. Faith formation embeds an outward focus on the world that is crying out for God's presence. The [Synthesis Document](#) says it this way, "If becoming synodal means walking together with the One who is *the Way*, a synodal Church needs to put those experiencing poverty at the center of all aspects of its life: through their sufferings, they have direct knowledge of the suffering Christ [cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, no 198]." (4,h) Just a bit later in the document, we read "The experience of encounter, sharing a common life and serving those living in poverty and on the margins should be an integral part of all formation paths offered by Christian communities; it is a requirement of faith, not an optional extra." (4,o) Synodality is mission focused so faith formation would be mission focused also. From the youngest of the baptised through adulthood, those people connected to the parish are being helped to see God's beloved who are on the peripheries, marginalized by systems and structures, outcasted, widowed, orphaned who dwell close by (inside the parish boundaries). They are being given skills and opportunities to be the healing presence of Christ close to home and taught how to receive the gift of Christ's presence through each of these people. Service projects aren't counted by hours or by completion of a sacrament preparation process. They are methods through which the Holy Spirit forms participants who have the mind of Christ and his passion for justice. Outreach is the way of the parish and all who are able participate. Again, reflection on the experiences is a core formation practice, for that is where the Spirit's presence is named and celebrated.
3. Synodal faith formation centers different areas of the Tradition than are currently central in curriculums. The Synthesis Document says it this way, "From the work of the Assembly, there is a call for better knowledge of the teachings of Vatican II, post conciliar teaching and the Church's social doctrine. ...In a world where the number of migrants and refugees is increasing while a willingness to welcome them is decreasing and where the foreigner is viewed with increasing suspicion, it is appropriate for the Church to engage decisively in education, in the culture of dialogue and encounter, combating racism and xenophobia (dislike of or prejudice against people from other countries), especially through pastoral formation." (5,o,p) So a parish engaged in synodal faith formation is one whose adults continue to mine the treasures of Vatican II and the teachings that have emerged from it, and is one whose adults are steeped in Catholic Social Teaching.

Since this is an eBook and not an academic treatment of this subject, I'll stop here. My hope is that you are beginning to see that a synodal parish is approaching lifelong faith formation very differently than what is currently in practice in most parishes. This will take innovation, experimentation, "failing forward" in that something did not work out but a lot was learned along the way, and it will take leadership willing to swim against the tide, challenging models, materials and methods. And that means this beginning sign of a synodal parish is present: the acknowledgment that what we have always been doing is not creating missionary disciples. We must form ourselves differently.

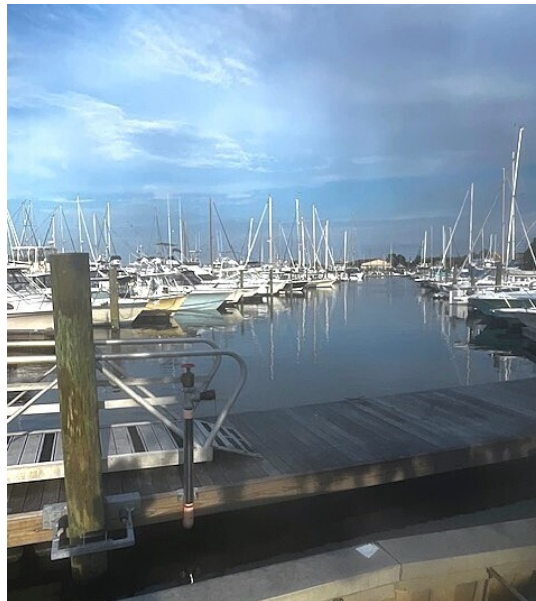
General characteristics, specific systems and structures, observable leadership practices and a different approach to the content and methodology of faith formation are all signs of a synodal parish/organization. You can recognize it when you see it, and if you're not seeing a lot of it yet, start moving in one or more of these directions. Pray. Ask for the Spirit's energy and guidance, and then walk in that Spirit, toward this more synodal Church.

The Pentecost Vigil Project, Inc. is a Virginia 501c3, established for the sole purpose of supporting the Catholic Church in the United States as she embraces synodality. We believe we are the only organization like this, focused solely on unleashing the Spirit of synodality, and we aim to be your "one-stop-shop" for learning about and then implementing synodality. Check us out [here](#).

To discuss with others:

1. What is the starting point for your parish's faith formation offerings? Who is responsible for determining your formation's purposes, materials and methods? To what degree are they familiar with synodality?
2. What evidence do you have for each of your formation offerings that participants are encountering Jesus Christ and learning how to relate to him? (For signs of conversion, see the text for the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, paragraph 42. Note: a new ritual text called the *Order of Christian Initiation of Adults* is to be released at the end of 2024. I don't have access to it to tell you where to find the signs of conversion in that text.)
3. As you review this list, where do you believe your parish is already well on the #synodjourney? Why do you believe this is so?
4. Where do you believe the Spirit is asking you to begin to embrace a formation for synodality? Who should be part of this conversation to determine next steps?

Photo Credit Deborah W. Stallery (c) 2024 Morningstar Marina Norfolk, VA



## PART FIVE: Unity and Ecumenism

It's Saturday afternoon and this is how the conversation goes,

"Are you going to church in the morning?"

"Yes, I am scheduled."

"Are you taking one or both of the kids?"

