

**VOICES OF THE COMMUNITY:
THE SYNTHESIS OF HONG KONG FOR THE SYNODAL CHURCH**

INTRODUCTION

1. With forthright insight, Pope Francis is inviting us to journey together to build up a Synodal Church marked by **Communion, Participation and Mission**. The Holy Father reminds us that a Synodal Church is one with the firm conviction that “listening” is a process which involves mutual listening in which everyone listens and has something to learn. When we as the People of God listen to each other, we can then listen to the Holy Spirit and discern what He says to the Church (*Address at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops*, 17 October 2015).

2. **Purposes of this synthesis:** This synthesis reports on a participatory and inclusive ecclesial process that has offered members of the Church Community in Hong Kong the opportunity to express their views and to be heard. Through resonating the different voices of our Church Community, it is hoped that we can recall how the Spirit has guided our journey, so that we can better “scrutinize the signs of the times and interpret them in the light of the Gospel” (*GS*, no.4), living in communion with one another, building up a participatory Church and equipping ourselves better for our mission today.

METHOD

3. **Conversation and consultation:** We are all well aware that, instead of a collection of data obtained through questionnaires alone, this present consultation at the diocesan level is a mission that calls for the active participation of the entire Local Church.
 - a. In alignment with the principles of synodality, thirteen conferences with nearly 1,200 participants were held to consult Church members. Spiritual conversation, consisting of active listening and intentional speaking in small group sharing, were also organized and well received by the Community.

More than 170 spiritual conversational groups were run with more than 930 participants.

- b. After the conferences and spiritual conversations, the Church members were invited to respond to a questionnaire posted online by the Diocese. The questionnaire comprised of twenty-five open-ended questions, covering ten thematic nuclei as suggested by the *Preparatory Document* provided by the Holy See. With open-ended questions, the respondents were free to articulate their views and ideas without the constraint of predisposed assumptions.
4. **Collection of contributions:** The Church members were asked to reply to the Diocese by completing the online Google form, sending an email, or mailing a completed questionnaire form to the Diocese. These channels of communication have enabled us to receive good responses, with a total of 1,278 replies in a six-month period. Some Church members responded individually, while others were in groups, involving 150 Church groups, amounting to more than two thousand respondents.
 5. **Discernment on the collected materials:** A drafting group was set up and guided by Bishop Joseph Ha, OFM, Auxiliary Bishop and Vicar General of our Diocese. It included ten members with strong academic backgrounds (two with PhD and eight with Master's degrees). On average, they have served the Church for more than twenty years.
 - a. *Excel* files were used to organize this large dataset which were then coded (categorized) and analysed by the drafting group. The members, working in small teams, extracted concepts from the respondents' experiences, working through common themes they sorted out and discovering pluralistic viewpoints from the diverse groups in the Community.
 - b. Through a long process of re-reading, discernment and discussions, a draft of more than sixty pages was completed. The drafting group made use of

"thick description", reporting in a rich, dense, and detailed manner, in order to present the respondents' thoughts and meanings.

- c. The draft was then discussed by three focus-groups held by the faithful who have extensive experience in their devout service to the Church. It was then condensed and revised after it was examined by the Diocesan Curia .
- d. It is hoped that this report will unveil an understanding of the complexity and plurality in the voices of our Community. What follows is a collective discernment of these voices, organized in ten thematic nuclei reported in three sections:

COMMUNION

6. **The journeying companions:** "Companions on the journey" include all parties with different roles within the Diocese: individuals like the clergy, lay people and employed staff in Catholic organizations; groups, such as parishes, lay associations, schools, hospitals and charitable organizations. "Walking together" can be more strongly reflected through fraternal fellowship or spiritual practice with these "companions".
 - a. It is noteworthy that God is always mentioned by the respondents as "our Companion" on the journey.
 - b. "Companions on the journey" from outside the Church include non-Catholic family members, catechumens, the disabled, service users of Catholic organizations and schools. Some respondents suggest that individuals and organizations without religious background but sharing the same human values as ours can be our collaborators in serving the needy.
 - c. Those who feel themselves to be left out include the poor, the elderly, youths, sexual minorities, ethnic minorities, the sick, and the mentally or physically disabled. It is also mentioned that those who are usually quiet, introverted or may have difficulties in communicating with others are also marginalized in the Church.
 - d. It is suggested that the Church, being a major provider of social services in society, should also be the witness to God's love more expressively. On the

other hand, while in recent years the Church has engaged the faithful better by using information technology (IT) and social media, she should likewise maintain connection with and take good care of those who are deprived of IT means, such as the elderly and the poor.

