



## **Assembly of Western Catholic Bishops**

### **Synod Synthesis, July 2022**

The Catholic Church in western and northern Canada consists of 18 Roman Catholic dioceses and four Ukrainian Catholic eparchies. These are the traditional territories of numerous Indigenous peoples with diverse cultural, linguistic, and spiritual identities. Missionaries and fur traders brought Catholicism to these territories in the 17th and 18th centuries. The history of relations with the Indigenous peoples of these territories has been complicated by colonialism and settlement beginning in the early 19th century. Even before large-scale European settlement, the Catholic Church had been established in numerous First Nation and Métis communities. Waves of immigration brought settlers from around the world, with large numbers from Britain, western Europe, Ukraine and Poland, China, South-east Asia, India and Pakistan, and more recently, Africa. Agricultural opportunities fueled settlement in western Canada, but there has been considerable urbanization. The diversity within the population of these four provinces and three territories is also reflected in the Catholic community, the largest religious group according to census data.

The Assembly of Western Catholic Bishops (AWCB) has appointed a writing team to receive Synod reports from these 22 local churches to synthesize into a single report for western Canada. The reports present a remarkable snapshot of the church in western Canada at this time. While the particular context of each report influenced the issues and perspectives they describe, a substantial consistency is found across these dioceses. In this synthesis, the team reports on what has been heard in these dioceses and is included in their Synod reports.

Various methods were used in the participating dioceses to collect responses to the Synod's fundamental question and sometimes to the detailed questions included in the ten themes of the Synod. Consultation groups were widely used, but there were also online surveys, individual responses, and one-on-one dialogues. Websites, social media, promotional materials, and personal invitations were used to a varying extent to increase participation. Synod responses were received from parishes, schools, religious orders, and various affinity groups such as CWL, Knights of Columbus, Bible studies, youth groups, etc... Some dioceses were ambitious in reaching out to groups and individuals on the periphery, but this remains a challenge that was only partially successful. Some dioceses expressed concern about the difficulties of engaging in a



synodal consultation during the COVID pandemic. Other responses indicated a lack of interest on the parish or the priest's part, limiting involvement in the synod consultations.

Three common points emerged among the many issues and concerns included in the reports: a need for increased catechesis, the importance of leadership, and a sensitivity to Indigenous concerns. Other concerns included secularism, a mainstream media hostile to the church, criticism of church responses to clergy sexual abuse, the role of women, traditional liturgy, inclusive and accessible language, and misunderstanding of the church's moral teaching.

The diocesan reports call for more catechesis at all levels of the church. Catechesis, in this regard, should be understood to include faith education and formation for all ages, including the formation of lay and ordained ministers. It was noted that for many Catholics, faith formation seems to end with Confirmation. Access to Catholic schools is varied from province to province, but where schools exist, they are generally expected to be responsible for catechesis. Greater collaboration between parish and school is needed to assist parents in assuming this role. The church is invited to consider various methods of evangelization to engage people in ways that lead to missionary discipleship.

Issues about leadership include clergy shortages, reliance on international priests, the role of women in church ministries and governance, the prevalence of clericalism among clergy and laity, lay ministry, and formation for ministry. It was noted that the Vatican II understanding of the church as people of God with a ministry rooted in baptism could be a corrective to a number of the problems related to leadership in the church. A wider awareness of the council's teaching can help the church as we seek to be more synodal as a listening church walking together in mission.

As Catholics have become aware of the impact of Residential Schools and other government programs involving Indigenous peoples, a sensitivity to Indigenous concerns is developing. The diocesan reports indicate that many non-Indigenous Catholics have no contact with Indigenous peoples and their history and, for that reason, do not understand the church's commitment to reconciliation. However, many other Catholics are calling upon church leaders to take more decisive steps together with Indigenous peoples to assist in the healing of those wounded by the church. There is widespread support for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) Calls to Action, including local and papal apologies, repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery, adoption of the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP) as a framework for reconciliation, development of projects to assist in the renewal of Indigenous languages and culture, and support for healing initiatives. There is considerable hope that the upcoming papal visit will lead to new opportunities for reconciliation.

