



Catarman

Northern Samar

Garay

Western Samar

Calbayog

Eastern Samar



Catbalogan



Leyte



Borongan



Carigara

Tadoban

Palo

METROPOLITAN SYNTHESIS REPORT **PALO ECCLESIASTICAL PROVINCE**

Archdiocese of Palo – Diocese of Calbayog – Diocese of Borongan
Diocese of Catarman – Diocese of Naval

Abuyog

INTRODUCTION

What were the main steps in the process of consultation?

Responding to the invitation of Pope Francis, and with the encouragement of the bishops of the ecclesiastical province of Palo, under the pallium of Archbishop John F. Du, DD, the Synod of Synodality was brought to the local level through respective diocesan opening Masses and launching. The process specified three phases: 1) The Preparation, 2) The Consultation, and 3) The Preparation of the synthesis.

The process began with the creation of diocesan synodal teams that will supervise the consultations in the parishes. Later, members of the clergy were given orientations seminars and synodal teams were created in the parishes. Consultations among diocesan and parish teams were conducted through hybrid and in-person conversations. After a series of consultations, the parish teams presented their recorded responses with voices from professionals, government employees, community/barangay leaders and residents, women, elders, youth, marginalized and those in the peripheries, consecrated persons, and members of the clergy. Video and photo documentations, notetaker forms, and analysis matrices and syntheses served as references.

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?

Since many participants found it hard to understand many of the questions in the 10 themes even if the questions were already translated into dialect, diocesan teams decided to make simplified questions that encompassed the different themes.

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

Some consultations were done during the weekend to guarantee more attendance. Neighboring chapels were clustered for consultation in bigger parishes. Various means were exhausted to invite those who will attend the consultation: letters were sent, tarpaulins were posted, online posts and ads were uploaded, announcements were made during Sunday Masses, and the public announcement systems also in the barangay was utilized.

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

The pre-synodal consultations were opened to everyone, but responses depended on the number of actual participants regardless of invitation. The total number of participants for every parish represented only a small portion of the total population of the dioceses.

Yet, they succeeded in getting representation of various sectors in the community. Participants came from parish servant-leaders and workers, BEC, non-regular churchgoers, youth, senior citizens, students, barangay officials, government employees, vendors, farmers, etc. The most significant came from the marginalized, mainly because these were people not often listened to by the church. The presence of the youth and their interest to participate in church activities gave hope for a synodal church in the future. The senior citizens were also appreciated for the important historical context of their ideas. Non-regular church goers were also mentioned for they were also significant as far as some parishes were concerned. While much effort was exerted to include as many people as possible, the limitations brought about by the pandemic prevented the parishes from getting more numbers to join the consultations. Some parishes opted to conduct online meetings instead.

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

Worth noting was the involvement of Seventh Day Adventists and Born-Again Christian denominations, pedicab and motorcycle drivers, carpenters, vendors, laundrywomen and farmers, welders, housewives, catechists, liturgical ministers, seminarians, BEC coordinators, Family Groups, Parents, Barangay Officials, Teachers who are not active in any ministries, government workers, members of communities far from any active involvement in the church, fraternities, sororities, LGBTQA, and most especially former rebels and returnees. Some really sacrificed their one-day earning/income just to attend the synod consultations.

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 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?

The active participation of the laity was very much present in the life of the dioceses: with their pastors, various lay leaders were at the forefront, from the preparatory stages until the drafting of the parish synthesis. In all these, the youth were very well represented; indeed, they were active and effective in the synodal teams, making up most of the participants. The consultations themselves became a place for people, including the very young and the non-regular church goers, to recall their personal experiences and express their ideas and sentiments. There was joy and fulfillment in being called to take part in

such a immense activity, in being with others, in sharing with them and learning together on the “common” grounds of faith and experience. And the teams organized for the synodal consultations were crucial for the success of the endeavor.