7. **Listening:** The formal communication channels and platforms established by our Local Church, which aim at listening to the laity effectively, are generally acknowledged. Some respondents, nevertheless, point out that the Church seems to listen only to leaders and core members of Church groups. Communication with the laity in general has not been effective nor obvious.
- a. Some respondents see the hierarchical structure of the Church and clericalism as barriers to an effective communication between the clergy and the lay people. The Church should be more open-minded, humble and sincere in accepting and appreciating opinions from the laity. Church leaders should have more face-to-face encounters with the faithful and be responsive to their needs, especially those of women and the young people.
 - b. A number of respondents have expressed the view that they are not familiar with the mission and vision of different religious institutes. However, they agree that the charisms and spiritual experiences of consecrated persons are generally respected and well-integrated into the Church community, inspiring youngsters to follow religious vocations. The participation of consecrated persons in the Church's mission should be further enhanced.
 - c. Many respondents commend the Church for her solicitude for the minorities, namely, the disadvantaged and the marginalized, through the services of specific organizations and concern groups. Some respondents, nonetheless, suggest that the parish should be more proactive, listen more and understand more.
 - d. Some respondents find (Note: the verb "express" in the previous draft means "think" or "hold", but grammatically it cannot be used to link up with what follows; see also p.6, #94, first line and p.6 #10, first line) that the Church is not receptive to those who do not live according to the Church's moral

standards (Note: “code” would be preferable), such as the homosexuals or the divorced. It is suggested that the Church should extend more empathy, not judgment, to these people.

8. **Speaking out:** The respondents generally feel that the atmosphere for speaking out is lacking in the Church, and sometimes there are simply no communication channels. Some of them attribute this situation to inadequate leadership in the parish.
 - a. Some respondents state that there is scarcely authentic sharing in groups, but some find it positive and describe their experiences as “harmonious”. Others suggest that small group gatherings should be widely promoted.
 - b. Some respondents state that certain sectors, e.g. young people, are missed out in the communication process. Nevertheless, the recent connection model through technological means is appreciated.

9. **Celebrating:** It is acknowledged that prayers and liturgical celebrations have been inspiring and guiding the life and mission of our Community. Some respondents mention that they find it encouraging to take up different services and to play a part in liturgical celebrations. Formation is also provided for those who are committed to serving as ministers.
 - a. Some complain that there appears to be a culture of “club membership” where interested parishioners might find it difficult to join. A team-spirit of welcoming new participants, personal invitations, face-to-face contact, and priests’ trust will help.
 - b. It is emphasized that both catechumens and the faithful should be taught the significance of the liturgy and the sacraments for the Christian life. Thus continual and refreshing formation programmes on the liturgy and actual participation in liturgical celebrations are both indispensable.
 - c. While the Mass has rubrics that regulate its celebration, some respondents suggest to make it more inclusive and more adaptable to different Church members through the celebration of Family Masses, Children Masses, etc.

Lay liturgical assistants can be assigned to family units, parents and children can serve as lectors or altar servers, or be asked to bring the bread and wine to the altar at the Offertory.

- d. It is also suggested that the Church can design a variety of activities to attract different segments of the Community, such as having different forms of music and hymns for young people.
- e. Some respondents think that the community spirit manifested during the Sunday Eucharist can be extended to a gathering after Mass. For instance, a coffee corner or another venue for socializing can be set up within the church compound. Such facilities can become a more vital and powerful extension of the Sunday celebration that raise the community spirit.

MISSION

10. **Co-responsibility in the mission:** Many respondents agree that for active participation in the mission of the Church, continual formation for the laity is necessary, in particular, for the newly baptized. Online formation programmes will be instrumental in promoting the missionary role of the faithful, and skills or methods to evangelize should be taught.
- a. It has often been emphasized that priests are “the protagonists of the mission of the Church”. The Church, however, is nowadays expected “to lead the faithful, to hold formation programmes for them, to encourage and motivate them, and to teach them missionary skills”, so that they can share in the mission of the Church. Increasing the use of social media by the Diocese is recommended to strengthen the faith of the lay people and their sense of belonging to the Church Community, especially in the current delicate political environment of Hong Kong.
 - b. Some respondents emphasize the need for the Church to undergo courageous and important changes: Church management needs to be more open and systematic, and its superiors and leaders have to listen actively to the faithful. The Church Community should reflect the needs and aspirations of the faithful, and make a stand against the distortion of truth and the violation of

justice. With foresight the Local Church should consider and assess her orientation in the future, when religious freedom will likely be further restricted with changes in the political scenario.

