

A map of North America, including Canada, the United States, and Mexico, is shown in a light purple color. The map is overlaid on a white background. The title text is centered over the map.

FINAL DOCUMENT OF THE CONTINENTAL STAGE IN NORTH AMERICA

The outline of the *Final Document*¹ is as follows:

Introduction: Description of the Continental Stage in North America and the methodology used.

Presentation of Three Key Themes:

- *Called and Gifted Through Baptism:* Implications of the dignity and responsibilities of our common baptism.
- *Communion with Christ and One Another:* Recognizing the stresses on our ecclesial communion in North America today and discerning ways forward.
- *Sent Forth on Mission:* Living out our common baptismal call to bring the Good News to the world.

Bishops' Reflections on the Experience of Synodality in North America: Given the desire expressed by many to know how bishops perceive the synodal process, this section provides some of their insights and reflections.

Priorities Directed to the October 2023 Gathering of the Synod in Rome: Presentation of five priorities proposed for further discussion by the Synod in Rome.

Conclusion: The gift of being gathered together.

¹ This *Final Document* is based on reflections on the three questions found in the Document for the Continental Stage (DCS) #106, although its structure does not directly mirror those questions.

1. Introduction

He said to them, "Come, and you will see." (John 1:39)

The Invitation

1. Time and time again, the invitation from the Holy Father to the People of God to participate in the *2021-2024 Synod: For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation & Mission* elicited a range of responses. Profound joy and enthusiasm were experienced by many, while resistance, suspicion, and anxiety were aroused in some. In the Continental Stage, the delegates accepted the invitation; they came, and they saw. As one delegate remarked, *"The Holy Spirit is at work! This is only the beginning; we don't know where the Holy Spirit is taking us. We are coming to a deeper understanding of what it means to be Catholic"* (Session X Group 1). The experience of the Synod demonstrated that many Catholics in North America are committed to the communal discernment necessary to discover where the Holy Spirit is guiding the Church in the present moment.

2. There was great gratitude for being together with other Catholics, who come from different parts of the continent, who are lay, religious, and clergy, each with their own ideas and views, yet all part of the one Church. As one group mentioned, *"The synodal process gives us life and also gives life to the Church; we are grateful for that gift"* (Session IV Group 8). The overwhelming sentiment from those who participated in the local, national, and now continental stages was an optimistic hope and uplifting joy at being able to participate and contribute. As one group noted, *"The word that kept coming up in our group was joy – to share, to listen, and to be together"* (Session III Group 10). The experience of being able to share and express both disappointments and blessings was seen as a real fruit of the synodal process. *"People would start with pains and resentments, but at the end of the process the Holy Spirit had opened people up"* (Session II Group 7).

The Virtual Continental Assemblies

3. The Continental Stage in North America consisted of twelve virtual assemblies (sessions): seven in English, three in Spanish, and two in French. Attending these assemblies were 931 delegates, with an almost equal split among delegates between women and men (50.2% / 49.8%, respectively). The 931 delegates ranged from a variety of vocations, with 391 lay women, 235 lay men, 148 priests (diocesan and religious), 77 women religious, and 4 non-ordained men religious. There also were 146 bishops who participated in one or more of the virtual assemblies. Almost 90% of the dioceses and eparchies in the United States and Canada (236/267) were represented in the assemblies. As one group reported, *"There was a lot of participation and diversity, yet there was still lots of convergence. The Spirit is at work"* (Session III Group 6).

4. The virtual format for the Continental Assembly was chosen to accommodate as many delegates as possible, including those who were unable to travel due to health or work, and to minimize financial burdens while maximizing participation of

the dioceses and eparchies in the United States and Canada. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic also influenced the decision to hold virtual assemblies. Feedback from the assemblies revealed mixed opinions on the value of a virtual format. Some were appreciative that the virtual assemblies allowed for greater participation. *“Some of the groups I attended were easily able to engage in a prayerful manner in spiritual conversation and the questions. There was a possibility of significant dissonant voices to be heard”* (Session I Feedback). Others felt that the spiritual conversations suffered due to the lack of in-person engagement. *“Zoom is a great tool and made it easier for more participation as travel may have limited those who could attend, but in-person is always so much better”* (Session II Feedback).

5. Each Ordinary was asked to select four to five delegates to be part of the Continental Assembly. These delegates, along with the bishops themselves, were then asked to register for one of the twelve virtual assemblies that would be the main component of the Continental Assembly. For each assembly, small listening circles were formed in such a manner that they consisted of a mix of delegates from Canada and the United States, dioceses and eparchies, men and women, generations, and cultural backgrounds. To aid the preparation for these assemblies, each delegate was sent a *Delegate Preparation Guide* (see Appendix C) that outlined the format of the assemblies and the *Spiritual Conversation Model*.

6. A week before each assembly, the delegates were introduced to one another via email. In this exchange, they were asked to share their name, diocese or eparchy, and how they had been engaged in the Synod thus far. There was a range of experience, from planning and facilitating listening sessions in their parish in the Diocesan Stage to the virtual assemblies being one of their first encounters with the Synod. Many exchanged warm wishes along with their hopes and prayers for the upcoming assemblies. While not always effective, overall, these introductions were helpful.

