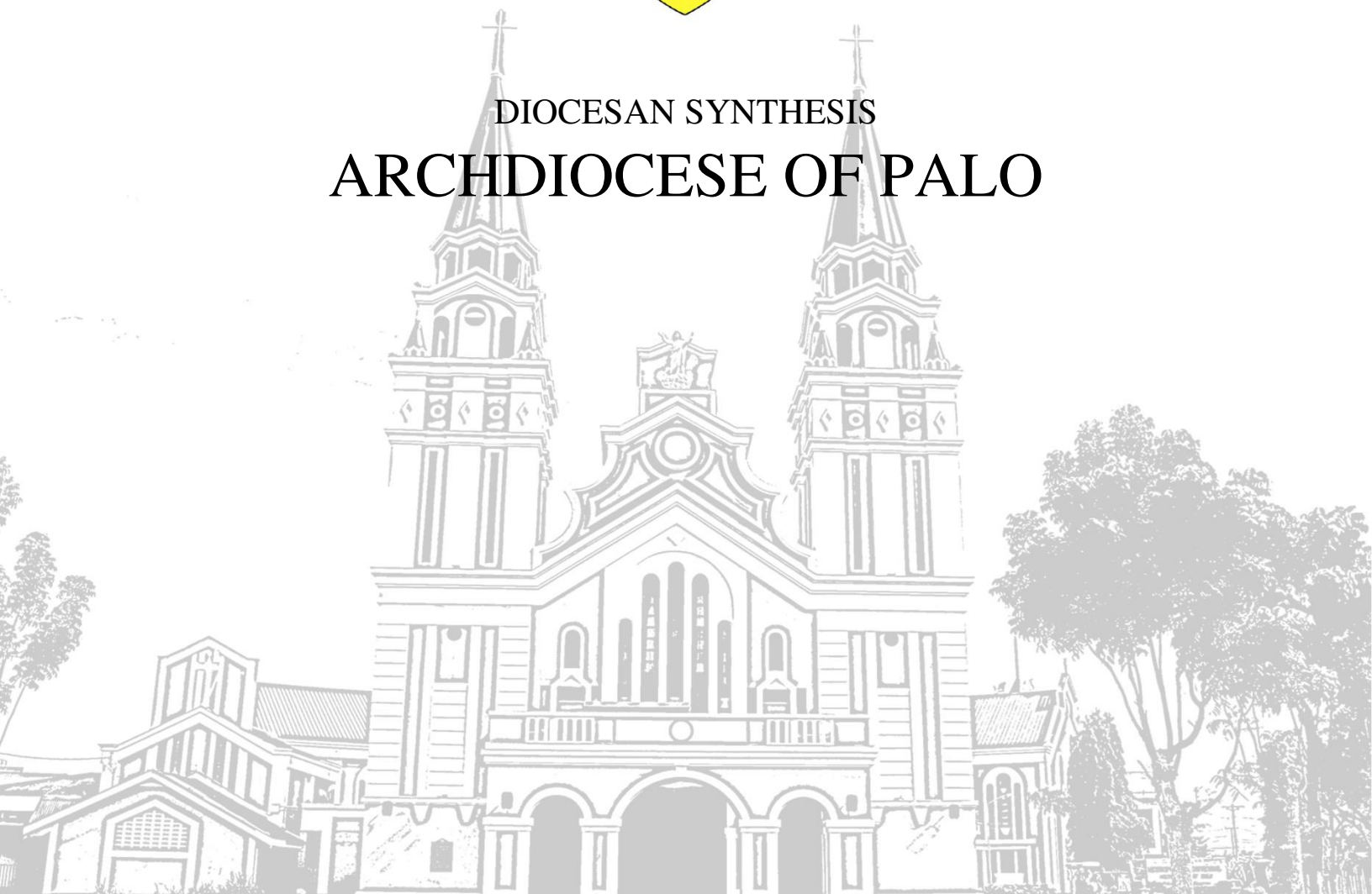


DIOCESAN SYNTHESIS
ARCHDIOCESE OF PALO



ARCHDIOCESE OF PALO SYNTHESIS

INTRODUCTION

Main Steps in the Process of Consultation

The main steps taken in the Archdiocese of Palo were as follows. Parish coordinators were identified and had their courtesy call with the parish priests. They conducted orientation seminars /workshop to the chosen members of the parish core group (the Parish Synodal Team) who would serve as the facilitators and note takers for the spiritual conversations. The organization of these teams were often done in cooperation with the different sectors of the parish such as the Basic Ecclesial Communities (BEC) and other Lay Organizations, Movements and Associations (LOMAs). Identification of groups to be reached out then took place. Although the spiritual conversations were not limited to the identified groups, this step was taken to have a buffer zone regarding who the participants would be. Most parishes conducted the spiritual conversations per LOMAs or ministries, some with clusters of barangays. One parish had it through BEC which was participated mainly by BEC Coordinators and Family Group Leaders. In turn, these people conducted the spiritual conversations in their respective barangays and/or chapels with the guidance of the core group. Finally, on the last week of April 2022, most parishes started to synthesize, finalize and submit the reports.

What were the main questions posed?

The main questions posed during the consultations were the following: (1) How is this “journeying together” happening today? (2) What steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow in our “journeying together”? (3) What particular concerns in the church need to be addressed?

What was done to engage as many participants as possible and to reach out to the peripheries?

The consultations were announced during masses in the parishes and the ten themes were incorporated into the homilies during big occasions such as *Misas de Gallo* and fiestas. Certain parishes sent out invitation letters and posted notices in social media platforms such as Facebook and Messenger. There was also the strengthening of the Core Group, inviting the participants verbally (casual conversations, through announcements before the Holy Mass ended, during *Kasaulugan* (Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of A Priest) involving the BEC especially the coordinators and family group leaders, going to the