

Introduction

On December 16, 2022, Voice of the Faithful (VOTF) received an invitation¹ from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) Synod Team to participate in the Continental phase of the Synodal process. We decided that prior consultation with our members would provide the most accurate input from our organization for the USCCB listening session (scheduled for February 8, 2023). To collect this input, we held two synodal meetings focused on the Continental Stage working document (DCS) titled “Enlarge the space of your tent.” Our invitation to the sessions included a link to the DCS and a request for members to read and pray with the document prior to the session. We also asked them to review the U.S. national document from the Diocesan Stage and the report VOTF sent in response to the working document from the Diocesan phase.

Eighty persons participated in the two overall sessions, during which participants broke into smaller groups of eight to ten persons each so that all could be heard. Scribes gathered notes from each small group, reported the comments in a closing session, and then sent the reports for us to report during the USCCB Region XVI Listening Session.

On February 8, 2023, the President and Executive Director of VOTF both participated, along with more than 100 other organizational representatives, in the USCCB Region XVI 2½-hour session. At the end of this session, we were informed that no summary or synopsis of our discussions and none of the information shared by the participants during the day would be part of future discussions.² Based on that information, we have prepared this document.

Results of Our Sessions

VOTF presented three questions to our participants:

- After having read and prayed with the DCS, which intuitions resonate most strongly with the lived experiences and realities of the Church in your continent? Which experiences are new or illuminating to you?
- After having read and prayed with the DCS, what substantial tensions or divergences emerge as particularly important in your continent’s perspective? Consequently, what are the questions or issues that should be addressed and considered in the next steps of the process?
- Looking at what emerges from the previous two questions, what are the priorities, recurring themes, and calls to action that can be shared with other local Churches around the world and discussed during the First Session of the Synodal Assembly in October 2023?

¹ See the addendum for the full text of this email.

² See Addendum 2 for a follow-up email questioning the transparency of the process.

Question 1

- ❖ Members were overwhelmingly surprised that so many of the issues we had identified in our first synodal meetings were shared by others around the world. The complaints, desires, and hopes across the world were similar.

“I really thought that people who thought like I did were a small minority because we get so much resistance from the U.S. bishops. Now I find out that people around the world think the same way: concerned about women’s roles in the church, the marginalization of the LGBTQ+ and divorced, homilies being uninspired, and the need for a focus on social justice.”

This was a common sentiment voiced by many.

- ❖ Participants affirmed numerous points in the DCS:
 - Emphasis on radical inclusion resonated: to be a welcoming and accepting church rather than judging and gatekeeping, which is how they see a large number of U.S. bishops behaving.
 - The voices of women and the marginalized must be heard.
 - Women must attain equal participation in the guidance of the Church.
 - We must continue moving toward a synodal church rather than seeing the Synod as a one-time process. They cautioned that for this to work it must take root on the local level, in every diocese and parish.
 - The Church must fully and finally address the clerical abuse crisis.
 - Eliminating clericalism is a critical step in solving many of the problems in the Church today.
 - Listening skills are essential; training and practice are needed for both clergy and lay people.
 - Unity does not mean homogenization—this element from the DCS resonated with many. We need to be accepting of differences and not use them to divide us. We must be able to engage each other respectfully even when we have different views of what Church is.

Question 2

- ❖ All the participants were very concerned with the divided Church in the United States. Many knew of the synodal process only because they are members of lay organizations that are engaged; they had not been informed by their dioceses or their pastors. Some said that when they asked their pastors about the Synod, the priests were uninformed. Others said they participated in sessions run by lay organizations because although their dioceses and parishes acknowledged the Synod, they did not engage the laity in the synodal process itself. As discussed above, although lay people found comfort in the fact that many of our concerns

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have been raised by others around the world, the power retained by the cadre of U.S. bishops who oppose synodality is a cause for great concern.

- ❖ A consistent message about the need for the Church to be welcoming is at odds with the gatekeeper role played by many bishops in the United States. These gatekeepers bring secular politics to the communion table, expect forgiveness for the way they handled clergy sex abuse of children, and yet exhibit no forgiveness for the divorced or those who do not share their views on political issues.
- ❖ Some issues that cause significant tension in the U.S. Church were not adequately addressed in the DCS: human sexuality, celibacy, and contraception.
- ❖ Although mentioned by others across the world, our group felt that there must be even more focus on the formation of priests and laity.

Question 3

The Church needs to enlarge the tent but too many current leaders in the U.S. and in the Curia have sewn all the flaps closed to homosexuals, to women, to the divorced, to those who support freedom of choice on reproduction, and to people at the edges of society. To address these problems, those who participated in discussions made these points:

- ❖ The role of women **MUST** be addressed in the first round of changes that are instituted as a result of the Synod. Ordaining women deacons would be a good first step. If the role of women is not addressed, many will feel that real listening is not happening because this matter was a universal concern.
- ❖ The Church needs to go out to the people where they are and then listen. Jesus did not wait for people to come to him.
- ❖ Formation is needed around the Church's social doctrine. This will energize both laity and clerics.
- ❖ The Church needs to do a better job regarding the sex abuse scandals and make real reparations. Until this happens young people will not come back. There were sick priests who committed these acts; they need to be removed from ministry and reported to secular authorities. However, also guilty are the bishops who covered up the crimes and moved the priests to other parishes; strong action must be taken against them.
- ❖ The demographics of those involved in the synodal process should be part of future reports.

