

## Methodology and Results

The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops asked each diocese or eparchy to choose only 2-3 themes or questions from those listed in sections 8-12, 16, 18 of the 2023 *Synthesis Report* and to organize sessions of reflection on these focused themes. The method of conversation in the Spirit was strongly recommended. Dioceses were asked to synthesize the fruits of their reflections into a synthesis of no more than two pages.

Responses were only received from Latin Rite Dioceses, with 66% of Dioceses responding. The Latin Church in Canada is divided into four Pastoral Regions. Of the responses received, 29% were from the Western Canada, 16% from Ontario, 37% from Quebec, and 18% from Atlantic Canada.

A large number of responses did not, strictly speaking, follow the directions from *Towards October 2024*, or the shorter directives provided by the CCCB. This suggests that the instructions from the Synod Office and/or the CCCB may not have been sufficiently clear. In many cases, there was confusion about the difference between this stage (i.e., focused reflection on specific themes from the 2023 *Synthesis Report*) and previous stages (“listening sessions”). Although many dioceses employed, and greatly appreciated, the method of conversation in the Spirit, a significant number did not use it, which often resulted in less-focused reflections. In some cases, dioceses did not carry out reflection sessions but simply submitted reports on related synodal initiatives. In other cases, the syntheses did not name themes from the *Synthesis Report*, making it more complicated to assess them. In several cases, the diocesan syntheses are better categorized as a list of “best practices”; these will be submitted to the Synod Secretariat under that category.

## Top Themes from Diocesan Synthesis Reports

Of the 20 sections contained in the 2023 Synthesis Report, 8 received significant attention:

Rank	Theme / Section of 2023 <i>Synthesis Report</i>	% of syntheses dealing with the theme directly
1	The Church is Mission (section 8)	66%
2	Towards a Listening and Accompanying Church (section 16)	39%
3	Structures of Participation (section 18)	32%
4	A Church “out of every tribe, tongue, people and nation” (section 5)	24%
5	Women in the Life and Mission of the Church (section 9)	21%
6	A Synodal Approach to Formation (section 14)	16%
7	Entering the Community of Faith: Christian Initiation (section 3)	11%
8	People in Poverty, Protagonists of the Church’s Journey (section 4)	11%

The top priority was *The Church is Mission* (section 8). This is not surprising since it corresponds to the overarching question: “how can we be a synodal Church *in mission*?” This was true for every region of Canada.

It is notable that while dioceses were encouraged to focus on sections 8-12, 16, 18, there was virtually no mention of sections 10-12 (which deal with consecrated life and the clergy). The reasons for this are not clear, but may be of concern. Perhaps the synodal gathering of priests in Rome will remedy this situation somewhat.

It is also interesting that the 3<sup>rd</sup>-most common theme (section 5) was not one of those recommended by the document *Towards October 2024* (nor was it recommended by the CCCB). This indicates the great importance Canadian dioceses give to the question of building community within the Church, especially as concerns those of different ethnic, cultural, and linguistic groups.

What follows is a presentation of each of the above 8 themes, including key observations and matters for consideration that emerge from the Canadian diocesan reflections.

## **I. The Church is Mission – Section 8 (identified in 66% of diocesan syntheses)**

This theme was clearly the most important to Canadian dioceses, being identified about twice as often as any other theme. There was clear convergence on the need for every baptized person (lay, consecrated, ordained) to bear witness in word and deed to the Good News and to participate in the Church's evangelizing mission of transforming humanity and society through the leaven of the Gospel. This requires going out of our own ecclesial spaces, both individually and communally, into the world to meet people where they are, listening attentively to their joys, hopes, griefs, and anxieties.

This mission will benefit from the personal sharing of one's own faith story or testimony; it should be anchored in the Word of God, Sacred Tradition, and the Church's teaching. In order to be effective, it will rely on the recognition of the action of the Holy Spirit in each baptized person, and on the fostering of their unique charisms. Finally, it was repeatedly noted that all of this will require formation at all age-levels and for all Catholics, since many Catholics do not see themselves as missionaries and may not be aware of the vocation and spiritual gifts they received in Baptism.

### *Matters for Consideration*

- It was noted that major changes to diocesan and parish structures may be required to bring about the "missionary option" identified by Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium*. Some dioceses hint at more participative diocesan structures that are focused on fostering outreach initiatives.
- Some dioceses noted that it might be useful to establish a commissioning rite for faithful entrusted with specific tasks in the Church's mission in order to make more visible the diversity of vocations, charisms and ministries at work in the local community.
- Several dioceses noted that effective missionary outreach will require better internal communications (between parishes, between the diocesan office and parishes, between groups of faithful, etc.).

