

Synod Implementation Team Meeting Summary

Diocese of Toledo | February 25, 2025 | 11:30am

Overall Summary

This meeting brought together a diverse team of pastoral leaders from across the Diocese of Toledo to review Vatican documents on synodality and provide feedback for Bishop Thomas to bring to an upcoming Ohio bishops' conference. The overarching theme that emerged was a recognition that synodality is already being practiced in many forms across the diocese and its parishes — but the language, terminology, and formal framework around it remain unfamiliar and even intimidating to most people. The group agreed that simplifying and humanizing the concept is essential to broader adoption. Formation rooted in prayer, Eucharistic devotion, and listening to the Holy Spirit was repeatedly identified as the necessary foundation. The discussion surfaced both encouraging examples of grassroots synodality in action and honest challenges around bandwidth, clericalism, and the gap between diocesan leadership and parish-level implementation.

Questions Asked & Responses

Initial impressions — any confusion or points of clarity needed from the documents?

The chair opened the floor for general reactions to the synod documents that had been shared in advance. There was confusion around metrics — particularly how implementation success across the three pillars would be measured. It was also acknowledged the documents were complex and dense, used AI to summarize them. Others echoed that the documents were hard to read and difficult to distill into a clear vision or action plan. It was asked whether Bishop Thomas had shared any initial thoughts, which opened a broader discussion about the bishop's existing synodal practices.

The chair focused questions on information that the implementation committee could speak to, rather than address all of the questions.

How has the spiritual practice of synodality influenced your ministry's work?

The facilitator framed synodality as beginning with listening to God before listening to each other. Responses focused heavily on relationship, accompaniment, and prayer as the spiritual core of synodal practice.

The importance of relationship over knowledge-transfer is imperative to the synodal process. The paradigm shift in starting relationships from believe to belong appears to agree with the idea of the synodal listening.

Another way to approach synodality is the 'Triple I' framework: Invitational, Informational, Inspiration. It is important to invite Catholic laity into the process. One shared how lay parishioners accompany grieving families (many non-Catholic) for a full year in their parish. This is a powerful example of synodal accompaniment already in practice.

Do you observe adaptation toward synodality across different levels of your parish or apostolate?

Participants reflected on their specific ministries and parishes.

It became quite apparent through the sharing of this information that parishes do not understand what the concept of synodality means but are participating in many synodal practices. Here are the examples given by the team: listening sessions for various parish projects, pastoral/finance council engagement, OCIA accompaniment, relationship-building before and after Mass, FOCUS missionary work, retreats, walking with individuals through transitions. podcasts and teachings on synodality, a weekly online Bible study, 'Evening with Jesus' monthly prayer services led by laity, and direct outreach to African-American families.

How is the work of synodality being incorporated into the different ministries of your diocese?

Synodality is woven into the regular rhythms of how our Pastoral Center departments operate and engage with parishes and schools across the diocese.

Within the Department of Discipleship and Family Life, for example, our Coordinator of Youth Ministry meets regularly with parish youth ministers, both as a full group once a year and in smaller groups organized by deanery. These smaller gatherings are intentionally designed as listening sessions, giving her the opportunity to hear directly from youth ministers about what they need and how the diocese can better support their work at the parish level.

In the Department of Catholic Education, the team meets monthly with school principals, creating a consistent space for gathering feedback, sharing best practices, and ensuring that the voices of those closest to the schools are informing diocesan decisions.

These are just a few examples of how synodality is being practiced across our ministries, not as a program or initiative, but as a way of working together that prioritizes listening, collaboration, and mutual support.

How is the work of synodality being integrated into the diocesan participatory bodies (i.e. diocesan councils: pastoral, presbyteral, finance, etc.)

Bishop Thomas meets regularly with the Senior Staff, the College of Consultors, the Presbyteral Council, the Diocesan Pastoral Advisory Council made up of lay members with representation from each deanery, Diocesan Finance Council, Religious Superiors, School Advisory Committee, and numerous committees and ministry teams—all working together in a synodal way, guided by the Holy Spirit. These structures have been in place for many years.