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

There is a common effort and journey among the dioceses in Eastern Visayas as it aspires to become a more listening Church. Evangelization now uses social media and technology. There is still more work to do as the ecclesial culture in the region is still priest-centered. The non-participation of the male sector in the Church was considered as a low point as observed during the consultation process. It is shown that people prefer to work and earn a living rather than to attend Mass and other church activities. Other couples do not attend Mass because they have not yet received the sacrament of matrimony.

The most felt difficulty was of comprehension: it was not easy to understand even the very term “Synodality” and the sense of some of the questions found among the thematic nuclei. Even more common terms (e.g. Church, hierarchy) needed to be explained, especially to the younger and less educated among the participants. Problems arose, too, concerning the mechanics and the conduct of the consultations: the methods used sometimes varied from one parish to another. These all depended on the personnel and other resources available to a parish. And then there were difficulties of a more practical nature: some areas were difficult to reach or outright rendered inaccessible due to road or weather conditions; there were household, economic, professional and even deeply personal constraints which tended also to limit the participation of many; the two languages (Cebuano and Binisaya) used in the dioceses sometimes resulted in confusion: e.g. “panaw” = journey (Ceb.); = death (Bin.); in some areas, the invitation to participate was sometimes misunderstood (as “just another [unimportant] meeting” or even as a fundraising event).

What dispositions, attitudes, or feelings were notable?

Notable were the following positive dispositions, attitudes, and feelings: the relief of some participants for having 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 reveal long and staling hidden emotions because trust was assured. Everyone was able to express themselves, even those who were hesitant at first.

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 wish to play more active roles as co-responsible members of the parish community.

What tensions or disagreements emerged from the listening process?

A few people were uncomfortable with the group they belong to during the small group discussions, but the uneasiness was gradually overcome as the sharing went on. There were topics that elicited some disagreements and discussions such as: running the parish, implementation of church activities, administration of the parish financial resources, and differences in stand on social issues. 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, another with the proper dress code during the Mass.

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

Some themes that gave rise to diverse points were: the involvement of the church leaders in politics; the unclear notion on the separation of the Church and the State; the reasons for decline of attendance during liturgical celebrations, especially the Holy Mass; the reasons for the lack of synodality in the Church, and the lack of involvement in church activities among the youth.

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

The Holy Spirit has indeed accompanied us in the entire synodal journey allowing us to reap many fruits in the end. Among of these gifts were:

Generosity. There was readiness among the parishioners to share their time, talent, and treasure for the success of the synodal consultations.

Openness and Sincerity. The participants whole heartedly shared their stories and imparted their concerns, comments and suggestions that are helpful in the growth of the parish and the diocese.

Willingness and commitment. The parish facilitators were very active in their tasks to implement the parish consultations, heeding the call of synodality, fulfilling the aspirations of the faithful and implementing the plans and implications that transpired from the consultations.

Sense of gratitude, joy, and satisfaction. The participants experienced the presence of God and the presence of each other and were thankful to be part of this journey and discernment.

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

A common and surprising story was about the challenges that people face within the Catholic Faith: how one sooner or later left the Church. The tension and the conflicts came out in the dialogue with individuals or groups from Christian sects, who recalled how they eventually abandoned the synodal journey.

The Key Role of Priests in the Church. We all know the fact that the priests plays an important role in keeping the faith alive in parishioners. During the pandemic, they were the inspirational ground in lifting spirit of those faithful who found themselves at their lowest which was clearly seen on the quality of their homilies and their immediate response to administer the sacraments especially those in the grassroots of the society. The person of the priest is very important if synodality is to be realized. His character, his way of life, his lifestyle, his relationships, and even his temper can either be instrumental or detrimental in our synodal journey.

Celebration of the Eucharist. A need to examine how the celebration of the Eucharist is undertaken. This includes the delivery, language used, length and how the homilies can move faithful to reflect on one's life. The importance on the use of music and the inspiration of participating in the Mass must be taken consideration.