7. Each of the twelve virtual assemblies began with the *Adsumus* prayer, followed by time together in small group listening circles (147 in total). These small groups followed the *Spiritual Conversation Model*, as suggested by the Secretariat for the General Synod. After the small group discussions, everyone returned to the larger group to share the fruits of the conversations, there was a reflection from DCS #25-26, and there was a period of silence (see Appendix D for the format of these discussions). While some delegates noted that the spiritual conversations had the potential to be more enriching if they had been in person, many others observed that the Spirit was present in the virtual assemblies. *“I am very grateful for the opportunity to participate in the synodal process and truly appreciate the efforts of those who organized the virtual gatherings. While there certainly were limitations because the sessions were virtual, nevertheless, I do believe it was a good experience and could sense the Holy Spirit at work”* (Session III Feedback). *“The very real feeling of the guiding presence of the Holy Spirit is its greatest strength”* (Session VIII Feedback).

8. The North American Synod Team (see Appendix A), in a spirit of co-responsibility,

relied upon the delegates to facilitate and report back the fruits of the listening circles at the plenary portion of the Continental Assemblies. This process achieved varying degrees of success, depending on the preparation of the participants. Nonetheless, the methodology offered the delegates an opportunity for formation in synodality. All of the delegates were given resources explaining the Spiritual Conversation Model, and a webinar on this topic was offered to those who volunteered to facilitate a listening circle; a recording of the webinar was made available to others.

9. The listening experienced by the delegates during the spiritual conversation was greatly appreciated. Many spoke of it with admiration, acknowledging that they had been transformed. Not only did the synodal experience create a space for them to speak freely, but it also provided an opportunity to be heard. For many it was a discovery, an illuminating experience. It filled them with joy, hope, and gratitude. *"The methodology that has emerged from the synodal process – particularly the spiritual conversations – is so important. We have learned that we **can** learn from listening. We hope this will continue! This is an empowering way to reach out and to attend to places of hurt"* (Session XII Group 2).

The Continental Debrief Session

10. After the completion of all twelve virtual assemblies, representatives from each met with the North American Synod Team, which was tasked with writing this report. At this "debriefing," the representatives shared the fruits of each of the twelve assemblies; common themes and experiences naturally emerged and were further discussed. In contrast to the virtual assemblies, the Debrief Session allowed the Synod Team to ask follow-up and clarification questions of the delegates. As will be seen below, what emerged from the assemblies was a recognition that there are strong tensions within the Church, but the delegates predominantly felt hope and encouragement and a desire for the synodal process to continue. At the Debrief Session, one delegate shared that she *"was very encouraged by the small groups; people are modeling synodality for themselves, and I can see that as a fruit of the process"* (Debrief Session).

The Continental Writing Retreat

11. For the composition of this document, the North American Synod Team began with a weeklong retreat. A word that frequently surfaced during the team's discernment at the retreat was "messiness." Synodality is not always easy to comprehend; it can also be seen to be a complicated process. As a participant at one of the virtual assemblies noted, *"People don't know what the Synod on Synodality is for. They don't understand the purpose, couldn't grasp what was trying to be achieved"* (Session XI Group 14). Yet, there was the simultaneous acknowledgement that trust in the Holy Spirit is crucial for the fruitfulness of the Synod. *"Maybe we need to admit that we're stuck here and that we don't exactly know where we're going, but it's okay because we're following the Holy Spirit! We must allow the Holy Spirit to take the lead to guide us to where we are meant to go!"* (Session XI Group 14). When there were moments of uncertainty, the Synod Team chose to trust the Holy Spirit and each other. Openness

to the Spirit is essential to being fruitful companions on the synodal path.

The North American Final Document

12. What follows is based on what was heard at the virtual assemblies. The North American Synod Team was composed of laity, priests, religious, and bishops from both Canada and the United States, who met together to reflect on what was shared and to discern not a plan or a project, but simply what has arisen from this journey so far. In order to further ensure that the *Final Document* was faithful to what was shared during the Continental Assembly and to foster co-responsible discernment, the Synod Team invited comments and reflections on a draft of this document from 25 delegates from Canada and 25 delegates from the United States. The document was subsequently revised in light of their contributions. Bishops designated by each episcopal conference validated and approved the *Final Document*.²

13. This report from the Continental Stage is North America's contribution to the larger, global discussion and discernment stage of the 2021-2024 Synod. The North American participants felt that the DCS reflected much of what the participants expressed during the diocesan and national stages of the Synod. The conversations at the Continental Stage focused on the intense need for the Church to become even more synodal. In summary, what was shared and what was heard at the Continental Stage was that by our common baptism, we are each **called by God and gifted by God with dignity**. This common baptism places us in **communion with Christ and one another**. The synodal journey thus far has made us more conscious of where the stresses on our communion lie. But it also has revealed that, as one delegate described it, *"the more we become missionary disciples the more we will address these challenges"* (Debrief Session). Our baptismal dignity is inseparable from our baptismal responsibility, which **sends us forth on mission**. *"Many times, we focus on the negative and forget the joy; the Spirit we experience in our core is to be a missionary"* (Debrief Session).

Called and Gifted Through Baptism

14. Expressed over and over in the Continental Assembly of North America was the need to grow into a more synodal Church, starting with the recognition of the dignity of all the baptized. *"Walking together and expanding the tent envelops everyone. All the baptized have a right to be there"* (Session IX Group 2). Every human person possesses the dignity that comes from being created in the image of God. Through baptism, Christians share in an exalted dignity and vocation to holiness, with no inequality based on race, nationality, social condition, or sex, because we are one in Christ Jesus (Lumen Gentium 32; cf. Gal 3:28, Col 3:11). *"Synod was a good way for laity and clergy to realize that we are all the Church and that we have a co-*

² This included the CCCB Executive Committee and the USCCB Executive Committee.

responsibility for expanding the tent. If we aim to do that it will take all of us!" (Session VIII Group 3).