Approximately how many parishes in your diocese are incorporating synodality into their staff, leadership, apostolic groups, pastoral council, and finance council?

To some extent, every parish in our diocese is incorporating synodality, even if they do not always use that word to describe it. Every parish is required to have a finance council, and our diocese mandates that every parish maintain a pastoral council as well. The Pastoral Center has worked diligently to equip pastors with best practices for making the most of these councils.

Additionally, every parish with a school has a school advisory committee that serves in an advisory role to both the pastor and principal. These councils and committees are composed of parishioners who are deeply connected to the life of their parishes and schools, people with their ear to the ground, attuned to the needs and experiences of the community they serve.

So, while the language of synodality may not always be explicitly used, the reality of it is being lived out across all of our parishes, through shared listening, collaborative discernment, and structures that bring diverse voices into parish leadership."

What is the reality of pastors in your diocese regarding synodality?

This question probed how parish pastors understand and implement (or do not implement) synodality.

Pastors are stretched too thin because there are too few priests. The language has not taken root, but the lived practice is observable. There is genuine openness to walking with, listening to, and forming relationships. Pastors are open to creating listening spaces but need help in sustaining it with external support. The key need is helping them develop the developers so synodal practices are scalable. Pastors are too focused on programs over mission. The language and formation needs to come from the top down clearly, through homilies, diocese messaging, and laity empowerment. Pastors could give the laity three tangible things to do when they leave Mass to promote listening and engage others in the week ahead sharing the Gospel.

What ways can we encourage formation at every level to address fear, resistance, and lack of understanding related to synodality?

This could be considered the was capstone question as to what the bishop should bring to the Ohio bishops' meeting as concrete recommendations.

Anchor formation in mission and prayer — truly teaching people how to pray in its many Catholic forms. Deepen devotion to the Eucharist (align with the Eucharistic Revival movement). Help people discern the role of the Holy Spirit. Create easy on-ramps alongside deeper formation pathways. We could address the fear of the unknown by breaking synodality into concrete, accessible language. Create safe spaces for questions. Build trust and rapport so people feel comfortable seeking clarification. The need for putting the Eucharist at the center of our lives assists us in humility before Christ and removes intimidation and fear. One of the team members closed this question discussion with the following: (1) Develop a clear, unified diocesan formation framework with standardized language and accessible tools. (2) Integrate synodality into existing structures at the deanery level. (3) Strengthen seminary and ongoing clergy formation. (4) Provide formation and empowerment for lay leaders. (5) Model synodal leadership at the diocesan level with visible consultation, transparent follow-up, and a culture of trust.

Notable Tangible Thoughts & Recommendations

The following are concrete, actionable ideas raised by participants:

Language & Communication

- Develop standardized, accessible language around synodality across all parishes and deaneries — not just 'episcopal speak.'
- Bishop's pastoral approach should explicitly reinforce and clarify synodality terminology.
- Podcasts and online content are effective tools for reaching lay people with accessible teaching on synodality.

Formation & Structure

- Push synodality formation down to the deanery level — not just from the diocese.
- Strengthen seminary curriculum with collaborative pastoral leadership and listening training.
- Create middle-ground formation resources between simple prayer apps and intensive programs like Encounter Ministries — easy on-ramps AND deeper dives.
- Empower laity by searching for and personally inviting dedicated parishioners into ministry roles — don't wait for them to volunteer.

Pastoral Practices

- Give the laity three tangible things to do after Mass
- Help pastors develop the developers — build scalable systems rather than relying on one person.

- Train parish greeters and volunteers in how to welcome and connect with parishioners.
- Use retreats (like ACT retreats) and relationship-based programming to create deeper connections beyond brief pre/post-Mass interactions.

Diocesan Transparency & Culture

- Host an open house at diocesan offices so parish and school staff can meet diocesan leadership — reducing the intimidation factor and building trust (this was already being discussed internally).
- Model synodal leadership visibly — ensure transparent follow-up from diocesan consultations so people see their input is acted on.
- Finalize and implement the Black Catholic Council and Hispanic Catholic Council — both have completed bylaws.
- Promote the documents for the diocese which captured the findings from all synodality listening sessions.