## **1. Companions on the Journey**

In many reports, respondents mention their fellow parishioners, parish priests, and members of various groups and faith organizations as their most frequent companions on the journey of faith. Reports of marginalization within the church included those on the fringes of society, such as those who are Indigenous, poor, imprisoned, LGBTQ+, elderly or homebound, or those who have drug and alcohol addictions, mental disabilities, or poor education.



The teachings and pastoral practices of the church have also pushed people to the periphery. Among those that were identified as being on the margins of the church, the reports frequently mentioned divorced and remarried Catholics, youth and young adults, singles, common-law couples, single parents, non-Catholic spouses, people with disabilities, people who are homebound or hospitalized, cultural, racial and other minorities, refugees and other immigrants, those who have left the church, and those who have suffered physical or sexual abuse or were themselves perpetrators.

The diocesan reports called for opportunities to build relationships with all marginalized groups through activities in the church and beyond the parish walls. Particular suggestions included priests reaching out to those who do not attend Mass regularly and training lay and ordained to walk together with people. Personal invitations and outreach were noted as crucial to establishing and transforming relationships.

## **2. Listening**

While understanding the importance of listening, the reports identified a number of barriers inhibiting the church from hearing the voices of the faithful, chiefly the busyness of our society and lifestyle. Many reports identified the workload and stress on priests as a barrier, as several reports noted that priests' workload is increasingly taken over by administrative responsibilities that could be delegated to lay people. Other barriers related to clergy include a clericalized practice of ministry and a lack of priests in rural parishes. Some reports noted a general perception that celibate clergy are ill-equipped to preach on the day-to-day challenges of married life.

Trust in church authorities is seriously lacking in our society and within the church membership itself. This is due, in part, to the failure of church leaders to respond appropriately to clergy sexual abuse and the legacy of Indian Residential Schools. A distrust in church authorities was expressed even by those who continue to identify as Catholic, which has led to increased levels of dissent from church teachings. Associated with a lack of trust in church authorities, there is also a perception of negative or even hostile media. The decline of Catholic media has meant that Catholics must receive their news from secular media with little access to religiously literate journalists.

The Catholic Church is increasingly seen as unwelcoming, non-inclusive, or a 'closed community.' Counter-culture mentalities have led to tension between some church leaders and people with other worldviews. Experiences of racism, sexism, homophobia, and other discrimination within parishes can be barriers to inclusion and listening. Some of the church's moral teachings have contributed to perceptions that the Catholic Church is in conflict with society and may be barriers to people approaching the church for support.

Many dioceses reported hearing objections to the use of 'archaic language,' an emphasis on suffering and sacrifice, or on morals and other doctrines, all of which indicate that in an increasingly secularized society, we no longer have a common vocabulary of faith in which the words, symbols, and metaphors of the Gospel are understood. This is not only a problem of catechesis, but it calls us to find new ways of evangelization.



Several opportunities to address these problems were identified in the diocesan reports. Noting that “the church must go to the people,” increasing the presence of priests and youth ministers in schools was suggested. The experience of some parishes that have employed registered nurses as part of the pastoral team was cited as a way to connect the church’s healing and pastoral ministry. Because of the high incidence of people with mental health issues seeking assistance from parishes, it was suggested that clergy and lay leaders receive training appropriate for mental health triage. Other pastoral training suggestions included increased access to Spiritual Direction and workshops on being present to others and truly listening. The importance of safe environment policies and training was mentioned, noting their role in building authentic relationships of trust and accountability.

Reconciliation with Indigenous peoples was frequently included under the rubric of “Listening,” indicating that many respondents recognize that listening and walking together with Indigenous peoples is the first step towards right relations. Some suggested that in complicity with colonialism, the church converted Indigenous peoples and then abandoned them. It was noted that the church needs to learn repentance for its collective guilt. We must learn to walk with humility in this land, in restored relationship with first peoples and with all of creation. It was also noted that church members must recognize intergenerational trauma as the legacy of the Residential Schools, be prepared to assist with healing initiatives, and work and walk together with Indigenous people.

