

# FACILITATING SYNODAL CONSULTATIONS



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## Part I Facilitating a Synodal Consultation

### Process for Facilitating Synodal Consultations

Dialogue is the foundation of all synodal consultations. Dialogue can include conflicting opinions, but we all acknowledge that what we discern through this process has the potential to be the will of God for the Church in the future.

- Dialogue comes before discussion in synodal exchanges. These two activities can lead to true discernment of what the Holy Spirit is saying and where she is leading.
- Dialogue expands possibilities and insight into possibilities.
- Discussion holds those possibilities against one another, helping to reflect upon them, and narrowing toward realistic, doable solutions, and steps forward.

Required materials/persons: Facilitator, groups no larger than 10 people per table, note taker for each group.

### Ground Rules

It helps to set ground rules and expectations at the start of the consultation by emphasizing the need for broad participation and safety. Boundary-related ground rules include:

- Discernment means speaking, listening, and prayerfully reflecting and sometimes pausing in silence between speakers to consider what is said.
- The emphasis is on listening to understand, rather than listening to respond.
- Speak when you can add to the conversation.
- Stay on topic.
- One person speaks at a time. This consultation is a safe place to talk. We will treat each other and what anyone says with reverence and respect.
- Our primary mode is dialogue: When we speak, our purpose is to advance the conversation. We avoid comments that seek to advance a personal agenda.
- We limit how long we speak so that everyone has time to share.
- We only speak once until everyone has had an opportunity to share.

### Practical Facilitation Suggestions for Dialogue, Discussion and Discernment

- A facilitator can call upon the group to share the themes that they hear surfacing, either intermittently in the first listening or at the end of the first round of listening, after everyone has spoken once.
- A facilitator can help stimulate discussion by offering to synthesize the comments made from time to time or when the flow of conversation seems to be stuck.
- “A facilitator can ask participants what is “sticking out” for them as a result of the conversation, concentrating on the three elements of synodality: communion, mission and participation. How is the Spirit calling us to be in stronger communion with each other and the Lord? How is the Spirit urging us to embrace elements of

our mission? How is the Spirit nudging us to greater participation in the life of the Church?"

- Discernment begins in prayer: "Your will, not mine." We attend to the Spirit in our stories, comments, and insights. A facilitator helps everyone turn their wills toward the Lord's will as the group begins to determine next steps.

### **Practical General Considerations for Facilitators**

- Pray for the process, the participants, and the other facilitators.
- Participate in another listening session with someone else facilitating so your views can be part of the discernment.
- Adapt the listening session process to their setting, timeframe, and the number of participants at a table.

### **Possible Focus Questions**

(Develop a one-page handout with the focus question and some descriptive content so participants can record insights, key points, or just doodle.)

- How is the Church accompanying me on my spiritual journey?
- On a scale of one to ten, how connected am I to my parish? Why?
- What are the two or three most important factors that you identify as the root cause of the clergy abuse crisis in the Catholic Church?
- What has been the most life-giving aspect of my parish experience?
- How would I describe the role of women in the Catholic Church today? How about in my parish experience? What are the blessings and the challenges?
- How would I describe the role of the laity in the Catholic Church today? How about in my parish experience?
- How welcoming is the Church, and my parish, to divorced and re-married couples? What are the challenges?
- How welcoming is the Church and my parish to the LBGQT+ community? What are the challenges? What is needed?
- What role should the Church play in the public political arena? What has been my experience in my parish?
- How does our communal worship (Mass) enhance my spiritual journey? What have been the blessings and the challenges?
- Have I ever been wounded by the Church in some way? What happened? What did I

need? What do I need now? How does my parish incorporate Catholic Social Teachings in our outreach, especially concerning the poor, the hungry, and recently arrived immigrants and refugees?

- What would I like to tell Pope Francis as he prepares to lead the International Synod?
  - Where do I find signs of hope in the Church today?
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## **Part II Example I**

### **Middle East Crisis: Context, Discussion, and Prayer**

Conversations in the Spirit is a central practice of the synodal Church. As a result, this approach is to permeate parish life. Here is an example of how St. Francis of Assisi Parish in the Archdiocese of Baltimore used this process to enable parishioners to engage together around what was quickly becoming a “hot” topic.