barangays and some clustered the barangays to encourage more participants. To most engaged parishes, the synodal process was integrated in the Lenten Retreats with individual confessions and Mass as its culmination activities. Elsewhere, listening sessions were done mostly on a weekend by which time people showed more interest in the process. Some parishes made it a whole day event and to some a half-day affair. The level of engagement was very encouraging. As to the submissions, they were extremely varied. For the first batches of respondents, facilitators meticulously followed the first format and questionnaire reflected in the *Vademecum*. Due to difficulties connected with the questionnaire, a new simplified and engaging format was made, with the questions translated into the dialect for better understanding. The individual parishes then collated all the responses to make a single report and submitted it to the vicariate level. The vicariate then identified, sorted, and prioritized the insights from the listening sessions. All key findings were

summarized, and main takeaways highlighted. The sorting-out was not merely about majority rule. There were ideas, perspectives which were mentioned only a few times but were significant and worth sharing.

Approximately what proportion of people in the diocese participated in one way or other?

All in all, the number of participants in every parish ranged from 20 to 5,000. Although much struggle was exerted to include as many people as possible, the health risks due to the pandemic prevented the parishes from getting more people to join the spiritual conversations. Since many people had no access to gadgets and the internet, almost all consultations were done face-to-face.

Were there any groups of people whose participation was especially noteworthy?

Worth noting was the involvement of Seventh-Day Adventists, pedicab and motorcycle drivers, carpenters, vendors, laundrywomen and farmers, welders, housewives, catechists, lectors, cantors, commentators, altar servers, seminarians, Catholic Women's League (CWL), MBG, BEC coordinators, Family Groups, Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion, Music Ministry members, Parents, Barangay Officials, Teachers who are not active in any ministries, government workers and most especially the members of communities far from any active involvement in the church. Some really sacrificed their one-day earning/income just to attend the synod consultations.