Lay Servant-Leaders. One of those who play roles to make the church alive are church servant leaders. Their faith and commitment are clearly acknowledged for it propels in continuing their service in the church during the pandemic and personal dilemmas. Regarding this, they must be given attention by supporting them on formation programs so that it will be helpful for them and make them competent. And in this way, they will be reminded to be mindful of their behavior, regardless of their social status, to avoid the impression of favoritism.

Youth Involvement. It is important that the youth of today be involved in church activities. We should not be showing to them their role in the church, instead, we must give them their role in the church for them to experience. This will make them realize that they are part in the life and the mission of the Church. The church should open its doors for them. Sadly, they are not given enough chance to voice out their concerns and they are even discouraged to participate in church activities. That is why, their voices must be heard since they are the future leaders of the church. Young people have the mission to sustain and enliven the spirit of caring and of compassion in the future.

Neglected Sectors (Senior Citizens, Single Parents, PWDS, LGBTQ, etc.). The Church should strive to be inclusive to and welcoming of people regardless of orientation, status, class, etc. We observed those people often found in the fringes of society seldom feel welcome. Feeling of discouragement exist when they tried to interact with identified people in the Church. On to this point, the Church must be a place of comfort whenever they are rejected by their own families and society because only the Church can provide understanding and compassion when some are looked down upon by society. By this, through formation programs, we can address their needs and be given emphasis.

Proselytism. Other Christian denominations are inviting the youth by promising them scholarship that leads to change of religion. Born Again Christians and those from other sects express that they gained personal and spiritual growth in other denominations. They

also find it difficult to follow the teachings of the Catholic church, and they seek for personal contentment and happiness which they could not feel from the local church.

What new perspectives or new horizons opened up?

The Church as a Minority. Among the new perspectives or horizons that opened was the mindset that the Church is now a minority but still pretending to be big and discernment processes are needed to address the glaring reality.

Integral Evangelization. In the different parish consultations, participants stressed the necessity for a more proactive way of evangelization because of the declining number of attendees during Sunday Masses and parish activities. Many Catholics do not know the basic teachings, prayers, and traditions of the Church. According to them, the Church should intensify more its efforts especially in its hospital, prison, social media, and other special ministries. They also mentioned the need for more active lay ministers, especially catechists and lay formators. BECs should be revitalized.

Family as Domestic Church. We should emphasize the importance of family as a domestic church where household members start to know God. Also, the limited participation of men in church activities was highlighted. There is a need to intensify the role of fathers as head of the family in order to build a praying family whose members are faithful followers of Christ.

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.

Renewed Catechesis and Religious Instruction. People need to be educated about receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation and Holy Communion, thus the need for renewed catechesis. 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.

Desire 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. 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.

Communication to the Community. The decisions made by the Church must be made known and be explained to the faithful that everyone may be aware of all happenings. In using the social media, it is encouraged that there must be a two-way communication between the hierarchy and the faithful.

Good and Prepared Homilies. The People expressed the need for good homilies that reflect on the Word of God and its relevance to their lives. They dislike homilies that are shallow and pure entertainment.

Meaningful Liturgy. Liturgical celebrations must be more joyful and alive and should inculcate in people the positive outlook that the Church welcomes everyone. The need for more meaningful liturgical and sacramental celebrations that bring the faithful closer to Christ, not making the celebrations occasions for pomp and pageantry.

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

There were stories of survival in families after experiencing setbacks and challenges. There were stories of conversion to the Catholic faith. A senior citizen participant has shared his testimony when a sect tried to encourage him to be a member, but due to his being firmly founded in the Catholic faith, he did not join. One parish reported that during a house-to-house synodal consultation, one member of the team had a warm welcome from a family who offered her food. Unexpectedly, this family was from the Aglipayan Church (Philippine Independent Church). Knowing the difference in religion, the facilitators were indeed amazed of the hospitality shown. There were many Catholics living in the area but only this family offered them something.

Some participants shared how they became more active in the life and ministry of the church. Some were pleased to share the gift of themselves to the mission. Others talked about their experience of joy in actively participating in church liturgies and other activities. Some facilitators have also listened to stories of transformation because of their faith in God, their relationship with their fellow faithful, and the help of the church.