11. **Dialogue between Church and Society:** Most of the respondents manifest a positive attitude to the dialogue between different Church communities, especially between those in Hong Kong and those in mainland China. They also see the need for more collaboration between different communities.
 - a. A vast majority of respondents propose to adopt a “top-down approach”, whereby the clergy and Church leaders take the lead for change, work hand in hand with all people of goodwill, and set good examples. Others opt for a “bottom-up approach”, i.e., to encourage the laity to be more proactive in making changes in the life and mission of the Church. According to some respondents, the laity consider their continual formation to be a priority, with a view to equipping themselves to face the challenges in society in a Christian way.
 - b. There is a suggestion that Church members, prior to reaching out to others for collaboration, should develop a better communication among themselves, so as to learn from each other and strengthen their own communion and solidarity.
 - c. There is a recommendation for promoting the collaboration with other sectors of society in charitable or social service projects. Cultural activities, such as concerts, seminars on social issues, online interreligious platform for sharing of different views, are also suggested. It is the desire of many respondents that our Church leaders will take the lead in carrying on the dialogue with different sectors of society, so that, among other things, they can come to a better understanding of the hopes and worries of marginalised people.

12. **With the other Christian denominations:** A significant number of respondents acknowledge that our Community maintains a friendly relationship with members

of other Christian Churches and Ecclesial Communities. Furthermore, many recognize such a relationship as committed and lasting. They are enthusiastic and expect the Church Community to be proactive in maintaining more sustainable relationships.

- a. Some observe that at present ecumenism is not considered a priority of the Church and that it might even have been overlooked by some Church members. Thus some respondents suggest that, with a prayerful and action-based commitment, more evangelization activities and events can be organized to foster closer relationships among Christian communities.
- b. Priority should be given to fellowship and collaboration in charitable services, rather than academic debates on theological differences. The Focolare Movement and the Taizé Community in Hong Kong are commended as good examples that can be followed.

PARTICIPATION

13. **Authority and participation:** A majority think that more frequent communication among Church members is very important. Our Bishops should reach out to the lay people as open-minded “active listeners”. Parish priests have the primary duty of providing a wholesome and friendly environment whereby parishioners are encouraged to speak out frankly and sincerely.

- a. Some respondents suggest that the Diocese may consider incorporating some elements of modern management into Church administration. For example, five-year strategic plans can be drawn up with clear and measurable goals, followed by an evaluation of the results of activities and the areas for improvement.
- b. There is a call for more training and formation for the lay people, such as discipleship training and servant leadership, so that they can participate more actively and fruitfully in evangelization. Parishioners, particularly those who are active, should also be well equipped for their evangelizing mission, and this culture for spreading the Gospel should be made more visible in the Church community.

- c. Basic ecclesial communities (basic Christian communities), which aim at widening participation and cultivating a closer relationship so as to enhance mutual understanding, are to be promoted. More resources should be invested in the training of trainers (e.g., in the area of human relationship skills) who can work as peer counsellors, mentors, and godparents.
 - d. Some comment that catechism classes are too knowledge-oriented and lack a culture of concern and solidarity. Since the Church is made up of basic communities of faith, the spirit of mutual care and concern among members should be cultivated, as well as their sense of belonging to the parish and to the Church. Besides, godparents and more mentors are needed to sustain the newly baptized in practising their faith, otherwise they will easily get lost in the secular world.
14. **Discerning and deciding:** About one-fifth of the respondents state that in their own communities, they have been holding meetings regularly to share, discuss, pray and meditate in order to discern the will of God. Decisions are usually made after a consensus has been reached. A few state that spiritual discernment is not practised in their community. Instead, a top-down approach is usually adopted, with decisions being made by clerics or by a few “experienced” parishioners. Some respondents comment that the opinions of small parishes, the quiet minority and young people tend to be neglected.
- a. The Church Hierarchy, which is built on Holy Orders and ecclesiastical administrative bodies, is strong in centralizing resources to achieve specific goals. However, many respondents see the need for the Church to be reformed to make way for more democratic mechanisms, since only then will the laity really “feel at home” in the Church. Making better use of social media, the diocesan weeklies, Facebook, WhatsApp groups and online questionnaires can help promote the transparency and accountability of the Church.
 - b. The clergy are expected to be humble, accessible and down-to-earth servant leaders. They should encourage more expression of opinions from the laity

and listen to the voices of the minority, especially those of the young people. Pastors can be equipped with training in psychology and counselling, in order to better serve the parishioners (particularly those with emotional and mental health issues).