Conclusion

There is comfort in knowing that others throughout the world share our concerns, hopes, and desires. To show that the bishops are truly listening, action must be taken on some key issues, including women's roles, youth participation, and the formation of priests to include the practice of "servant leadership."

Participants overall were delighted to be asked to participate. However, at the end of the meeting of Region XVI in the United States, the representatives from the USCCB told all who participated that there would be no summary and that the information shared would not be included in future synodal discussions. This action on the part of the USCCB not only confirmed some participants' worst fears that powerful bishops and cardinals in the United States oppose Pope Francis and the Synodal Process, but also appeared to have engaged us under false pretenses.

The addenda to this report show the communications that led to this feeling among some of those who attended the Region XVI session set up during the Continental Stage by the USCCB Synod Team. The timelines involved are included.

For the Synodal Process to work, communication must be open and honest.

Addendum 1: Invitation

Email received by Donna B. Doucette, which was sent by Richard Coll to a “blind list” of the lay-reform and other church organizations who had participated in the Diocesan Stage.

From: USCCB Synod Team <synod@usccb.org>
Date: December 16, 2022 at 1:55:34 PM EST
To: Richard Coll <RColl@usccb.org>
Subject: INVITATION: "Region XVI" Synod Listening Session - Wednesday, February 8, 2023 3 PM ET

Dear Friends,

We are delighted to let you know that the US Synod Team will be convening a listening session with organizations in “Region XVI.” The session will be on **Wednesday, February 8, 2023 from 3-5:30 PM ET**. Zoom details and a preparation guide will be shared after registration closes.

This is an invitation-only listening session. Your organization has been invited to participate because you submitted a synthesis through “Region XVI” in the Diocesan Phase or your organization is an important partner for the vibrancy and vitality of synodality in the United States. If you know of an organization that did not receive this invitation, but would be interested in participating, please have them email synod@usccb.org.

The listening session will use the [spiritual conversation model](#) and reflect upon the three questions adapted from the [Document for the Continental Stage](#) #106. You will be placed into groups of 6-8 and introduced to one another via email prior to the listening session. We are asking for volunteers to act as facilitators for the listening circles and representatives to share the fruits of the conversation in plenary.

Organizations are asked to register no more than two participants. Staff of your organization and/or members of the communities you serve are welcome. The registration deadline is **Tuesday, January 17, 2023**. You can register here: <https://airtable.com/shrEUnOPsPRcX9Enc> Please only share this link with those who will represent your organization.

Please feel free to reach out if you have any questions.

Thank you for your continued companionship on the synodal path!

Peace,

Julia McStravog & Richard Coll

USCCB Synod 2021-2024

synod@usccb.org

www.usccb.org/synod

[Document for the Continental Stage](#)

[US National Synthesis](#)

[US Regional Syntheses](#)

[For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission](#)

[Preparatory Document](#)

[Vademecum](#)

Vatican Synod Social Media: [Instagram](#) [Twitter](#) [Facebook](#) [Flickr](#) [Synodal Journey](#) Newsletter

Addendum 2: Follow-up Email & Timelines

The following notes are excerpts from a string of emails shared among some who attended the Region XVI listening session convened by the USCCB on Feb. 8, 2023. For exact wording of the original invitation, please see Addendum 1.

February 8, 2023

To USCCB Synod Team:

Thank you so much for producing this listening session today. I was pretty high on it until the very end - at which point it fell flat when I heard:

1. No next steps.
2. That we were not part of the official Synod (did I hear that correctly?)

Please, if you will, would you share how our Region XVI conclusions compared to the other “official” 15 Regions? It would be so helpful.

If you do not have that information, could you tell me who does?

From member of the USCCB Synod Team:

This is a discernment process, and our Team also needs to discern its way forward. Like it's been said, there are no predetermined outcomes. I also said that I would keep “Region XVI” up-to-date as we move forward, as we have been doing throughout the entire synodal process.

It was made clear from the beginning of the invitations that these sessions were special US listening sessions and not an official part of the Continental Phase. We must collaborate with Canada for the Continental Phase, and cannot use materials in which they did not collaborate/participate. This special session was for the US Synod Team and our discernment as the synod moves forward in the United States.

You can read the US Regional Syntheses from the Diocesan Phase [here](#). The notes we have taken are not official reports, but are for the discernment of the US Synod Team.

I hope this clears things up.

Related to the above is the timeline for the U.S.-Canada Continental discernment. Please note that despite the invitation (Addendum 1) to attend a “listening session” similar to those conducted during the Diocesan Stage, the date set for the consultation was already past the dates established for the U.S.-Canada listening sessions of the Continental Stage.

The paragraphs below are from a [Vatican News story](#) published in February just prior to the start of the Bishops Writing Retreat in Orlando, Florida, Feb. 13-17. Note the time period for the virtual Continental Assemblies for U.S.-Canada.

... The delegates will be drawing on the feedback obtained through a total of twelve Virtual Continental Assemblies held between **14 December and 25 January** in French, Spanish and English.

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Synod organizers in North America hoped this format would enable people to participate who would otherwise not have been able to due to the cost of travel and time constraints. People who participated in these virtual assemblies were able to give their feedback regarding the questions raised in the [Working Document for the Continental Stage](#) of the Synod.

These virtual assemblies were attended by 3-5 delegates chosen by the bishops who represented the 267 dioceses located in the United States and Canada. Each bishop was invited to participate in one of the virtual assemblies of their choice. Each virtual assembly included prayer, spiritual reflection, small group listening circles, and large group sharing. ...