The seminarians of St. John the Evangelist School of Theology participated with insight with their honest and wise testimonies. Also, the youth in the parishes comprised the highest number among the sectors. In particular, "overly-stressed" individuals found the conversations a "stress-reliever" experience.

Where there specific groups of people who did not participate for any reason?

Synod sessions were offered to everybody and to all who would like to join; however some groups of people were not able to join the consultations such as prisoners, businessmen, doctors, and the unchurched. Some parishes were able to implement the process but there were groups, specifically LOMAs in some parishes, who were not able to participate because of conflicts in their schedules (as to work, careers, etc.). Some reports from the parishes illustrate that the LOMAs existing in their parishes/mission stations were able to engage with the consultation but with few attendees. Some in the barangays were not reached because of time constraints and misunderstandings with the priest-in-charge. The very busy high-profile businessmen were also not able to participate. It was somewhat difficult to gather as many people as possible as it was the campaign period for the May 2022 National and Local Elections.

BODY OF THE SYNTHESIS

1. What was most significant about the whole experience of the consultation?

Feeling of Gratitude. Most respondents were grateful for being heard and the wealth of emotions reflected in the responses to the questions ranging from joy and gratefulness, and from disappointment to anger. At the heart of all is a voice of hope and a desire to walk together in a synodal way. As many expressed: "*May these conversations continue...*"

Emotional Release. Becoming an avenue to ventilate emotions, feelings and insights through active and empathic listening and without fear of judgment but feeling of importance, the spiritual conversations were heartwarming as it provided an avenue to express what one wished to say and the assurance that one was listened to. Hearing everyone share was heartening for the facilitators.

Listening. In the entire process of the spiritual conversation, people learned the importance of sharing, listening and discerning in our daily Christian life. Facilitators were able to listen to other people's problems with their family, work, and friends. Elders were able to listen to the side of the youth of today and vice versa. People were able to listen and understand the thoughts of their brothers and sisters from the same Church.

Bridging Gaps. The consultation provided opportunity for additional inputs to further strengthen faith in God and encourage the faithful to be active in the ministry of the Church. The whole process was truly enriching in the context of faith formation and spiritual maturity. This whole new experience is the fact that people became instruments of bridging the gap between the leadership of the Church and the laity. Regardless of who people were and where they came from, the Holy Spirit embraced all to listen and judge no one.

Touching People's Lives. The most significant experience during the whole consultation was meeting and hearing people, knowing them more and becoming one in the Church, especially with the depressed, deprived and the underserved. It was a joyous experience because the destitute also gave lessons, even to the mere listeners. By listening to human experiences, one can understand persons more, of why they have certain thoughts, why they say certain things and why they live the way they do.

What were the high points and low points, or the consolations and desolations?

High Points / Consolations. The high points or the consolations experiences were the following: the attendance of participants especially groups who were not expected to fully participate, their eagerness to participate, the sense of belongingness, the perseverance of facilitators, the openness of expressions with suitable acceptance of the group, prayerful conversations, the focus on God's inspiration, the unique stories during the sharing, the joy of bringing the family to church, the participation of children, the involvement of priests, and support of chapel leaders from the preparations to the consultations. During the consultations, the sharing of experiences especially from individuals who seldom participate in conversations provided consolations to the teams, knowing that these synodal consultations paved way for the Church to listen and for the silent members of society to be heard. There is a consolation that after these series of consultations, the need to work together as one for a particular mission emanates.

Low Points / Desolations. The low points of the consultation and desolations was the reality that there were people who did not want to participate and support the activities and who backed out during the process of the consultation. The results of the consultations somewhat uncovered an emptiness that the Church must fill in. There was bleakness when it came to miscommunications that resulted in conflicts. There was sadness knowing that not all who go to church are aware of their responsibility to God.