- c. The laity are encouraged to have more self-reflection, be more open-minded, and be more active in taking up the services of the parish. The calling of the lay people should be elevated to the level of spiritual commitment, granted that traditionally they are passive in passing on their faith and they rely too much on priests. Hopefully, Church institutions and lay ministries can promote a culture of participation.
- d. Many believe that growth in prayer life and a deeper union with God is of prime importance to the faithful. Greater importance should be given to the spiritual formation of the lay people (e.g., through Bible reading, meditations and adoration of the Blessed Sacrament). Many express the view that “spiritual conversation” is an effective way for Church members to share and make discernment together, and that it should be further promoted.

15. **Forming ourselves in the spirit of synodality:** It is suggested that the Church can hold regular retreats, training, workshops, prayer meetings or seminars, so as to encourage the laity to express their views, to communicate with each other, and to engage in dialogue.

- a. In order to build up a stronger sense of belonging to the Church and a culture of accompaniment among the parishioners, the practice of attending Mass regularly in the same parish should be encouraged. By doing so, the lay people can be more rooted in a parish, where they can meet trusting friends and their identity can be firmly anchored. The laity, especially the newly baptized, need to be encouraged to join small communities (such as the basic Christian communities).
- b. In today’s secularized society, we have to promote faith formation starting from the kindergarten level. Faith formation for students in Catholic schools

is necessary, where Catholic teachers can act as leaders and role models by helping students to know more about the Church.

CONCLUSION

16. The purpose of the Synod is “to plant dreams, draw forth prophecies and visions, allow hope to flourish, inspire trust, bind up wounds, weave together relationships, awaken a dawn of hope, learn from one another and create a bright resourcefulness that will enlighten minds, warm hearts, give strength to our hands.” (POPE FRANCIS, *Address at the Opening of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, 3 October 2018*).
17. We should bear in mind that the voices we have heard in this consultation at the diocesan level were not unheard-of in the past nor are they or entirely new. We may have heard of them more or less, from someone or somewhere in the Church Community. In this consultation, however, it is the eagerness and sincerity demonstrated by the laity that we should pay serious attention to.
18. We are being repeatedly reminded by the respondents that the young people, who are like a treasure to the Church today and are supposed to be the future of the Church, are leaving us. Some respondents point out that the deep-rooted issues underlying the social events that have occurred in Hong Kong over the past three years still remain unresolved. Our young people might be thinking that the Church is not with them. In order to listen to them and understand them, more channels need to be re-energized (such as the Catholic societies in local schools or universities), and youth ministries need to be introduced with more creative approaches. Some respondents propose the establishment of an academy of fine arts to train musicians and artists for the Church.
19. The communication between the Church and the young people is an issue that the Church must address. For instance, many young people do not trust the Catholic Church any more, because they find her too conservative in her teaching on

homosexuality. They sympathize with the LGBT people and it is their perception that these people are being marginalized and unfairly treated by the Church.

20. There is a tremendous demand on the part of the laity for spiritual formation and biblical knowledge. Some respondents suggest that the laity (especially the young people) should be given more solid formation on the liturgy, so that they will not be mere passive participants. In this respect, the liturgy can be a way to bring more of our faithful back to the Church.
21. Many respondents suggest that there should be more variety in the Eucharistic celebrations, provided that the authentic Church teaching is preserved. They suggest to organize the Eucharistic celebration in modified formats, for children, families and young people.
22. It is always recommended that the Church should organize more small groups (cell groups) that meet frequently, as these groups provide a favourable setting for Church members to share their faith experiences, thereby enhancing their sense of belonging to the Church and giving a strong community support to individuals.
23. It is also noted that, regrettably, the good experiences of different parishes are seldom shared in the Church Community. This calls for the establishment of a centralized network on information about the Catholic Church. The use of social media should be encouraged.
24. The respondents have repeatedly pointed out that priests should set good examples for the laity. Some respondents, like many other people, have criticized the Church for being “bureaucratic”. This criticism, on the one hand, poses a great challenge to priests and to the Church. Yet, on the other hand, it is telling us that such an inadequacy on the part of the Church is a good starting point for her self-reform.