The premise is simple, but not always easy. For the People of God, the voice to whom we are all listening is that of the Lord. We believe we can hear the Lord’s voice when we gather together in the Spirit, listen deeply to one another, seeking the Spirit’s gift of understanding first. We intend to allow the Spirit’s wisdom, knowledge and understanding, found in each other, to help us see and hear what we may have missed, to learn together, and to seek the Lord’s way together, in communion. We dialogue, discuss and then discern what the Spirit is saying to us in a particular context, moving then to mission and participation.

#### **Opening Prayer, Welcome: (5 minutes; pre-assigned and prepared)**

#### **Overview: presentation, reflection, discussion**

- Everyone is asked to prayerfully listen to what the speaker has to say. You are encouraged to make notes of what the speaker says. If you have a clarification question you’d like to ask, write it down.

#### **Presentation: James Howell (20 minutes)**

Executive director of the Bethlehem University Foundation

- The historical and geographical context of the Israel/Hamas relationship

#### **Small Group Discussion (synodal listening process)**

Explanation of Process: (2 minutes pre-assigned)

- Script: “You will be asked to think about the presentation we just heard, and you will have a minute of silent, prayerful reflection to gather your thoughts. When the minute is up – I will keep the time – we will go around the table, listening to each person’s

thoughts. When we are ready, the table facilitator will ask for a volunteer to begin the conversation. That person will have 3 minutes to offer his/her thoughts.

- Once the first speaker has finished, he or she invites the next person to speak. If that person is not ready, the first speaker then invites a second person to speak. After each person speaks, he or she invites the next speaker until everyone at the table has had a chance to speak. Those who decline the first invitation will be offered other chances.
- Once everyone has spoken, we will take time for clarifying questions, only. This is not the time for disagreements or challenges, simply to make sure we understand what the speaker meant by a comment or to ask the speaker to expand a bit on his or her original thought. We will use this same process for two rounds of conversation.”
- *Participants are asked to introduce themselves at their tables.*

## **Table Groups**

- Round I (15 minutes).  
Allow participants 1 minute to silently and prayerfully consider the presentation. The table facilitator asks for a volunteer to begin the sharing. There is no discussion until everyone has spoken. All participants simply listen deeply to each person and attend to how the Holy Spirit is moving within oneself, within the person speaking, and in the group as a whole.
- Round II (15 min):  
Following the clarifying questions time, participants silently reflect for one minute on the following questions:
  - *What did you hear in our sharing that spurs your own thinking? Captures your attention? Or perhaps provides a new perspective for you?*

The table facilitator asks for a volunteer to begin the sharing. There is no discussion until everyone has spoken.

- Round III: (5 minutes)  
Once the group dialogue has taken place, the table facilitator invites participants to review and share their insights and questions within their small group.
  - *Is there anything you want to say that hasn't yet been said?*
  - *What key insights or questions do we want to share with the entire group?*

Participants then decide on the feedback they wish to communicate to the large group:

- What were the key insights or questions?

## **Small Group Discussion Wrap up: Pre-Assigned (10 min)**

## **Closing Prayer for Peace: Pastor (10 minutes)**

## **Part III Example 2**

### **Synodal Process: A Practical Application**

For the past eight years I have been involved with GoodFaith, a Catholic ministry organization providing young people with transformative experiences of missionary discipleship rooted in Catholic social tradition.

Their newest initiative, *Family Matters*, provides resources and direct support to parents/caregivers and their children to nurture and deepen their role as protagonists (agents) of their faith and to integrate Catholic social tradition into their home life.

This parish-based project begins with consulting parents about their concerns, hopes, challenges, and needs in fostering the faith of their children. This onsite or virtual consultation utilizes a synodal process of prayerful reflection, sharing, and deep listening.

#### **Synodal Process**

This process is most effective when participants are seated at round tables or in a circle in groups of eight or less. Each group has a facilitator and a note-taker. Participants had a handout with the focus questions.

**Brief Introductions:** The facilitator provides a brief overview of the *Family Matters* program and objectives and then invites the participants to introduce themselves, moving around the circle, sharing their name, how many children and their children's ages.

#### **Opening Prayer**

Participants are invited to sit comfortably, close their eyes, let go of the stresses of the day, and relax in the presence of the Holy Spirit. Then, beginning with the sign of the cross, the facilitator invites participants to silently reflect on their families. Participants are asked to recall joyful and life – giving memories and experiences in their families – and then in their families of faith. This reflection included moments of belonging in the faith community, moments of hurt or disappointment, discouragement, gratitude, and support. Finally, participants reflect on a dream they have for their family engagement in the Church. The facilitator then offers a closing prayer.