In some vicariates and parishes, there was the lack of committed leaders to sustain consultations. Some people were not able to understand the questionnaire. There was lack of adequate time for some participants to really sit down through the whole synod process, without having to worry that they still had some pressing things to do. Some facilitators had conflicts in their schedules in such that some sessions were cut short, or groups had to wrap up everything abruptly.

What dispositions, attitudes, or feelings were notable?

Notable were the following positive dispositions, attitudes, and feelings: the relief of some participants for having unburdened/shared their hurts, long-hidden anger, frustrations, hopefulness (that the Church may learn to reach out more to others, and start to create a safe space or environment where people can speak out or share lives for guidance devoid of judgment). There was a sense of mission among church workers which was enhanced as gleaned through their enthusiasm to actively participate in the spiritual conversations. Many found the courage to open up long and staling hidden emotions without hesitation because trust was assured. Everyone expressed even those who were hesitant at first.

There was gratefulness for the various initiatives already underway in the respective parishes and ministries, and the feeling of being cared for and warmly embraced despite the challenges faced together with other members of the Church. There was respect and seriousness of purpose through what people shared, enthusiasm for a Church to live out the vision of Pope Francis, determination to work towards such a Synodal Church, the joy and gratitude for this blessing of Synod on Synodality especially the Spiritual conversations, the hope that springs from this synodal process, and the feeling of belongingness as manifested in the increase of participation in church activities. After the synodal conversation process, participants felt renewed and refreshed. Smiles in their faces were evident.

Notable also were the following negative dispositions, attitudes, and feelings: shyness, hesitation, low-self-esteem, doubts, disinterest, impatience to listen, feelings of wonder (why other religions are more appealing and their members display more good-mannered), and confusion as to the meaning and purpose of Church celebrations. Some participants were expressive and spontaneously shared their experiences. Others were timid and hesitant to speak up, while a few cried and were saddened by what they heard from the sharing.

There were also voices that spoke of disappointment in a Church that is moving too slowly towards being a synodal church, anger about abuse of power and some priest's scandalous behavior, and frustrations from those who desire to play more active roles as co-responsible members in the parish community.

What tensions or disagreements emerged from the listening process?

In some vicariates and parishes tensions arose when the topic about ecumenism was discussed. Butting in happened during conversation and listening phase, contradicting other perceptions. During the listening process, minor disagreements occurred on the celebration of the Eucharist. The participants cited practices that were usually not done previously but are slowly being practiced at present. One mission station reported that a tension and disagreement happened in connection with the impact of social media platforms to the church activities and fulfillment of pastoral obligations. Hesitancy to share was prevalent, especially with those issues that they felt were too sensitive due to 'trust' issues.

What topics or issues gave rise to diverse points of view?

Topics or issues that gave rise to diverse points of view were: poor condition of barangay chapels in one vicariate that can hardly accommodate 5% of the population, ecumenism, how to address sexual abuse by some members of the clergy, gender fluidity, whether *arancel* is to be reduced or no payment at all for those who have less, lack of reaching out to nominal Catholics, no programs or steps to invite and encourage the

“faraway” to come back and attend church activities, lack of transparency in financial matters, priests disappointed on low collection in the barangays or community visited by parish workers, the attitudes and misunderstanding among of the members of the LOMAs, and the behavior of youth ministers today, gave rise to different perspectives coming from the participants.

There were also disagreements on the issue of collaboration and dialogue among church ministries and other parishioners, the lavish celebrations of feasts, the issue of love offerings, not attending Sunday masses and other church activities due to work, on entering dialogue with other religions, the juggling of funds raised to meet the needs of the chapel, and the right dress code in church.

Overall, what were the fruits that the Holy Spirit has brought about through this experience?

The fruits that the Holy Spirit has brought about through this experience were the following: the encouragement to serve God in various capacities, continuous dialogue among barangay parishioners, love from group members, joy of meeting new friends, strengthening of faith, a sense of mission, closer bonds among parish workers, feelings of security, and bearing with one another especially in difficult moments for the church. Moreover, the greatest fruit that the Holy Spirit must have brought through this Synod is the methodology, which are listening and discernment in addressing issues in the church. It was noteworthy that there were respondents who began to use the language of discernment and appear to have internalized it. Hoping this style and attitude will spread more to many, especially those who are currently active in church ministries.