15. In the Continental Stage in North America, the joy of the participants was based in large part on their baptismal dignity being acknowledged through the synodal path. This awakened a desire for a greater recognition of, and opportunities for, co-responsibility within the Church and her mission. *"One of the challenges was the need to keep discovering and keep seeing what our baptismal call is inviting us to do"* (Debrief Session). At the same time, many of the conversations, like those held during the diocesan and national stages, referenced times when the Church's members failed to recognize this shared dignity. These failures place stress on our communion with one another. *"Responding to Christ's message requires that we talk the talk and walk the walk. We all must respond to our universal call to holiness"* (Session VIII Group 10).

Co-responsibility

16. Our personal call to holiness arises from our baptismal dignity. We are called to a particular state of life and simultaneously to share in the mission of the Church. The call to holiness includes and endures for all the baptized, no matter their state in life. *"We should release the gifts of everyone"* (Debrief Session). As several delegates in the North American Continental Stage explained, this universal call to holiness is lived out in particular ways of service to the wider mission of the Church. *"We cannot always be all things to all people; some people have certain charisms and we need to divvy up the work"* (Debrief Session).

17. Frequently in the Continental Assembly, there was the desire for greater co-responsibility among the laity and the clergy, including bishops. *"We need to ground ourselves in the equal dignity of baptism. This is an entry point for co-responsibility"* (Session XII Group 2). An emphasis on our shared baptismal dignity allows us to see in each other a co-laborer who can be formed, equipped, and encouraged for mission. *"We are called to act co-responsibly in a synodal fashion, not to wait until we know how to do everything perfectly, but to walk together as imperfect people"* (Session II Group 6). When Church structures and practices are dynamic and able to move with the Holy Spirit, everyone is able to *"use their gifts in service of the Church and of each other"* (Session XII Group 4).

18. For many delegates, the experience of the synodal path was one that reignited their call to discipleship. *"Through the synodal process the Church is being lived out right now in front of us and we are experiencing it! We are excited about this. The Holy Spirit is moving in this process and giving us a common spirit of mission worldwide!"* (Session III Group 2). This co-responsible Church will challenge each of us and necessitate greater collaboration and communication among all the People of God. *"We must . . . reach out to everyone from every walk of life. The responsibility of ministry is not just for priests, but for each baptized person. This is a real space where we can allow women and some of the more marginalized folks in the Church to really take up leadership roles"* (Session XI Group 7).

Women

19. There can be no true co-responsibility in the Church without fully honoring the inherent dignity of women. The continental delegates recognized the crucial work women do to keep the Church *“alive and healthy”* (Session IV Group 8). Nonetheless, delegates also named women as a marginalized group in the Church. *“We have come a long way, but we deplore the fact that women cannot invest themselves fully”* (Session V Group 4). While clarity is still needed around exactly what a fully co-responsible Church looks like, delegates proposed the examination of a variety of aspects of Church life, including decision-making roles, leadership, and ordination. Central in the discernment of these questions is the faithful acknowledgment of women’s baptismal dignity. A frequently heard call was that *“more space needs to be opened for them, especially at decision-making tables”* (Session IV Group 8). The Church in North America was encouraged to *“recognize, discern, and promote the role of women . . . so that they may have a greater presence in the Church”* (Session IV Group 5).

Youth / Young People

20. Authentic acknowledgment and respect for the gifts and talents of young people is another vital aspect of a co-responsible Church in North America. *“We are often perceived as the future, but we are also the ‘now’ of the Church”* (Debrief Session). Many delegates lamented the absence of young people both in their parishes as well as in the Continental Assembly. *“We are concerned that young people are not at the table and we wonder how they are going to be represented in Rome. Not only people who work with young people but the young people themselves. They know their reality the best”* (Session VI Group 1). Empowering young people to more fully live out their baptismal dignity requires that we confront tensions within our communion as the Body of Christ. The *“gifts of young people are not always fully appreciated by older generations. We should appreciate the creativity and the ingenuity of young people”* (Session I Group 6).

Formation

21. The People of God participating in the Continental Stage in North America expressed a great longing for formation as the key to living out both their baptismal dignity and their duty in a co-responsible Church. Especially as a response to ongoing challenges – as well as the desire to further engage in the practice of synodality – formation arose as a fundamental requirement. *“The answer to that question that surfaced was the need for formation – formation for synodality, for listening deeply; formation for stretching as is alluded to in widening the tent”* (Session I Group 9). Delegates expressed the desire for the Church to further *“develop formation in order to know our faith better”* (Session V Group 7). There also was a special concern to better accompany youth throughout their formation process, fostering a bold curiosity about the Christian faith. *“Children who go through religious education come out wondering if there is even a God. Are they afraid to ask questions? If they are afraid to ask questions, they may be stunted in their ability to grow in their faith”* (Session VIII Group 7). This desire was intimately linked to the dignity of our baptism and the responsibility it entails. *“In sharing our faith, we – who are in the pews – we have to*

not only be able to share our faith but to understand it" (Session I Group 5).

22. Delegates expressed a desire for formation that is life-long and offered to all members of the communion of the baptized, whatever their vocation. This includes not only formation in the fundamental teachings of our faith, but also formation for synodality, co-responsibility, welcoming, and going out to the peripheries. *"A deeper formation allows us to present the beauty of our faith, rather than a list of rules. To go deeper and underneath it and be formed in a way that allows us to present the hows and whys"* (Session XII Group 6). Delegates were insistent that deeper formation is central to our ability to live out our baptismal dignity and strengthen communion with Christ and each other. *"How do we go about becoming a people that have a disposition of listening, of being synodal, of putting listening first?"* (Session III Group 8).

