

Summary from the Diocese of Hamilton in Ontario to the Synod on Synodality  
“For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission”

**Audito Vocatione**

**I: Introduction:**

Heeding the call of the Holy Father Pope Francis, the Diocese of Hamilton engaged as fully as possible in the Synod Process. Parishes and individuals, educational and health care facilities, those deeply connected to the Church, those less connected, those outside the Church and those on the margins of society, were invited to participate and share their thoughts “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission”. The greatest struggle in our heeding of the Holy Father’s call was the restrictions and limitations placed on the parishes, and society in general, due to COVID 19. These restrictions made it very difficult, and in some cases impossible, for people to gather in groups for discussion and sharing. The majority of our responses came through individuals completing an online questionnaire. Although not ideal, we did receive almost 2,000 responses. Some of these responses were the result of a group discussion, but most were from individuals desiring to participate in the synodal process. Many indicated their pleasure of being asked to participate. However, there was not a lot of positive feedback. The responses indicated a great deal of dissatisfaction and how very polarized the Church, and society, has become.

In general, the responses indicated the importance of the clergy in people experiencing a connection or disconnection with the Church. Sacraments are very important to our

Catholic people, several mentioning the value of the Eucharist and Confession in their experiencing of God in their lives. The surveys indicated that the more people are connected/involved in the life of the Church, the more they experience their voices being heard and having the opportunity to share their wisdom and insights with the Church. Being involved in a ministry allowed many the opportunity to share their thoughts but also the opportunity to reach out in service to others. Many people indicated the need for the Church to be more intentional about inviting and engaging people in the Church's ministry, especially women and those living on the edges of the Church, for example the LGBTQIA+ community.

The survey surfaced discontent with the Church's current direction or teachings. Some, clearly frustrated with the Church's lack of support for the use of the 1962 Missal, the corresponding liturgies and what they see as a rejection of the Church's orthodox teachings, believe the Church has rejected the truth as taught by Jesus Christ. Others, just as frustrated that the Church is unwilling to change its teaching in areas such as its hierarchical structure, no women's ordination and some moral teachings, particularly concerning same-sex relationships and living together without the Sacrament of Matrimony, believe the Church is more concerned about preserving its structure and privilege than spreading God's call to charity. The deep divisions and polarizations found in the faithful were painfully clear in the responses we received.

One wonders if we had not undergone the past two years of lockdowns and restrictions if the responses would have been so polarized and negative. It is hard to know, if the responses are primarily the responses of those who are discontent or do they present a

true image of the people of God in the Diocese of Hamilton. Over the past three years, the Diocese of Hamilton has been engaged in a major capital campaign, “One Heart, One Soul”. This campaign surpassed its goal raising over \$36,000,000.00. One wonders if it would be possible to raise such an amazing sum if people were truly as negative toward the Diocese and the Church as the survey results seem to indicate. Sadly, those who are unhappy are often more likely to speak up than those who are happy and fulfilled.

## **II: Survey Summary:**

The basic question that prompted and guided our discussions was: “How does this ‘journeying together,’ which takes place today on different levels (from the local level to the universal one), allow the Church to proclaim the Gospel in accordance with the mission entrusted to Her; and what steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow as a synodal Church.” (Synod Preparatory Document, par. 2) In order to answer this primary question, the Diocese of Hamilton chose to focus our attention on a three-step process:

- A) How do we listen to the Spirit?
- B) What are the opportunities to share our voice with the Church?
- C) How do we move towards being a more synodal Church?

In each of these three areas, we received positive and negative feedback. Our synthesis of these responses is what follows.

## **A) Listening**

In reviewing the responses there was a problem with the interpretation of the word “Church”. The Church, identified only as the institution and hierarchy, hindered many of the respondents in seeing themselves as “Church” in terms of their spiritual relationship with God. This resulted in a discrepancy in the perspective of the responses. We identified three main areas in which people either hear or are hindered in hearing the voice of the Lord speaking today.

### **1. Spirituality/ Sacraments**

Many people commented on how God speaks to them through the celebration of the Sacraments, primarily through the Eucharist and Reconciliation. Meeting the Lord in the Sacraments continues to be the primary way in which most of our Catholic people experience God’s voice. Even though the Sacraments (particularly the Eucharist) continue to be essential to hearing God’s voice, the mode or style in which they are celebrated, was often expressed in a polarized fashion. Some feel the liturgy has changed too much while others feel the liturgy is too outdated to support their spiritual needs and their ability to be heard within the Church.

### **2. Communication**

This area was the touchstone moment for the vast majority of respondents. Communication involves hearing God’s voice in their lives and being able to share their own thoughts and dreams about the Church. Many commented on the negative aspects of communication, which we will touch on in a moment, but let us first focus on the positive aspects of communication. Examples of positive communication include; good

homilies, Priests who are open and willing to listen, lay leaders that the faithful can approach and being involved in small group ministries within the church where their voice might be heard.

The main struggle in communication mentioned by many respondents were poor, ineffective or un-relatable homilies. Respondents indicated that homilies that were out of touch, only personal thoughts, or poorly delivered, hindered any form of interactive communication.

Our local shortage of Priests has caused us to rely on international Priests who not only struggle with accent/language issues but who also come with very different cultural and organizational understandings, most often in relationships with women and the laity which make any form of parish communication difficult.

The area we found most troubling was the opinion that numerous people stated, “Nobody within the hierarchy cares and nobody really wants to hear the people’s voice.” Some felt that their Parish Priests are unwilling to make time to hear their voice and others stated that the Chancery Office is distant and unapproachable. This sense of disconnect with the hierarchy makes people feel unwilling or unable to express their views.