Among the feedback from the local meetings, what was particularly significant, surprising or unexpected?

In one vicariate, the participation of manual workers was quite significant. The plight of the youth surprisingly surfaced as well as the thirst for spiritual discussions. Significant *sharings* revolved around the need of the youth for companionship, the need for the Church to reach out more of the marginalized communities, the need for more formation for Church leaders and members, and to focus more on an evangelization that would be understood by most, if not all, members of the Church. Some parishioners showed commitment to help the parish priest in church endeavors. Their involvement in the spiritual conversations showed a good sign of eagerness to help the Church and be part of the change they want to see as they journey towards a synodal church.

Some vicariates had some notable difficulties. Dates of the consultations were often subject to change because of work constraint and the busy schedule of different members because of work. Tasks were sometimes neglected. There was budget constraint and insufficiency to conduct face-to-face consultations, plus the fact that it was election time. Nevertheless, one good thing observed was the change of attitude from a pessimism to optimism knowing that the Church is a dynamic Church.

What new perspectives or new horizons opened up?

The Church as a minority. Among the new perspectives or horizons that opened up was the mindset that the Church is now a minority but still pretending to be big as validated by the figures in the Variate

Evangelization Profile (VEP), and discernment processes are needed to address the glaring realities through VEP's fact and figures.

Sense of Belongingness. The sense of belongingness among the parishioners at the barangay level has been met/reawakened through this synod process, hence the parish should strive to sustain this thru more spiritual exercises. Some of those who were not often seen in church promised to go to church. The Church can try to be more active and intentional in being companion to people (especially those from the peripheries) in the different aspects of their lives. In particular, the pandemic created solidarity among those who struggled. After the synodal conversation process, participants felt renewed and refreshed. Smiles in their faces were evident.

Leadership consistent with synodality. Leaders in church should lead by example and associate with parishioners not only among themselves (exclusivity). They ought to bring the Church (sacraments) especially Matrimony to couples who have not yet received it. Leadership that is welcoming, service-oriented, united in mission and ready to reach out to the peripheries, especially at the local parish level, is possible. It has been done in some parishes and could be done to all.

Improvement in the Catechesis and Liturgy. Liturgical celebrations must be more joyful and alive and should inculcate in people the positive outlook that the Church welcomes everyone. People need to be educated about receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation and Holy Communion, thus the need for renewed catechesis. In reality, parishioners lack knowledge on basic catechism. There is a call for lay people to be trained in formation and spiritual discernment and delve deeper into the Sacred Scriptures.

Longing for Unity. Parishioners long for unity among the community regardless of their social status, providing an avenue becoming true Christians. The need for convening Pastoral Assemblies were also felt.

Hope springs eternal. Through these consultations, people trusts that the objectives of journeying together will be achieved. Members of the community have started to express their thoughts and ideas. They hope that they will be listened to and issues will be slowly addressed in God's time.

Which particular stories or real-life experiences were especially moving and why?

Emotional and Psychological Struggle of the Youth. The experience of a young female participant who kept silent about domestic/sexual abuses because her family, relatives and neighbors stereotyped her as "barkadista" and "maki-lalaki" because she is oftentimes seen in the company of male friends. She was thankful that her classmate encouraged her to join the youth ministry which paved the way to overcome her depression and disappointments.

Conversion through the Basic Ecclesial Communities. One person shared that in the past, her whole family was not religious enough as to rarely attending masses. Having that set up, they felt life was hard and dull. When BEC was introduced in the community, they started to be active with church activities. They realized that life is better with God in it. Their emotions became stable and their sorrows and struggles were lifted.