Communion with Christ and One Another

23. During the Continental Assembly, the North American Synod Team heard over and over again of the need within the synodal process to maintain the centrality of Christ, with whom we are all united by baptism. *"Jesus Christ [is] at the center of the tent"* (Session II Group 9). *"The Eucharist is the center of our lives"* (Session XI Group 4). *"The center of our faith is the person of Jesus Christ"* (Session XII Group 8). *"Jesus is the center pole of the tent that we must never lose sight of in what we do"* (Session III Group 16). Through baptism we are made members of the Body of Christ and are drawn into communion with one another.

24. Yet the synodal process of discernment in North America has revealed that the Church, like the larger society, is experiencing polarization and a strong pull towards fragmentation. This was a major theme throughout the diocesan, national, and continental stages of the Synod. As one delegate commented, *"The call to communion is something we need to make present in us and in our communities"* (Session XI Group 15). There was a recognition that we cannot fully live out our baptismal dignity and responsibility without addressing the areas where our communion with one another, and thereby our communion with Christ, is stressed almost to the breaking point. Several themes emerged that were common among all the virtual assemblies.

Trust and Credibility

25. A significant threat to communion within the Church is a lack of trust, especially between the bishops and the laity, but also between the clergy in general and the lay faithful. One of the major areas of tension in North America is the clergy sexual abuse crisis and its effects, which have created a loss of trust that cannot be overstated. Many people continue to carry the wounds of abuse and many others have lost their trust in the clergy and in the Church's institutions. To this reality, one must add that the historical wrongs found in the residential/boarding schools for Indigenous people, which also included abuse of all kinds. This only compounds the woundedness

of the Church and the lack of trust in its leaders. *"The sexual abuse crisis and the residential schools are so much a part of the reality of the Church; we have to be able to engage those questions and face those situations"* (Session II Group 9). Although it was acknowledged that Church leaders have done much to promote healing and prevent future abuses, it is apparent that more needs to be done to rebuild trust. As one delegate commented, *"There are different levels and degrees of engagement within the Church as an institution, but it has to start with healing and trust-building"* (Session II Group 8). Many of the listening sessions of the Synod called for a cultural change in the Church with a view to greater transparency, accountability, and co-responsibility. *"Synodality,"* it was seen by many, was *"a beautiful way to build trust through dialogue"* (Session XII Group 4).

Greater Inclusivity

26. In the Continental Assembly, as in our national reports, there was a deep desire for greater inclusivity and welcome within the Church. In fact, one of the major factors that was seen as breaking down communion was the experience of many that certain people or groups feel unwelcome in the Church. The groups named during the Continental Stage included women, young people, immigrants, racial or linguistic minorities, LGBTQ+ persons, people who are divorced and remarried without an annulment, and those with varying degrees of physical or mental abilities. While the reasons for experiencing the Church as inhospitable may vary, what is common is the Church's need to authentically honor the baptismal dignity of everyone. As one participant explained, *"we think we are welcoming, but we know that there are people who feel 'outside' the Church"* (Session III Group 12). Another suggested that this is because *"we get caught up in the minutiae of evaluating the worth of people on the margins"* (Session VIII Group 14). *"There is a need to differentiate between the importance of teaching and the need to welcome those into the Church, especially as it relates to our LGBTQ+ brothers and sisters"* (Session II Group 4).

27. Some participants in the synodal process reported on the profound sense of suffering of those prevented from receiving the Eucharist. While there are a variety of reasons for this reality, perhaps preeminent among them is Catholics who are divorced and remarried without an annulment, and others whose objective situation in life contradicts the beliefs and teachings of the Church. Additionally, some delegates spoke of those wounded by the limitations placed on the pre-conciliar Latin rite. Unfortunately, liturgy is not always experienced as unifying. *"We could find our unity in common prayer, but liturgy is one of the things that is divisive in the Church and we must break through that"* (Session X Group 18).

28. The listening sessions also produced ample examples of the longing to incorporate young people more fully in the life of the Church. As one group stated simply, the youth *"are indispensable"* (Session V Group 4). Practically all of the synodal consultations shared a deep ache in the wake of the departure of young people and viewed this as integrally connected to becoming a more inclusive Church. One group noted that there is a *"generational divide in communities – tension between younger*

and older members of the Church. This is something to pay attention to" (Session XI Group 9). The desire to be a more inclusive Church resonated throughout all the virtual assemblies. One delegate said, *"The Church must know how to be the family of God, to be open and receptive"* (Session IV Group 7).

Listening

29. Alongside the desire to be a more inclusive and welcoming Church was the need to understand how to be more hospitable, while maintaining and being true to Church teaching. *"There is tension between welcoming and formation in Church teaching. We need to keep in mind that Church teaching comes from the gospel – work must be done in that kind of hospitality"* (Session III Group 6). A key to solving this problem was seen in the ability to listen. One delegate reminds us that *"listening doesn't always mean you get the answer you are looking for"* (Session X Group 6), while another pointed out that listening helps us understand the perspectives of others and thereby welcome them (cf. Session III Group 12). Another proposed that we *"need to be inclusive and to love people enough to meet them where they are, but to love them enough not to leave them there"* (Session III Group 7).