### **3. Speaking Out**

Speaking courageously is essential to a synodal church. Many respondents offered examples of fear that hinders speaking freely within the church. They mentioned fear of judgment or rejection for their views, a fear of being labelled as a dissenter, and a feeling that speaking out is pointless. Some have a fear of taking a stand, others fear criticism, and for many, there is a fear of offending others. Some do not speak out because they think they will not be supported, and others believe they are out of step with a “liberal hierarchy.” There was a lack of trust in the synodal process in many places, expecting that particular voices would co-opt the process. Others indicated an unwillingness to speak due to a perceived lack of education or information. Some reported previous experiences of being shut down. In some rural parishes, a lack of a physical space or resident pastor were indicated as barriers to dialogue.

Several responses referenced a sense of not belonging to the community as the reason for not speaking out or engaging in the Synod. Some spoke of being invisible within the community and unknown to the pastor. Others indicated that their cultural norms do not encourage sharing of feelings. Some pointed to an atmosphere of political correctness that discourages dialogue, while others indicated a rigidity on the part of church leaders that discourages dialogue. When people have personal objections to church teachings, especially hot-button issues such as same-sex marriage and other LGBTQ+ issues, there is a tendency to withdraw from church life or self-censor due to an expectation of conflict.



#### 4. Celebration

The theme of Celebration elicited a great many responses, both critical and constructive. Several responses indicated the priests' crucial role in creating the culture of the parish, noting that receptive leadership is critical in helping to create a community that "walks together." Numerous concerns were raised about homilies, indicating that many people have difficulty hearing due to volume levels or delivery. Some had difficulty understanding the homily due to the use of theological language and unfamiliar or unexplained concepts, while others were concerned about a lack of inclusive language. The dependence of many western dioceses on international priests was noted, with a concern about difficulties understanding accents. Related to this was a concern about priests who are unable to relate to young people due to age or cultural differences. Other homiletic concerns included an overemphasis on piety and doctrine and difficulties connecting the Gospel to the lived experience of the laity.

Several reports indicate a lack of understanding of the Eucharist's centrality in the community's life. In some cases, this was cited as a need for catechesis. Still, in other cases, it was a criticism of those they perceived to lack orthodoxy or an understanding of the sacraments. A number of responses indicated that some pastoral norms have been misunderstood, such as the introduction of the restored order of the sacraments, reception of Communion, and annulments. Others are concerned about the perceived exclusion of particular groups from Communion, such as the divorced and remarried and LGBTQ+. Numerous dioceses reported that participants have called for the ordination of women and married people, with many suggesting that such candidates would be more able to relate to the lived experience of the laity.

Noting that priests are not resident in many rural communities, the reports cited the lack of opportunity to attend Mass every Sunday and even more rarely on weekdays. In other cases, shift workers reported difficulty attending Mass due to a lack of Masses later in the day. Rural depopulation and the increasing average age of parishioners have led to numerous parish closures in recent years. A cultural shift appears to have occurred, resulting in the belief that Mass participation is unnecessary. Others think that watching Masses online fulfills their Sunday Obligation.

Proposals to enhance the communal celebration of the Eucharist fall into three general categories: pastoral, catechetical, and liturgical. Pastoral suggestions include reaching out to those not attending, adopting a more invitational approach to teens, helping grandparents become evangelizers, building relationships outside Mass, and working to include those on the margins. Catechetical suggestions include providing workshops for liturgical ministries and employing mentors in these roles, homilies that inform and challenge, teaching the Mass through bulletin inserts, more tradition/orthodoxy, emphasizing and encouraging reverence, more teaching on the Real Presence, and cooperation of parish and school in sacramental preparation. It was also suggested that parishes have additional services to teach different ways of prayer (Rosary, Moleben, etc.).

Not surprisingly, most suggestions are related to the liturgy itself. These include encouraging participation in liturgical ministries, including lay people in more roles such as preaching, and



encouraging congregational singing and responses. More frequent use of the *Sunday Celebration of the Word* was requested to address the lack of priests in many rural parishes. Some called for using traditional music and offering Mass with greater devotion.