- One diocese noted that, in its local context, the word “mission” is often associated with colonialism and that we need to develop a corrected and purified understanding of mission in order to bring the Good News to our world. This purification is an ongoing challenge.
- There were repeated calls for better formation. However, in Canada we do not have the requisite ecclesial culture or, in some cases, the needed structures. One challenge lies in identifying programs and methods of formation that will be attractive and accessible to the lay faithful who are not already employed by the Church.

## ***II. Towards a Listening and Accompanying Church – Section 16 (identified in 39% of diocesan syntheses)***

Many dioceses identified this theme. The related terms “listening,” “accompaniment,” and “welcome” were also frequently mentioned in diocesan reflections even when this theme itself was not explicitly identified. They pointed out that the Church is called to adopt a listening and welcoming attitude to those outside the Church, and those no longer practicing their faith, modeled on the example of Jesus (for example, in his interaction with the Samaritan woman). This welcoming and listening is the responsibility of individual Catholics as well as of parish communities. It should be unconditional but not conceal one’s commitment to Jesus Christ and the Gospel. It should be marked by active listening, which is greater than simply hearing. The practice of listening and accompaniment provides the opportunity for significant and needed connections to be made between the Church and its people, in particular those at the periphery, the visible and invisible marginalized in our communities. Finally, many dioceses mentioned the value of small Christian communities in providing a place of welcome, listening, and evangelization.

### *Conversation in the Spirit (CiS)*

Intimately connected to the theme of becoming a “listening” Church is the practice of “conversation in the Spirit.” A very large number of dioceses indicated their use of, and appreciation for, this method of discernment. During the 2024 reflection sessions it helped participants listen to each other, broke down barriers, and facilitated greater understanding. As one diocese’s synthesis put it: “At the conclusion of these sessions, there was a felt movement from confusion about synodality and what it means, to active and joyful participation as a result of being seen, heard, and received.”

More work, however, remains to be done in forming Catholics in this method. Challenges include a lack of formation in active listening, the habit of debating, hesitancy to share honestly, a lack of relevant theological knowledge, and difficulty identifying the question to be discerned.

### *Matters for Consideration*

For this theme, dioceses identified many areas of potential growth and development, without necessarily knowing how this will be achieved.

- *Formation:* it was recognized that the path “towards a listening and accompanying Church” requires a great deal of formation on the part of clergy and laity alike. Enhanced formation in spiritual direction / listening / accompaniment is necessary.
- A number of dioceses noted the serious challenges posed in reaching those who have been wounded by the Church, or who believe the Church rejects them.

- Some dioceses gave voice to concerns about the ambiguity that can arise when listening to diverse perspectives is interpreted as endorsement of them. In many cases, dioceses noted that a wide range of perspectives are already present within their churches and what is needed is unity in diversity.
- Many dioceses noted the need to create new spaces or renew current ones where people feel free to share their struggles and questions. Such listening itself is a form of welcome. As was shared, “The heart of reaching those who feel excluded needs to be founded on listening to the Word of God and to each other.” In particular, “merciful listening”, listening without prior judgement to understand their struggles and circumstances, should be encouraged.
- Many dioceses noted the serious challenge that administrative crises (e.g., managing allegations of sexual abuse, etc.) can drain their energy and greatly inhibit their ability to devote suitable energy toward listening and fostering better internal communications, as well as initiatives of evangelization.
- A number of dioceses envisioned CiS as the model and approach for supporting diocesan and pastoral planning. Through the incorporation of CiS into existing structures of participation, pastoral activity and planning become more open and inclusive.
- Bishops should change the way they make pastoral visits to parishes by facilitating greater opportunities for listening to the local community.
- It may be helpful to make the RCIA more accessible and available.

### **III. *Structures of Participation* – Section 18 (identified in 32% of diocesan syntheses)**

The meaning of “participation” may be interpreted in different ways. Although it was often taken to mean participation in the Church’s mission, in the diocesan reflections it was more often understood as participation in ecclesial structures of administration, governance, and decision-making. There was broad consensus on the need for all the faithful – to the extent possible – to be involved in the planning of the Church’s pastoral mission. When we invite participation through personal invitation and allow for the sharing of the unique gifts of each of the baptized we become a more co-responsible Church. Strengthening and supporting Parish Councils, as well as improving the quality of communications (particularly the communication of decisions) are immediate steps that can be taken. With respect to decisions, it was often noted that greater listening will improve the quality of decisions. It was also noted that we should view ministry primarily as service to others rather than as a way of exercising power or of being seen by them. With respect to a broader concept of “participation,” some dioceses noted that small groups within parishes can foster a deeper sense of belonging and more active participation in the parish community. It was also pointed out that participation requires formation.