30. A frequent theme heard during the assemblies was that *"tension is a part of life and will never be completely resolved. We must keep listening, but tension will always be part of our life. We need to be okay with that and allow the Holy Spirit to guide us through that"* (Session XI Group 11). The delegates reported that the Synod was an experience of both being heard and of listening. It is important that *"people have a chance to speak but also to be heard and validated, recognized"* (Session III Group 11).

Formation in Synodality

31. In the virtual assemblies there was discussion about the stress placed on our communion within the Church. There was a consensus that more formation in synodality is needed. *"We need formation on how to listen and accompany; resources that will help us grow as people"* (Session VI Group 4). The majority of the delegates agreed that in order to become a more listening Church, one that bolsters communion, more formation in how to be a synodal Church is crucial. *"How do we continue training ourselves, converting ourselves and others, to this synodal way?"* (Session 1 Group 12) was a frequent question.

32. Synodality is a great source of hope for renewing and strengthening communion. The hope is that by becoming more synodal, the Church, as one delegate described, would create *"safe places where people can ask their real questions about Church teaching without judgment or punishment"* (Session X Group 8). In describing the experience of the Synod, one delegate said, *"The most beautiful thing about this was that from every stage of listening, people responded in an extraordinary way. People felt listened to very well. We believe that the concept of synodality is a concept that must continue, that must become a way of life. We thank God for these fruits"* (Session VII Group 3). Such formation not only would aid the development of deeper bonds

of communion within the Church, but also would be a stimulus for evangelization and mission. As was discussed in one of the assemblies, *"We want our faithful to know that they are needed and wanted . . . Listening is the first part of evangelization; we are accompanying folks, meeting them where they are"* (Session VIII Group 2).

Sent Forth on Mission

33. Throughout the Continental Stage in North America, delegates recognized the duty of the communion of the baptized to go out on mission to the peripheries to proclaim the Gospel and care for those who are wounded and downtrodden. *"How beautiful the Church got to be by the wounded and the hurt! When the Church reaches out in times of disaster, that is a reminder that the Church is a place of compassion and care. Caring for people is a good way to welcome them in"* (Session I Group 4). Many recognized that the Church is at its best when walking alongside those forced to the margins of our society. It was recognized that for the Church to be truly missionary – to go out to the peripheries and to evangelize – what is needed is holistic formation in our baptismal dignity and calling, in co-responsibility, and in synodality. It also was recognized that in order to proclaim Christ effectively and clearly, the Church must be united. *"We must find the balance to proclaim Christ to others and be united as a Church rather than being fragmented into separate groups"* (Session VIII Group 8). With God's grace, this, in turn, will make for a stronger communion, allowing the Church to be a credible witness to Christ and a Church *en salida* (Spanish) or *en sortie* (French), i.e., a Church that "goes forth" (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium* 24).

34. As noted in an image from Isaiah 53, the Church *en salida* or *en sortie* requires us to leave the tent – to not just welcome people where we are but to seek them where they are. As one participant noted, *"We want to respect everyone's inherent dignity and meet people where they are. We want to do all this while remaining faithful to the teachings of the Church."* (Session X Group 13). Delegates expressed the desire to "nurture the joy of discipleship" (Session X Group 2) by accompanying those who experience alienation in our society. *"We are called to accompany marginalized people. How can we give the truth with compassion and get rid of the fear that parishioners have to go out and evangelize?"* (Session VI Group 3). For some, this means living even more deeply the truth of the Gospel. *"These people have not left the Church, but the Church has left them. How do we go out and minister to them and exude that joy?"* (Session II Group 8). The North American Synod Team heard repeatedly that central to this mission of accompaniment is Jesus Christ. *"This whole process of synodality must all be centered around Jesus Christ. It is Christ we are trying to live out in all our listening, accompanying, worship, participation"* (Session III Group 16).

Moving Out of the Tent

35. For many delegates, being a Church on mission is the natural outgrowth of synodality and co-responsibility. *"There is hope in trusting the Holy Spirit as we*

apply synodality to the local community. We are being called to have that missionary mindset to see the love of Christ and then go out and walk in friendship with those who are feeling marginalized and accompany them. . . What do co-responsibility and synodality look like in our lives to bring people to Christ?" (Session II Group 11). It was precisely the experience of synodality that, for many, renewed this call to discipleship and evangelization. "All people are called to mission and have something important to contribute to the life of the Church and the world. This is our opportunity to go out and share with others" (Session X Group 3). It also was expressed that moving forward, the Church in North America needs to "engage synodality as a missionary movement. Synodality leads to an encounter with the Lord and with truth" (Session I Group 15). For the Church in North America, synodality is inseparable from becoming a Church sent forth on mission. A delegate spoke of "the importance of authentically listening to each other and to reaching out to the peripheries, expanding our tent and embracing the reality that there is a place for everyone in this Church and that Jesus wants everyone to know him and receive his love" (Session I Group 10).

A Church in the World

36. Throughout the Continental Stage in North America, the tensions present within a Church sent out on mission in the world were apparent. "Consumerism and secularism have provided answers to questions we didn't know we were asking in ways that feel fulfilling but that really aren't. This false fulfillment will collapse and crumble, but the Church offers true fulfillment that will last. Economic/political upheaval are doing great damage, but as we all come – broken and sinful – to the Church, everyone must feel welcomed and at home" (Session XI Group 7). For some delegates, this tension created feelings of fear and discomfort. "There are tensions between letting the popular culture enter into the life of the parish. There is a tsunami of culture threatening to overwhelm us" (Session III Group 15). For others, this tension was understood as an opportunity to collaborate with other people of faith. "We don't live in Christendom anymore! We need to recognize that so that we can move forward. This should involve partnering with others. What does ecumenism look like right now? How can we work with people of other faiths?" (Session VIII Group 8). Delegates from the Continental Stage in North America are ready to embark on mission, while tending to inevitable discomfort. "Tension is conversion; it leads us to the openness of listening to the other, welcoming the marginalized, not rejecting those who come in the tent and receiving them. It creates tension; to want to receive people brings up the question of those who feel distant. How can we have this gift of helping them to approach without fear about their process of conversion to the teachings of the Church? We need to look for ways to help them" (Session VI Group 6). Navigating this tension is an important task for mission and evangelization in North America today.