Specific suggestions related to the Byzantine liturgy included wider use of Ukrainian and making the Divine Liturgy more relevant to the modern world. Some people called for promoting other devotions to allow for an exploration of the church's rich liturgical heritage, while others called for further standardizing of liturgical texts.

Numerous suggestions were received about incorporating elements of Indigenous spirituality into the Mass, including drumming, smudging, and Indigenous languages. Some suggested incorporating Indigenous funeral customs into the Rite of Burial. Others suggested including Indigenous Elders within the liturgy, including assisting at the altar or consecrating the sacrament.

## **5. Co-Responsible in the Mission of the Church**

As noted in the introduction to this report, diocesan reports addressed a number of issues related to leadership. Understanding the church as the people of God with a ministry rooted in baptism can serve as a corrective to many leadership issues identified in these reports. The Synod theme of "Co-responsible in the Mission" points to this same conclusion and connects this to the exercise of synodality.

Barriers to the greater participation of lay people in ministry and governance of the church are frequently related to a lack of catechesis and formation in Scripture, sacramental life and other church teachings. In most parishes, lay leaders lack the skills and tools necessary to assume these roles. This deficit can be addressed; however, many laity lack confidence in their understanding of the church's mission, the laity's role in that mission, and the personal responsibility of all baptized. Many Catholics have accepted a secular vision of religious indifference, apathy, and the privatization of faith. They are uncomfortable speaking about faith or sharing their faith outside the church.

Difficulties engaging lay people in ministry are not always the result of lay reluctance to assume this role. Frequently, lay people are excluded from ministries and decision-making by priests who cannot work collaboratively. Clericalism can creep in unintentionally as clergy fail to encourage or promote lay leaders, provide appropriate guidance, or ensure that lay leaders receive the necessary formation to assume the role. Clergy rarely see their role as mentoring lay leadership, and there is a lack of priests that model missionary discipleship. Pastors and bishops must empower the laity to use their gifts to manifest the reign of God.

Some dioceses reported an overemphasis on how to get to heaven at the expense of promoting a church tasked with the responsibility of reclaiming society for Christ. Laity frequently express frustration with a church that is "strangely silent" on teachings it once voiced with confident authority. This can result from polarization in the church over hot-button issues, leading many priests to avoid controversial topics in their homilies.



In a secular society that is frequently hostile, lay people find it challenging to defend counter-cultural teachings that are attacked, mocked, or misunderstood by the media. They look for efforts from church leaders to articulate doctrine in contemporary language that is accessible and relevant. Many people have shared disappointment in the Canadian Catholic bishops' lack of sufficient contrition for their handling of clergy sexual abuse or Residential School fundraising.

In response to lay reluctance to assume leadership roles, some dioceses suggested an enhanced catechesis and formation related to the baptismal call to ministry. There are several proposals in the diocesan reports, many of which are already in practice in our dioceses, such as offering lay formation and other adult education for people in the pews. Other suggestions focus on improving faith formation in Catholic schools, strengthening the connection between schools and parishes, and supporting school teachers in living their faith. Parishes called for ongoing formation opportunities for all ages, especially following Confirmation and RCIA. There are a number of suggestions about the specific content of catechesis or formation, including more attention to church tradition and the sacraments. Other topics include Catholic social teaching, church history, and Scripture. Other suggestions include joint parish missions and other shared efforts between parishes to strengthen parish leaders, pastoral councils, and deaneries.

In addition to renewed catechesis, other suggestions to strengthen collaboration in the church's mission include assisting parents in evangelizing their children, parish-based evangelization projects like Alpha, greater access to spiritual direction, and more faith-sharing groups.

There were calls for greater visibility and access to the pastor. Some called for priests to show support and interest in the activities of lay organizations associated with their parish. Catholic school students asked for priests and youth ministers to visit schools. At the same time, there was an acknowledgement of the priests' heavy workload preventing them from being as visible or accessible as either party would like.