Which points of view seem to have strong resonance?

The themes of listening, journeying together, celebrating and speaking out, strongly resonated in the responses of the people. In connection with the aspect of celebration, one of the participants said that sometimes he does not go to church because he does not have the proper attire. Most of the participants

have the same sentiments about the dress code. These comments of the people should be corrected as the church is not only for those who wear beautiful dress or for rich people but for everyone.

Which points of view were mentioned less but are interesting and noteworthy?

The themes that were mentioned less but are interesting and noteworthy are Authority and Participation, Discerning and Deciding, Formation in Synodality, Ecumenism, and Dialogue in the Church and society

Overall, what has the Holy Spirit inspired the community to see regarding the current reality of synodality in the local church, including the present lights and shadows?

Overall, the fruits that the Holy Spirit has brought about through this experience are: continuous dialogue among barangay parishioners, love from group members, joy of knowing new friends, strengthening of faith, peace, humility, love, unity, discernment, a sense of mission, closer bonds among parish workers, formation of new relationships. He inspired the faithful of the Archdiocese to give their own ideas on how to promote the values and practices of the Church, inspire others to be more faithful to God especially to those people who lack in faith and do not believe in him, unify for the continuance of the Catholic Church, become instruments in reaching out to the People of God, listening to them, talking, sharing and giving them pieces of advice to survive whatever challenge they have at the moment. This inspiration is concretely manifested in resolutions made by the participants such as the intensification of catechesis, having more home visitations, offering the sacrament of marriage to those already living together, increasing the number of FGs and BEC to be more active, reforming the structure of PPC/PFC, and renewing the mindset of the faithful and clergy and align with synodality.

The Holy Spirit also invites the faithful to continue the synod conversations, continue the mission of having regular spiritual conversations to grow in journeying together towards Christ and gradually build the life of a synodal church. This is the attitude of being open and be patient to those who are not in one way or another supportive of the Church, and those who need healing and reconciliation.

What did participants have to say about areas where the Church is in need of healing and conversion, in its spiritual life, culture, attitudes, structures, pastoral practices, relationships, and missionary outreach?

Transparency and Accountability. There was a call for the transparency and accountability of funds, donations, and project expenses. The priest should reach out to the parishioners especially the ones who do not go to church.

Need for a more listening Church. The high-walled boundary between the clergy and the lay people still exists. The empowerment of the lay is not yet seen and observed in many local churches. There are still people who see the Church as the church of wealthy people. There are divisions among the clergy itself on certain matters such as mandatory vaccination, and abuse of authority. Some observed that church leaders are less accommodating particularly those who belong to the lower strata of society. There is a lack of spiritual activities to enhance the faith of the parishioners. Pastors should listen more and be inclusive towards the poorest of the poor, for example: the pedicab drivers and vendors through equal participation and responsibility in the church/parish. More efforts for the spiritual growth of parishioners must be exerted and for people to cooperate and assist our priest in this endeavor. Pastoral accompaniment of the poor and

victims of calamities, injustices and poverty need to be reinforced and addressed as well as healing of broken relationships, aging and health care among clergy and the parishioners.

Spirituality. There were concerns especially in the formation and catechism. The need for reorientation and application of spiritual practices is very high. The people who belong to the least, last and lost categories are being left behind, in which the Church must be with these group of people to build a relationship and hear their concerns so they can grow spiritually. There should be the courage to shift to missionary mode and conduct more missionary activities through the ecclesial movements. There should also be a deepening of Eucharistic spirituality and promotion of religious vocations as at present many barangays request for masses and other church activities and there is a perceived scarcity of priests.

The Christian Family. The Church should focus on the family which is the basic unit of society. The family should be evangelized because it will constitute a strong Church.

CONCLUSION

In what ways is the Holy Spirit inviting the local church to grow in synodality?