#### *Matters for Consideration*

- Some dioceses suggested greater space for consultation and discussion prior to decisions being made. This would not replace the authority of the Bishop, but the process of arriving at the decision would be transformed by consultation and active listening. What could this look like?
- Some dioceses suggested the creation of a Diocesan Pastoral Council, similar to a Parish Council.

- Some participants in diocesan meetings indicated a desire for a greater recognition of the role of women in Church structures.
- It remains an open question whether we need new diocesan structures, or whether we need to renew and revitalize existing ones. For example, one diocese noted the need to streamline existing structures, while another stated that “we don’t need to wait for other directives from Rome; we can already start working in a more synodal way.” It may be that these two tendencies are not mutually exclusive.

#### **IV. *A Church “out of every tribe, tongue, people and nation” – Section 5 (identified in 24% of diocesan syntheses)***

Canada is currently experiencing its highest-ever level of immigration. It is therefore not surprising that this theme was identified so frequently, even though it was not one of those suggested by the Synod Secretariat. The increasingly multiculturalism of many dioceses is creating new challenges for the pastoral care of recently-arrived Catholics as well as for those already residing in Canada.

There is general consensus on the need to welcome and integrate recently-arrived Catholics into our parishes and communities. Some Latin Rite dioceses have begun celebrating traditional liturgical feasts associated with the countries of origin of their new parishioners. Many Catholic immigrants from the Middle East and Ukraine belong to *sui iuris* Eastern Churches. Their experience is often significantly different from that of Roman Catholics.<sup>1</sup>

There is also a generally-recognized need to bridge not only cultures, but ages, in the form of multigenerational ministry. Several dioceses also noted the importance of continuing the Church’s work of reconciliation regarding its complicated history of relations with Canada’s Indigenous Peoples.

#### *Matters for Consideration*

- Sometimes, the arrival of immigrants in a parish can create tension. Long-time parishioners may feel threatened by their presence, languages, and differing liturgical expressions. There is a need to consider carefully how to manage these situations.
- Many Canadian dioceses have a large number of foreign-born priests. This is a blessing, but can result in problems: there may be difficulties in leading and communicating due to linguistic and cultural differences; on the other hand, these priests may experience discrimination and/or racism. There is a need for intercultural formation, not only of priests but of parishioners as well.
- With respect to what may be described as an intergenerational “gap,” many dioceses mentioned the need for better youth ministry; however, they also frequently confessed a lack of ideas in how to make this happen.

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the experience of the Synod by Eastern Catholics of Churches originating in the Middle East, see the attached *Spotlight on conversations within Canada's Eastern Churches with Origins in the Middle East* by Dr. Sami Aoun, one of the Canadian Synod Delegates to the 2023-24 Synod.

**V. *Women in the Life and Mission of the Church* – Section 9 (identified in 21% of diocesan syntheses)**

Dioceses that identified this theme noted the Church's need for the unique gifts of women, which must be valued and better integrated into the life of the Church. One diocesan report pointed to Mary as a model of feminine leadership in the Church. Some dioceses emphasized the need to recognize the reciprocity and complementarity of men and women, pointing to the need to "reassess traditional gender roles" to discover them as "distinct yet equal," sharing in the same baptismal dignity. Participants from a small number of dioceses call for all ministries to be opened to women, noting that those who serve are to be called in view of their "competencies" and abilities, not their gender. Some also noted the contrast between Jesus' treatment of women and the actual experience of women, many of whom do not experience themselves as "beloved disciples." Where women are already active in important pastoral roles, some reports noted the need for improved structures of "formation, commissioning, and blessing" of their ministries. Two dioceses report a desire for more inclusive language to better reflect the presence and experience of women in the prayer of the Church. Concerns were also raised regarding a common but inadequate view of ordained ministry as the exercise of power rather than as the exercise of the gift of service.

*Matters for Consideration*

- Many respondents indicated a need to ensure women are able to better participate in decision-making processes, as well as to take on greater responsibilities. How might this happen?
- Some diocesan reflections that raised this theme suggested the diaconate as a way of better integrating the gifts of women. It is understood that this question has been referred by the Holy Father to a study group, although this was not known at the time of the diocesan reflection sessions.

**VI. *A Synodal Approach to Formation* – Section 14 (identified in 16% of diocesan syntheses)**

Dioceses identified improved formation as necessary for the deepening and implementation of every theme raised (the term appears over 100 times in the various reflections). They pointed especially to the need for formation in the culture and habits of synodality and co-responsibility, recognizing the "ongoing formation" of all – ordained ministers and the lay faithful – as essential for learning the practices of synodality (skills for active listening, accompaniment, and consultation; forms of conversation in the Spirit; the habits of personal and communal discernment).