## **6. Dialogue in Church and Society**

The church is in dialogue internally and with the world. Not closed in upon itself or forming an enclave away from the world, the church is called to proclaim the Gospel with courage to a world in need of Christ's salvation. This dialogue engages the arts, culture, science, politics, and ideology in a new Areopagus. At a time of increasing polarization in church and society, reflection on dialogue is a necessary response. There is a sense that our broader society is hostile to Catholic teaching, particularly on moral issues. There is a public perception that the church's views on marriage and divorce, gender, same-sex marriage, contraception, and abortion are incompatible with a pluralistic society. Some people noted a failure of the church in Canada to speak to moral issues and doctrines. There is a perception that Catholic teaching is not welcome in our society, which may lead church leaders to mute their public witness. On various issues, the Catholic Church has been at odds with public opinion leading to a decline in social capital and trust. Particular failures by the church concerning residential schools and clergy sexual abuse have exposed the inability of the church to act transparently. Suspicion of the church and its motives has become rampant, resulting in hostile secular media coverage and great difficulties in continuing to speak out on other social issues.



Dialogue within the church is also strained. Polarization between so-called liberal and conservative, or progressive and traditional, wings has been exacerbated in recent years by many factors, including social media, fake news, the decline of Catholic print media, and disputes over the pre-conciliar liturgy. Each faction blames the other, questions their Catholicity, and offers simplistic solutions. Dialogue is needed within the church to maintain communion between groups increasingly unable to recognize faithfulness in the other.

Many diocesan reports focused on a lack of coherence between personal beliefs, the church's teachings on morality, and the exercise of conscience. There appears to be a need for further education and formation for those involved in these disputes. Numerous responses noted the value of Synod listening sessions and encouraged the continuation of these and other forms of honest conversation. Others proposed witnessing through action, such as projects to support the poor and marginalized, the people of Ukraine, and other needy causes. Additional social justice activities and advocacy were mentioned, including volunteering at soup kitchens, writing to elected representatives, and acting on the TRC's 94 Calls to Action. To promote a culture of life, Catholics should speak out on the problems in Long Term Care facilities, access to palliative care, and the spread of assisted suicide and euthanasia. Simple ideas such as coffee and fellowship after Mass, more community and prayer events, and better use of social media were also shared.

## **7. Ecumenism**

The core insight of Vatican II that permitted the Catholic Church to embrace the ecumenical movement was recognizing that we share a common baptism with other Christians. In this report, we have noted baptism's place in establishing the people of God and in calling and forming us for mission. As we seek to become a more synodal church, we learn from our ecumenical partners how synodality is experienced in their context. The diocesan reports indicated a broad experience of prayer and working with other Christians. Suggestions for enhancing these relationships included more social action and prayer. Bible study, pilgrimages, Alpha, World Day of Prayer, Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, Way of the Cross, Good Friday services, Remembrance Day, and other spiritual ecumenism were proposed. Ideas for working together include pro-life and social justice issues, mental illness and isolation, poverty, support for families, homelessness, suicide, environmental issues, clean drinking water on reserves, issues faced by rural areas, and reaching out to those on the margins. Respondents encouraged us to focus on what we have in common and look for ways to break down misconceptions. We should also work together with other Christians on interfaith relations and dialogue. The diocesan reports expressed a desire to examine ways to increase occasions where there might be greater sacramental sharing.

It was noted that the experiences of interchurch couples are a resource for the church. These couples, with a foot in two churches, can be a bridge assisting the Catholic Church in establishing and strengthening relationships with other Christians.



## 8. Authority and Participation

As noted in the introduction, leadership issues were reported from many of the dioceses. A common concern is the education and formation of clergy and lay ministers. This is related to the broader problem of catechesis and formation discussed earlier. Problems in the exercise of authority and the ministerial participation of all the faithful could be resolved with a greater understanding of the baptismal call to ministry.

Examples of clericalism are found earlier in this report. In many places, people describe the church as clerical, rigid, and patriarchal. The root of clericalism is a distorted understanding of the Christian community and the clergy's authority in the community. This misunderstanding may exist among clergy or laity but is equally pernicious. Clericalism leads to failures in the shared responsibility of clergy and laity within the church. It is a combination of a lack of understanding of the role of the laity, a lack of understanding of the structures and processes of the church, and a lack of self-awareness by clergy; clericalism impacts the proper functioning of the Christian community. Several diocesan reports indicated that where decisions are made exclusively by priests and bishops, there is a lack of transparency and subsidiarity. Clericalism means that clergy service the spiritual needs of a passive laity.