Formation for Mission and Catholic Social Teaching

37. Proper formation is the key to embracing our baptismal call to go out on mission. As one delegate put it, we need to "recognize the importance of faith formation for our ability to be a missionary Church. We have to be adequately formed in our faith to bring it to others" (Session XI Group 11). There also was a desire among delegates

to understand more deeply the social mission of the Church. “There is a need for formation at all levels (clergy, laity, etc.). We need to be formed to understand our Catholic Social Teaching, to be leaders, and to be evangelizers” (Session XII Group 7). This formation in evangelization and Catholic Social Teaching is crucial to walking the synodal path. “We must embrace a missionary mindset and reach out to everyone from every walk of life. The responsibility of ministry is not just for priests, but for each baptized person” (Session XI Group 7). The duty to know and live the teachings of our Catholic faith, including the Church’s social teaching, flows from our baptism, but it is not always easy and requires intentional formation. “This isn’t so much about the what as about the how” (Session III Group 4).

Bishops’ Reflections on the Experience of Synodality in North America

38. This *Final Document* presents the response of the People of God in North America who participated in the Continental Stage of the Synod. As baptized members of the People of God, many bishops participated actively in this process. Many, however, particularly the lay faithful, expressed a longing to know how this synodal process was viewed by their bishops. Furthermore, in accordance with the methodological guidelines for the Continental Stage, bishops were “invited to meet at the end of the Continental Stage to collegially reread the lived synodal experience from the perspective of their specific charism and role” (DCS #108). Accordingly, what follows is an insight into the reflections and experiences of the many bishops who participated during the Continental Stage of the synodal process, as well as those who participated in the drafting of the *Final Document*.

39. During the course of the Continental Stage, 146 bishops from Canada and the United States participated in at least one of the virtual assemblies. Of these, with rare exceptions, they shared in the full two and one-half hour session, which included spiritual conversation in small groups. Some participated in small groups by being dispersed at random into the general mix of participants. The great majority, however, participated in small groups made up of other bishops from Canada and the United States. The bishops who participated in the small group spiritual conversations also participated in the plenary portion of the Continental Assemblies, heard what the other groups shared, and reported back to the wider body the fruits of their own spiritual conversations as bishops.

40. Some of the bishops commented that it would have been preferable for all of the participating bishops to have been placed in the randomly mixed small groups, as it would have provided another opportunity for bishops to listen and share within a setting more representative of the full body of the Church. Other bishops, however, commented on their appreciation of having a sustained time of small group reflection

with other bishops about their experiences of the synodal process thus far. It often was mentioned that it has been rare for bishops to have an opportunity to listen to and share with other bishops about their synodal experiences. Further, it was frequently noted that the opportunity to hear and discuss with bishops from both Canada and the United States together was a tremendous grace, unique in the history of the two episcopal conferences.

41. In addition, the eight bishops from the United States and Canada who were members of the North American Synod Team had an opportunity to prayerfully reflect together on the experience of collegiality and synodality in North America. These reflections will be summarized at the conclusion of this section.

42. During the Continental consultations, the bishops expressed their experience of synodality at the Diocesan Stage as a great grace, although often challenging, and as a learning experience. They frequently expressed their joy at participating in their home dioceses by prayerful listening and dialoguing with their own people. In this sense, the bishops shared in the joy that the wider body of participants also expressed. “[We are] grateful for the opportunity for fraternal dialogue. This echoes the positive reaction of the faithful to the listening process” (Session X Group 18). Likewise, many bishops expressed the same kinds of uncertainties and ambiguities about “where all of this is going” that many participants at all levels of the consultative process mentioned. “Many of our people expressed gratitude at being asked to participate. [But they asked] what are the next steps? Where do we go from here?” (Session XII Group 8).

43. The participating bishops conveyed appreciation for the pathway of patient listening and the dialogue it opened. “Small groups make **such** a huge difference, even among bishops, because this is where dialogue can begin. This must continue!” (Session VIII Group 16). “For some people, a listening session was the first opportunity they had ever had of speaking directly to a bishop!” (Session X Group 15). Yet there is a general recognition of the challenges that still face us. “This is a great process for us all to participate in; there is still a need for the wider Church to understand what synodality is all about” (Session III Group 16). Indeed, the listening sessions in the local Churches caused bishops to reflect on the structural challenges that make it difficult to sustain this style in a consistent way. “Has the Church been so organized that it becomes difficult to speak to it? The Church has organizationally isolated itself from the people of God” (Session III Group 17). “Synodality is the way forward, but it is not an easy way” (Session III Group 18).

44. Concerning the DCS, some bishops remarked that it provided a rare window for the Church in North America to hear voices from the Church experiencing great trials and even persecution. “We feel gratitude that the process has helped us to see the witness of the whole Church, the suffering Church that is persecuted in other countries” (Session VI Group 6). “Our concern should be for the Church around the world, not just our own dioceses” (Session VI Group 6). This made the sharing of

common concerns across very different global situations all the more striking. *“The synodal documents expanded our consciousness about the realities of life in the Church in different places in the world. Also bringing our attention back to our own situation in the local Churches and to see the commonalities we all share”* (Session XI Group 15).