Among dioceses that identified this theme directly, the desire was expressed for better formation resources for children and families, as well as for relevant adult faith formation that addresses the questions and challenges encountered in daily life, including those of young people and the causes that interest them. They also note the need for improved liturgical formation to enable the baptized faithful to better understand the meaning of its signs and the language of prayer, thus enabling them to participate more fully, and see more clearly the link between the

prayer of the Church and the offering of their daily lives. The need for improved formation for ecumenical and interfaith dialogue and collaboration was affirmed.

A desire was also expressed for adult formation that is culturally adapted and relevant. This is particularly important given the fact that many recent immigrants do not share the secular, materialist worldview that has come to predominate in Canada today. The increasing multiculturalism experienced in large urban centers has introduced new tensions and challenges to finding ways to celebrate as one local community. It was also pointed out that formation in administrative tasks (e.g., finances, management, etc.) that do not require ordination could already be provided to the laity, freeing priests to be more available for pastoral tasks.

Priests indicate a desire to benefit from opportunities for ongoing formation to support their vocation, with a focus on “theological matters, self-care, mental health awareness, how to provide spiritual direction and how to effectively administer a parish.” There is a recognized need for the ongoing formation of all those in ministry, with a view to improved collaboration, “an understanding of the distinct, complementary, and co-essential nature and appropriate exercise of the ministerial priesthood and the baptismal priesthood of the lay faithful.” A preference was expressed for models of formation where candidates for priestly, diaconal, and lay ministries share in a common experience that will prepare them for future and ongoing collaboration in ministry. A number of dioceses indicate the considerable challenge of limited resources to support present and future needs for formation.

#### *Matters for Consideration*

- How might faith formation be adapted to meet the specific starting points of different cultures and worldviews?
- How might liturgical formation be improved – not only for liturgical ministers, but to enable all the faithful participate more fully in the prayer of the Church?
- How can ongoing adult faith formation address the questions and challenges encountered in daily life?

#### **VII. *Entering the Community of Faith: Christian Initiation* - Section 3 (identified in 11% of diocesan syntheses)**

Diocesan reflections that identified this theme generally focused on improving the celebration of the Eucharist (Mass) rather than the Rite of Christian Initiation itself. It was acknowledged that many leaders of the RCIA programs need better formation. This was linked to the need for improved liturgical formation: in order to fully participate in the Liturgy, formation is needed to understand its language and rituals. Beyond the RCIA, little attention is given today to helping the baptized understand the nature and dignity of their vocation as the presence of the Church in the world, or their co-responsibility for the Church’s life and mission. A desire was also expressed for improved formation in non-Eucharistic forms of personal and communal prayer, including Bible study. The theme of music was also mentioned, with an emphasis on the need for proficient musicians and culturally-appropriate music. Finally, there was a suggestion to organize large parish celebrations on particular liturgical feasts as a way of bringing together different cultures and generations.

*Matters for Consideration*

- Empty churches can be depressing and detract from a joyful celebration. A suggestion was made to reduce the number of Masses offered to ensure churches are full.
- A suggestion was to recognize the appeal to young people of more traditional liturgical elements and to incorporate these in the Liturgy, according to existing regulations.
- Consider pairing newly-married couples with older “mentor couples” as a relational way of providing ongoing formation and accompaniment in the Sacrament of Marriage.

**VIII. *People in Poverty, Protagonists of the Church’s Journey* - Section 4 (identified in 11% of diocesan syntheses)**

Dioceses that identified this theme noted the need to emphasize the preferential option for the poor, which includes defense of the dignity of human life at all stages and implies care for our common home (integral ecology). It was also suggested that Christian formation should always include an element of outreach to the poor and marginalized. The potential for ecumenical collaboration and in the revisioning of permanent diaconate ministry towards social justice and charity were noted as important.

One diocese pointed out the need to be sensitive to the distinction between material and spiritual poverty, particularly since in Canada today the latter has become far more prevalent. However, as a society we can also allow ourselves to be desensitized to those individuals living in various social conditions which place them in poverty or in being marginalized such as immigrants and refugees. It was also pointed out that we should not forget persons living with disabilities and the unique challenges they face. As one diocesan reflection stated, “Just as Christ did, all the baptized are called to overcome their fears and prejudices and go out to those who are suffering.”

*Matters for Consideration*

- One diocese suggested connecting diocesan or parish groups with existing civil society groups engaged on social questions.