"Sure. They seem to like it and the folks there love seeing them. Are you going to church tomorrow night?"

"Yes. I'm cantoring."

"Are you taking our son?"

"I'll see if he wants to go when it's time."

Week in and week out, two Christian parents trying to raise their children in the ways of faith, be involved in their faith communities, and not over-do the kids. It's an ecumenical marriage in practice. They are living out the truth of "one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and in all" (Eph 4:5-6). What they are not doing is worshiping and serving together in the same Christian community. They struggle to pray together as a family, and there's even some tension around which Bible the children read. Faith-based holidays see them choosing what is easiest at the time, including occasionally, choosing nothing. Ecumenism, on the ground, in real life.

The Synthesis Document has an entire section entitled "On the Road Towards Christian Unity"(7). It makes the following statements: "Baptism, which is at the root of the principle of synodality, also constitutes the foundation of ecumenism. Through it all Christians participate in the *sensus fidei* and for this reason they should be listened to carefully, regardless of their tradition, as the Synod Assembly did in its discernment process. There can be no synodality without an ecumenical dimension." (7,b) Further down in this section, we read "Ecumenism is first and foremost a matter of spiritual renewal that also requires processes for repentance and healing of memory. ...Therefore it is important that ecumenism is practiced first and foremost in daily life." (7,c) And another passage that shines a light on the relationship between synodality and ecumenism: "Marriages between Christians who belong to different Churches or ecclesial communities [inter-church marriages] may constitute realities in which the wisdom of communion can mature, and it is possible to evangelize each other." (7,f)

There can be no synodality without an ecumenical dimension. Why? Because we are one people through our baptism, imbued with the Spirit and together tasked with the mission of being Christ's hands and feet in the world today.

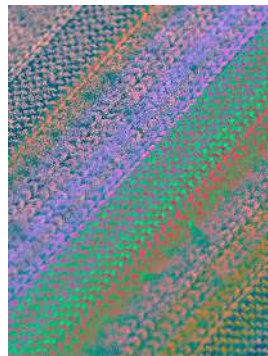


Photo by Daniela Paola Alchapar on Unsplash

So, what kinds of ecumenical actions might a synodal parish be doing? Here are a few suggestions:

- Provide opportunities for ecumenical households to pray together, drawing from the rich Catholic prayer tradition that welcome all Christians to participate. (SR 3,m) Penitential services, Taize prayer, Tenebrae, Stations of the Cross, healing services...use your imagination and the rich [Catholic spiritual tradition](#)!
- Form the people of the parish in the [skills necessary for ecumenical dialogue](#) (SR 14,e)
- Engage entire households in works of charity and justice alongside those from other Christian denominations, and provide for mystagogy/reflection about them once they are done, so that all can come to understand how this work is an encounter with the Lord himself.
- Invite ecumenical households to participate in learning how to [listen well](#), and to practice [Conversations in the Spirit](#) in their homes as a way to strengthen the family.
- Make sure that as part of the structured, regularly scheduled listening sessions that happen in a synodal parish, ecumenical families are specifically invited to participate.
- Consider offering Liturgies of the Word to celebrate major religious holidays so that ecumenical households can worship together without the difficulty that arises when one partner is not welcome to communion.
- Visit with and learn from other Christian churches to see how they are welcoming, inclusive and in service to their ecumenical households and invest in some of those same actions in Catholic parishes.
- Create opportunities for couples living out ecumenical marriages to get to know one another, to engage in conversations about their strengths and struggles, and to surface what they are in need of as they live out their marriage vocation ecumenically. Host ecumenical events like Vacation Bible School, parish social activities, and advocate for participation in these.

Some of you reading this are thinking this is ill-advised, that it will "water down" what it means to be Catholic, that it will encourage a kind of syncretism that is dangerous and contrary to the conservation of the Catholic faith. But, if there can be no synodality without this deep respect for the baptismal dignity of all other Christians and if we cannot give evidence of that deep respect by parish practices that welcome, listen, encourage participation in the mission and enable elements of unity within ecumenical households, then there can be no synodality.

Here's what gives me the impetus to embrace the challenge of ecumenism: I believe the Holy Spirit does want synodality to be the way the Church is church in the third millennium and I do not want to be at odds with the Spirit. That moves me in these directions. I hope it will move you as well.

Remember, the purpose of this Ebook is to begin to point out concrete signs of a parish/organization that is becoming more and more synodal. It's about that axiom, "I can't tell you what it is, but I know it when I see it." We may have trouble succinctly defining synodality, but this eBook and some future work the Pentecost Vigil Project is doing intends to help us "know it when we see it." I am anticipating we will get even more indicators of a synodal Church after the October, 2024 Assembly of the Synod on Synodality. But we certainly have enough to get started identifying what is, listening to the Spirit tell us what we most need next, and then planning to respond to the Spirit in faith, hope and love.

Need something more? Members of the Pentecost Vigil Project are ready to assist you. [Contact us!](#)



To Discuss with Others:

1. What ecumenical practices do you already offer? How do you welcome ecumenical households to these offerings?
2. How many ecumenical households are in your parish? Within your parish boundaries? How can you identify them?
3. What makes ecumenical households feel welcome? Excluded?
4. What are the barriers to becoming more ecumenical? How will leaders begin to remove those barriers?
5. What kinds of ecumenical formation is necessary for your leaders and then your parishioners? Who can assist you with this?

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