### **3. Leadership**

The prophet Jeremiah says, “I will give you shepherds according to my own heart” (Jer. 3:15). Many of our respondents acknowledged the generous and self-giving service of our Priests and Deacons. Our people still love their clergy and are grateful for their life and ministry. Yet, some still expressed concern that the formation of Priests and Deacons does not adequately prepare them for contemporary parish ministry. The multiple

demands of parish life seem to distract the Priests from their primary responsibility, the spiritual well being of their flock. Priests need to learn and rely upon the gifts of lay professionals allowing them to oversee the day to day administrative and maintenance needs of the parish. The laity desires to be actively involved in parish leadership and our Priests need to see them as “co-workers in the vineyard of the Lord”. There was a general feeling that true servant leadership, after the example of Jesus, only comes when clergy and laity work together.

## **B) Speaking Out**

The purpose of this portion of the consultation was to determine when and how people feel comfortable sharing their voice with the church. In this instance, we mean “Church” to include, hierarchy, clergy and laity together.

### **1. Participation/Involvement**

The majority of people felt their voice was best heard when they chose to be actively involved and participate in the life of their parish and/or the Diocese. Participation in parish ministries, membership in Catholic organizations, like the Knights of Columbus and the Catholic Women’s League, gave people an opportunity to share with those who are of a like mind and gave them greater access to the clergy. Both points allow people the opportunity to speak out and gives them the feeling that their voices have been heard.

### **2. Mission/Evangelization**

The other area where people felt they had a chance to speak out and have their voices heard was through active mission work, (i.e. outreach to the community). Through this

self-giving, people felt an opportunity to share their own experiences of God and Church. The surveys indicate that some people choose not speak out for various and personal reasons but for those who do speak out they see it as part of their Baptismal call to help the church to grow in the mission entrusted to her.

### **C) Moving Forward**

Looking at where we have come from and where we are, only bears abundant fruit if it helps us to move forward in fulfilling the mission of the Church, and at this time, in particular, to become a more Synodal Church. Within this section there where two main areas of expressed response. One has a more positive view and one is expressing a concern that is actively growing in the church and needs curtailing.

#### **1. Polarization**

The area of most concern is the growing polarization within the Church. More and more we are seeing an “us and them attitude”. This polarization, expressed by the perceived tensions between: Chancery and parish, clergy and laity, Priests and Deacons, traditional and liberal, mainstream and marginalized, makes moving forward extremely challenging. Our polarized positions make us move in opposite directions, and each is sadly unwilling to adjust his/her direction. Each believes my way is correct and thus less open to even having discussions with the other. In order to “allow the Church to proclaim the Gospel in accordance with the mission entrusted to her...(we need to address) this question together.... listening to the Holy Spirit who like the wind blows where it will; you can hear the sound it makes, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes remaining

open to the surprises that the Spirit will certainly prepare for us along the way.” (Preparatory Document paragraph 2). Polarization makes hearing the Spirit and responding to His call to communicate and to enlighten the world with the Good News, not only difficult but makes true communication next to impossible.

## **2. Diversity and Inclusion**

The vast majority of respondents expressed that any moving forward of the Church’s mission needed to include a great and further reaching out to those who feel abandoned by the Church. Particularly those in irregular marriage situations, those holding uncommon or unpopular views, women, the elderly, the youth, and the LGBTQIA+ community. The Church teaches us that all are members of the Church and that all are welcomed and valued. What we heard from our respondents is that we need be more intentional in our expression of that welcome and of the value we place on those voice than we have been to this point. In the Sacred Scriptures, we read many times that the blessings of God are for all people. The results of this consultation process have clearly indicated, that we must in an intentional way, do a better job of inviting and including those voices who feel excluded. We must strive to help them experience welcome, a sense of being loved and valued, and know that the Church is their loving Mother who knows their needs and wants to hear their voice.



### **III Conclusion and Moving Forward:**

Reading all the almost 2,000 responses was a taxing and sometimes difficult task. Reading the discontent with the Church was hard, but “Obstacles become Opportunities with God”. As a Diocese, we are committed to continue the dialogue and to strive to work for healing in order that we can all better proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ by both our words and our lives. Reaching out to those on the margins, working more closely with our laity, helping renew the relationship between chancery and parish/Bishops and Priests, we acknowledge the work that needs to be done and are excited for the opportunities both the pandemic and the Synod have provided.

In the midst of a Pandemic, the Diocese of Hamilton did its best to engage in the synodal process and sought to seek out the voices of as many people as possible. Not only has the Diocese sought to have people share their voice, we have already begun to actively listen to and respond to the voices we have heard. Though some voices are asking for things we are unable to provide, for example to remove the Church’s hierarchical structure, we have already begun a process to continue listening to the voices of the people of this Diocese. “Forward Together in Christ” is the Diocese’s first response to the synodal responses. “Forward Together in Christ” is a process to hear each other and, then together, decide upon a path forward from the limitations of the Pandemic.

Already we have had listening meetings with our Priests, Deacons and Lay-pastoral Ministers. We have heard their concerns and will meet again to discuss the concerns brought forward and then seek a path Together to heal, fix, grow, and/or reboot our Diocese and her members. Moving on, we will continue these discussions with our

Schools, Healthcare Facilities, Service Organizations, Religious, youth and any other interested parties. Together as the whole Diocese of Hamilton, under the guidance of Christ our King and Good Shepherd, we hope to continue to grow into the living Body of Christ.