Several dioceses reported a limited number of lay ministers, particularly in youth ministry. There are difficulties in recruiting and retaining qualified lay ministers in parishes because, in most cases, parishes do not offer a living wage or job security. Lay ministers receive little recognition for their professional training or experience. During the pandemic, lay ministers were laid off in many places, resulting in the loss of numerous experienced and committed personnel.

In many cases, lay ministers experience difficulty working collaboratively with clergy. The common pastoral model in the church assumes that ministry roles are normally filled by clergy, and that lay people only minister vicariously. The transfer of priests or bishops can disrupt a pastoral team leading to job insecurity for lay people. Youth ministers face a unique difficulty. Youth ministers report that parishes place unrealistic expectations on them, hoping that they will restore the life of the parish and fill the pews.

Several dioceses reported calls for the ordination of women and married people. Some of these proposals referenced Synod discussions about ordaining *virī probati* and ordaining women to the diaconate. Others proposed sweeping reforms to end mandatory celibacy of priests and bishops and open all ministries to women.

## 9. Discerning and Deciding

Many dioceses reported positive experiences of synod consultation, primarily when group discussions occurred. Participants frequently asked for more opportunities for discussion and expressed hopes that these discussions would result in changes to pastoral plans and practices. It is evident that clergy and laity are enthusiastic about introducing more synodal discernment. Few specific ideas about ways to implement synodal processes were proposed, but several synodal virtues were identified. These included setting discernment within the context of prayer, listening



to everyone, discussing charitably, providing feedback to those affected, transparency, and involving youth.

Acknowledging the crucial role of the clergy in the parish, it was suggested that priests need to consult parish councils more often and should avoid overruling the council. There are still parishes that do not have parish councils, which needs to be addressed. Frequent movement of clergy was identified as a problem that impacts good decision-making and destabilizes parishes. It was suggested that parish councils and other laity be consulted regarding priest appointments to help match skills to the needs of parishes. Others suggested that priests need additional leadership training and to make greater use of lay people with management and leadership skills. Parishes should find ways for the laity to take on more of the administrative burden.

## **10. Forming Ourselves in Synodality**

The diocesan reports indicate several barriers that inhibit the formation of synodal life in the church. Problems of catechesis and leadership have been described repeatedly in this report. One diocese noted that the laity are sacramentalized but not catechized. This leads to passive participation in the church's mission with limited contribution to decision-making. Clerical defensiveness, poor leadership, and a heavy workload have led to resistance to participating in the Synod process and implementing change. Parishes without resident priests have difficulty establishing trust between pastors and parish leaders, such that processes of discernment are less effective.

Several proposals indicated the need for implementing synodal practices within the church. Proposals include learning how to have healthy conversations, developing spaces for youth to talk, providing spaces for encounters between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to promote healing, and encouraging simple gatherings to promote relationship building within parishes and beyond. Seeing the central role of the Holy Spirit in synodal life, several proposals suggested beginning dialogue sessions with prayer.

Recommendations from the diocesan reports include continuing synodal processes in diocesan councils, parish councils, schools, lay associations, movements, and ministry groups to build trusting relationships.

## **11. Conclusion**

Whenever the gospels speak of Jesus sending out his disciples on mission, we hear he sent them in pairs, two by two. What is the smallest Christian community? It is two. Two disciples sent on mission. In the synodal experience that we have just lived in the dioceses and eparchies of western Canada, we hear that some of the sharing circles were small, but none could be smaller than two. Discipleship puts us in relationship with one another. Following Jesus and the Holy Spirit that blows where it wills always binds us together in love. This is one of the many lessons re-learned in the course of the past several months.

We have not now come to the end of anything. Missionary discipleship does not end. Neither have we just begun; the church has experienced synodality for two millennia. We walk by faith



and not by sight, with sister and brother disciples at our side. Let us rejoice in the Spirit's presence with us.

Alleluia!