#### **Ground Rules**

The facilitator thanks the participants for their willingness to enter into the prayer reflection, highlighting the importance of taking time for silence and stillness, allowing the Holy Spirit's presence. This silent reflection is integral to the synodal process.

The basic ground rules and process were displayed on PowerPoint™, as were the five focus questions below.

The facilitator describes the five rounds of reflection and sharing. Each will begin with two minutes of silent reflection on the question prompt. Then one at a time, moving around the circle in order, each participant has three minutes to share their insights and thoughts. The rest of the group listens carefully to understand, not to respond, and there is no cross-talking or discussion. Just deep listening.

**Round 1:**

First question: What compelled you to be a part of this listening session, and to consider participation in *Family Matters*? What excites you about what you know so far? What ideas, expectations, or hopes do you have for what this could be for you/your family?

Silent reflection ... sharing ... listening.

**Round 2:**

The group takes another minute of silence to consider what they heard in the first round and to reflect about this next question: Share about the kinds of things you do regularly in your family (rituals, patterns, behaviors, activities) that feel successful and matter to you. What makes them matter and why are they successful to you? Why do you do them regularly? How does it make you feel?

Silent reflection ... sharing ... listening.

**Round 3:**

The group takes another minute of silence to consider the next question: Think about a time you felt really committed to something as a family: what kept you coming back to that? What are barriers you see to making commitments as a family?

Silent reflection ... sharing ... listening.

**Round 4:**

The group takes another minute of silence to consider the next question: What is happening in your family, immediate community, schools, world events that you want help navigating from a faith lens? Another way to think of this is - What is keeping you up at night? What do you need from the Church?

Silent reflection ... sharing ... listening.

**Closing Round:**

The group takes 30 seconds of silence to consider the final question tonight: Share an idea(s) or revelation(s) that you've had as you've been part of this listening session. Were there things that came up that made you excited or feel challenging to you?

Silent reflection ... sharing ... listening.

## **Report, Closing Prayer, and Next Steps - Facilitator/Parish Staff**

The note-taker can share an overview of key insights, without naming names. The facilitator and/or parish staff share the next steps in the *Family Matters* program and how the parish will move forward. Then the facilitator thanks the participants and closes with a brief prayer.

### **Summary**

Though this application is specifically on parenting and families, the synodal process can be adapted to any topic, issue, or setting. The participants appreciated the opportunity to reflect first before sharing, to share without interruption and discussion, and to listen carefully to the experiences of others.

### **Side note**

As a facilitator in this process, I have been struck by the simple insight that people just want to be heard. There is such a strong desire by the members of our faith community to have opportunities to share their struggles, challenges, and concerns and to know that they are not alone with their challenges. Further, there is a genuine appreciation for pastoral leaders that listen to their stories and commit to providing the resources and support needed for parents to pass on faith to their children.

Over and over again, participants in the consultations identify the importance of welcome and hospitality in their parishes, the desire for vibrant worship, which included singable music and homilies that are rooted in life experiences, and the overall sense of community. Basically, people were looking to be participants in their faith community, and not mere spectators. The most significant impact on the faith life of children, youth, and young adults is the faith life of the parents. So, parish support and encouragement for family rituals, faith practices, community engagement, and service contribute significantly to parents' ability to foster the faith of their children, as well as to their own faith growth. Because *Family Matters*.

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Bob McCarty has spent his entire professional career in service to the Catholic Church and her pastoral ministry and mission through leadership development, organizational management, and spirituality for the journey. He has practical pastoral leadership experience at the parish, school, diocesan, and national levels. His varied experiences enabled Bob to address a broad range of topics and audiences, including conferences of local lay ecclesial leaders, graduate classes, and clergy and bishop workshops nationally and internationally.



Bob has spent his career focusing on pastoral leadership. Bob has a reputation for fostering collaboration and operationalizing strategic vision. He has provided consultation and training for ministry leadership in five countries to assist their efforts in creating a national vision and structure for pastoral ministry with young Catholics. He is a project coordinator for Saint Mary's Press research, specifically the Saint Mary's Press research project "Going, Going, Gone: The Dynamics of Disaffiliation in Young Catholics". an author of nine books, the most recent of which is The Heart of Discipleship.