Formation in Synodality. Synodality is first of all achieved by forming the People of God, allowing their faith to grow through evangelization – the proclamation of the Good News – especially directed to the youth, the poor and the unchurched. Evangelization could be attractive to the youth through songs, dance, and other such kinds of evangelistic activities such as Bible studies. The clergy must also have their own Synod on Synodality process through regular pastoral immersion of priests and lay leaders and including it in the program in the seminary.

Integral Human Development. Integrate psychosocial activities and personality development, guidance and counseling, as well as discuss social issues such as taking care of our environment and conduct activities in line with this such as mangrove planting, biking, and the like.

Social Action. Social action within the parish is important. There must be programs for the poor and the oppressed such as collaborating with the government agencies to help serve the marginalized, and to give scholarship grants to deserving youth through partnership and networking.

Revival of Parish Programs. The Family and Life Apostolate as well as the Basic Ecclesial Communities should be revived.

What dreams, desires, and aspirations for the church were expressed by participants?

Reaching out to the peripheries. The faithful must share knowledge and learnings especially to the people who are not active in Church. We have to give time to listen to their experiences.

Zeal for the Mission. Be unpretentious and should bestow pure affection for the mission. The parish should be able to reach its parishioners especially those from the remote areas.

Love of Neighbor. Emancipate being loving neighbors and total submission to the almighty God in a way of offering service as the actual breakthrough of the mission.

Deepening of Faith. Parishioners should be taught a deeper understanding on the beliefs and practices of the Roman Catholic so as to strengthen their stand against the people trying to change their spiritual perspectives; and lastly, families should be encouraged to only have one religion/the same religion within the household to avoid conflict of beliefs.

Based on their feedback, what steps does the diocese feel called to take in becoming more synodal?

Renewal of Parish Communities. The Archdiocese feels called to form parish communities that are synodal by inviting people to get involved and participate in mandated organizations and other church activities, catering the sacraments especially the sacrament of matrimony to the unwed, focusing on the development of the spiritual life and helping people grow in faith and relationship with God through spiritual formation programs especially those afforded by the ecclesial movements, highlight the teachings of the catechism, and designing programs reaching out those who are at the peripheries such as feeding programs and livelihood assistance.

Continuing faith formation, sustaining BEC activities, active participation in the liturgies, evangelized confraternities, concern for the projects and maintenance through tithing, readily available sacraments and communal celebrations can unite the faithful, promote active participation in the threefold mission we acquired through baptism (priest, prophet, and king).

There are certain things and activities the parish that should minimize, some improve. All decisions for the parish should be with consultations with the PPC, PFT and other ministries. Still, the parish priest(s) should always have the final say.

Flexibility and Openness. Each one must be capable of being readily changed and not be bounded by rigid standards through recognition of mistakes. In addition, there must be the ability to open hearts for new companions and new opportunities to grow spiritually.

Relationship with Christ. Help other people build a stronger relationship with Christ as they get to know the importance of encountering, listening, and discerning as being part of this journey.

What are the next steps forward for our diocese on the path of Synodality, in communion with the whole Church?

It would be necessary to implement the planned parish programs and the proposals based on what was presented above. Specifically, this is done by making the principles of synodality as part of the parish program. Likewise, programs and projects have to be conceived and realized in order to answer the issues and concerns raised during the spiritual conversations in the parishes.

What cultural image articulate our experience of synodality?

The distinctive cultural image that could illustrate the experience of synodality in the Archdiocese of Palo could be the *San Juanico Bridge* – the bridge that connects the islands of Leyte and Samar – the Archdiocese of Palo with her suffragans in the north of the region. The path of synodality behooves the faithful to conquer division and alienation by establishing connection, genuine relationships, and communion among the members of the local Church and to society in general. In fact, the ministry of the bishop (and the Pope) as *pontifex* – builder of bridges – is so congruent with the baptismal dignity of Christians being sharers in the priesthood of Christ, the one mediator between God and man.