Other participants talked about their personal struggles in keeping the faith or sharing the faith to others, especially with their family and friends. One farmer shared about his simple act of asking an inactive or unchurched person to take part in an event or expressing their importance to the Church. He said it had an internal effect on them.

Some young people expressed their feeling of being left out in church activities because their chapel is managed mostly by old people. Because of poverty, farmers would rather go to their farms than attend Mass.

Which points of view seem to have strong resonance?

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.

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

Gaps in the Church. An action needs to be undertaken to bridge the gap between the clergies and the laity, clergy to clergy, laity to laity, the rich and the poor, the youth and the adult, the newcomers, and the seniors in the years of service, etc.

Formation Programs. Education on the faithful must be taken considerations. Programs such as catechesis must be extended both in homes and in school and must be extended to those living in the margins. Furthermore, sacraments must be within reach even to those who cannot afford the fees.

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

The recent synodal consultation can, without doubt, be considered as the work of the Holy Spirit. He brought the community, i.e., the clergy and the parishioners, to see the “thirst” within themselves. The clergy thirsting to encounter their parishioners, to hear from and listen to them; and the latter thirsting, too, for a greater presence of their ordained ministers among them and desiring true change. Generally, synodality is healthy: most of the consultation teams did not find much difficulty in gathering the people and obtaining straightforward responses from them. They even described the activity as joyful, and that the participants were happy because they were accorded some attention and importance. And many were able to air their desires and even their grievances.

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?

Church Scandals. Participants said that scandals, unbecoming conduct, or inappropriate attitude of some church leaders are detrimental to the growth of the community and are hindrance to the dedicated participation of the faithful. Sometimes these behaviors become reasons for the faithful to leave the church and to join other sects. There are sexual abuse/harassment allegations against a few priests abusing young males and females especially in the Youth Ministry.

Free Sacraments. Some participants said that sacraments should be “free” especially for the poor. Still, many of the faithful consider the fixed amount or *arancel* system as “payment” for the services rendered by the priests.

Favoritism, Elitism, and Competition. There is a danger of favoritism, elitism, competition within the church, among church leaders, and among parish groups and organizations, confraternities, faith communities and ministries when the center of parish activities revolve around the rich and those who can afford. This makes many of the parishioners feel excluded.

Transparency and Accountability in Church Finances. There was a call for the transparency and accountability of funds, donations, and project expenses. There should always be transparency in every activity in the church so that the people would be confident about their participation and donations. It can give them assurance that the support given was purely utilized in the church/chapel.

Spiritual life. There is a need for regular spiritual renewal and enrichment such as retreats, recollections, pilgrimages, formations, and the like among parishioners to facilitate deeper encounter with the Lord. The dichotomy of faith and life is another aspect that needs attention. Faith must be put into action at home and in our workplaces. Our faith must transform the society. Religious leaders and lay leaders must live exemplary life and must be able to touch or connect with people especially the poor.

CONCLUSION

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

Formation in Synodality. Synodality is first 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 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. Care for the environment has also to be inculcated in Catholics.

Revival of Parish Programs. The FALA (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 must give time to listen to their experiences.

Zeal for the Mission. All the members of the Church must 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 especially through Basic Ecclesial Communities.

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 Catholic Church to strengthen their stand against the people trying to change their spiritual perspectives.

An Inclusive Church. A church community where everybody is welcome, listened to, understood, and loved.

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

The metropolitan ecclesiastical province 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).

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 must be conceived and realized to answer the issues and concerns raised during the spiritual conversations in the parishes.

What cultural image articulate our experience of synodality?

The distinguishing cultural images that could illustrate the experience of synodality in the ecclesiastical province of Palo are the *San Juanico Bridge* and *Biliran Bridge*- the bridges that connect the islands of Leyte, Samar, and Naval - the Archdiocese of Palo with her suffragans. The path of synodality behooves the faithful of the dioceses to overcome division and estrangement by creating connection, genuine relationships, and communion among the members of the local Church and with 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.