45. The bishops reflected frequently on what they heard during the various consultative phases, from the diocesan through the national and continental stages. They noted gratefully the resonances that were shared throughout the synodal process. This included the joy of the baptized at being asked to participate and share their perspectives, as well as the call to co-responsibility. It also included hearing the many pains and tensions expressed by participants. This has been of immense value. *“The openness that the synodal process should bring about for everyone is to listen and hear what is hurting people and what needs healing. [We should be asking] what is helpful and what does this mean for reconciliation?”* (Session XI Group 16). *“People of God have concerns across the board and we need to listen and accompany better”* (Session III Group 18).

46. *“The great opportunity we have now as bishops is to transmit, to share our experience of conversion. Our faithful see the process as something difficult, [but] we must reflect on whether we are giving witness of conversion for the laity. We can continue to grow as a synodal Church, have the gift of being able to dialogue and change the culture of the Church, listen to the voice of the Spirit in order to walk together”* (Session VI Group 6).

47. The week-long writing retreat offered the participating bishops from Canada and the United States an opportunity for a sustained reflection on the synodal experience in North America. For them the continental retreat was a valuable experience of collegiality. It was a fruitful challenge for these two countries to address common experiences as well as to explore the many nuances and varieties of circumstances in each one. Through this challenge there has been growth in mutual understanding and in the sense of having a unique ecclesial bond. The bishops openly wondered, however, about how it might have been a further grace also to have walked and worked together with the Episcopal Conference of Mexico. While it is clearly understood why Mexico collaborated on the Continental level with the countries of Central and South America, it was acknowledged that the North American ecclesial context is deeply impacted by the faith and practice of the Church in Mexico, and the Church in Mexico is deeply affected by the Church in the United States and Canada.

48. During their meeting on the final day of the writing retreat, the bishops observed that *“our people are interested in where we are going with this. Synodality is an adventure and we aren’t very familiar with it. We do have the experience of parish pastoral councils, presbyteral councils, and diocesan pastoral councils, but this is different, bigger. How can we teach it and learn it? We need to do more with our people – listen to them more to aid our discernment; sit down with them and discuss*

the religious life in the diocese. We cannot just sit in the office and make important decisions by ourselves.” The bishops were grateful for the spiritual conversations and prayer that were present throughout the synodal endeavor. They also noted that this aspect, and its relation to ecclesial discernment, is vital for living the way of the Church that avoids the polarizing habits of the wider society in North America. *“If we are going to be people of dialogue, we have to first have a dialogue with God; synodality needs to be based on a dialogue with Scripture and the Lord.”* The bishops also stated a desire to promote much-needed formation in Scriptural prayer and discernment. *“Much of the anxiety around the Synod comes from a misunderstanding of what discernment actually entails.”*

49. The bishops also noted that the great majority of our people had little or no direct contact with the synodal process and are unsure of their role in it. Likewise, many are unsure of the discerning role of the local bishop and the college of bishops in union with the Pope as the process unfolds.

50. As a learning experience, the bishops noted that *“we are recalibrating; how can we do the synodal process better?”* This flowed from a recognition that the process undertaken with great generosity and creativity also revealed our weaknesses. We can and must do better in consulting those who are poor, migrant communities, Indigenous peoples, and racial minorities in our communities, and the many others who are wounded in the Church and in society.

51. The relative absence of priests also was noticeable in this process. The bishops acknowledged that it is their responsibility to address this in the future, both by example and by conveying the transparency and spiritual/pastoral fruitfulness of synodality. *“We need to be more intentional in working with our priests and parish leadership on synodality.”* The circumstances are somewhat different in the northern dioceses of Canada, where *“the majority of bishops have [a very small number of] priests in the diocese . . . So the relationship between bishops and priests and bishops and the people is closer. Under these circumstances, the bishop can’t just do what he wants to do with a parish. He must do it together with the clergy and the people.”* Bishops need to do a better job of modeling synodality by listening, conversing, and discerning together.

52. There is a concern about the danger of false or unrealistic expectations regarding what the synodal process is meant to be and to “produce.” Western, North American culture automatically thinks in terms both of measurable results and of winners and losers, and the Church’s voice can be drowned out by that competitive impulse. Nevertheless, the bishops felt that they must show a different way, one that promotes our common baptism, our communion in the Lord, and our will to work together to address the challenges we face, which is led by the Spirit and is faithful to the Lord Jesus. *“Bishops must simply do the best we can in the synodal process and be authentic and honest. We must be transparent. Bishops need to reveal themselves more. We need to recognize the need for conversion all the way around (bishops,*

priest, laity). *We can't control the outcome of this process. Bishops cannot regain credibility without acting credibly.*"

53. The bishops noted the importance of the national syntheses as well as this continental Final Document. They view them as documents that serve to reflect back to our local communities what was said and heard in the synodal consultations. This is especially important in acknowledging that as the Church in Canada and the United States, we heard those who feel wounded or cast aside by the Church. This does not solve the issues or heal the wounds, but it is an important beginning. *"The Indigenous want to know that the Church knows. This needs to be in the document. We must let them know that we understand the issues they are dealing with in their daily lives, and we are listening to them."* A woman who is a leader in her Indigenous community told a Canadian bishop, *"Don't give up on us. Yes, we are grieving and, yes, we are angry, but don't give up on us."* This aspect of the synodal experience also applies in addressing the anger and distrust caused by the ongoing effects of the sexual abuse crisis. The bishops ask also that the people not give up on us.

Priorities Directed to the October 2023 Gathering of the Synod in Rome

54. The Church in North America has experienced a significant moment of joy and hope in the journey along the synodal path. Gathered in a spirit of prayerful listening, local communities in our dioceses have expressed their joys and their anxieties. The path led initially to shared spiritual conversations in each of our countries, and then to similar, mutual conversations by delegates from the United States and Canada. During the Continental Assembly, many resonances and tensions were expressed, all of which were spoken out of a great love for Christ Jesus and his Church. The North American Synod Team labored to give a synthetic account of the richness of the conversations. The Synod Team has gathered the principal themes that emerged from our Continental Assembly and now propose them for further consideration at the Synodal Assembly to be held in Rome in October 2023.

1. **Integration of synodal consultation in the local Churches. This would include formation both in synodality and in the spirituality of discernment.** Although the synodal way was experienced with such joy on our continent by those who participated, we acknowledge that it is just the beginning. Much work remains to be done to integrate the synodal style of consultation at the level of the local Churches, as well as at the national and continental levels, to increase participation and reach many in our communities who have not yet even heard of synodality. This includes particular attention to the spiritual formation necessary for personal and communal discernment. We also urge that formation in the synodal style be encouraged and guided, so that it may be properly understood.

Many who chose not to participate conceive of it as a competitive model, opposing laity to clergy. Others see it as insufficiently clear in its methodology, ecclesiology, and aims. Nevertheless, there is the practical matter of rethinking our diocesan and national ecclesial practices and/or structures in a way that truly prioritizes the synodal style.

II. The challenge of welcoming those who feel excluded from participation in the life of the Church in a manner that is authentic and faithful to the Gospel and the Catholic faith weighs heavily on the hearts of our people.

This tension in individuals and in communities was spoken of often. Our people perceive that welcoming and serving the wounded and isolated in the world and in the Church is an essential aspect of the mission given to us by the Lord Jesus; yet they also observe that the new complexity of issues before us requires discernment, because it implies both new pastoral initiatives and fidelity to the kerygma that we are to announce publicly. Hence, many asked what is meant by “radical inclusion,” and what are its pastoral and even doctrinal implications? The term itself elicited widely divergent reactions during our consultations. There also is a need for formation in how to be more welcoming of one another.

III. Co-responsibility.

A plea for renewed consideration of the mission of all the baptized, with specific attention given to particular vocations, was frequently mentioned. The discernment of how baptismal co-responsibility for the Church’s mission should be appreciated and achieved demands a better understanding of the roles of the laity in general, and of women and young people in particular. The theme of co-responsibility also touches the frequently raised issue of shared decision-making and the desire for more transparency in Church governance. Discerning a practical way forward on these issues will require a consideration of current canonical norms and ecclesial structures. Intimately connected to this theme is the need for more integral formation for the whole of Christian life.

IV. Addressing the unity and communion of the Church in the midst of various kinds of polarization and division.

Some polarizations arise within the Church, whereas others originate in the wider society and are transposed into the Church. Discernment is needed so that local Churches are better able to promote the ecclesiology of communion, rooted in baptism and nourished by the Eucharistic sacrifice. These must be seen as primary sources of our identity and unity as the People of God, and prior to any racial, ethnic, social, economic, political, or ideological differences. This is a challenge for our immediate future.

V. A Church that goes out to the peripheries.

Much of the conversation in the Continental Assembly concerned the internal workings of the Church, but we also are called to be outward looking. Our people speak often of having heard the call of Pope Francis to go out credibly to the margins. On our continent there is always a danger of forgetfulness of, and indifference to, those who are poor and ostracized. The North American Synod Team heard through the synodal consultations that our people are asking for more robust formation in

this kind of missionary activity. It is vital that the local Churches hear the call to assist the needs of the poor and marginalized churches around the world. This is a concern of the whole Church and should be articulated with greater urgency on the level of the Universal Church.

Conclusion

They were all in one place together. (Acts 2:1)

55. At the very beginning of the Church, at the time of Pentecost, there was confusion and fear and yet expectation and hope as well. This is true of every age, including our current time. The response of the Holy Spirit was to gather the Church together *in one place* and give them the ability to hear and understand the Gospel message. As the Church in North America continues to journey on the synodal path, we must imitate Mary, who was present at the first Pentecost and continually said “yes” to the invitation to contribute to the building up of the Kingdom of God. “We want to be like Mary” (Session I Group 2).

56. The gift of being gathered together in the Holy Spirit was experienced again by the Church in Canada and the United States during the Continental Stage. There was great gratitude for being in one place, that is, being (virtually) together with other Catholics, who come from different parts of Canada and the United States, who are lay, religious, and clergy, each with their own ideas and views, yet all part of the one Church. “*I am thankful for the time and effort taken to facilitate this process. It gives me hope that we can move forward to healing and rebuilding trust with the Church and among our brothers and sisters*” (Session II Feedback).

57. The gift of being together in one place and listening to each other is perhaps the best lesson learned during the Continental Stage in North America. As one participant said, “*People enjoyed sharing, rather than just being talked to – there is no going back*” (Session III Group 4). The benefits of being intentionally synodal was a common theme. As was mentioned by a bishops’ group, “*The synodal process has not been perfect, but it has been good*” (Session XII Group 8).