



# Update on the Archbishop's Diocesan Synod for 2020

by Steve Schneider and Trish Babina (delegates to the Synod from St. Thomas)

## **Background**

As you may or may not remember, back in 2018 (pre-pandemic), Archbishop Blair began canvassing the parishes in our Archdiocese via “deanery-wide” meetings to get our input on three questions that were posed – what we (the Archdiocese) are doing well, what can be improved, and what should we be doing that we are not doing. As you can imagine, the Bishop heard an earful at these meetings (I know, I was at the one that was held at St. Thomas). Attendees did not have to mention who they were or what parish they belonged to (unless they wanted to). The Bishop also requested input from clergy as well (in separate sessions). Notes of these responses were taken at all of these meetings and compiled by Fr. Jeffery Romans (Pastor of St. Bridget’s in Cheshire, who would later become the Secretary of the 2020 Synod). These notes, we later found out, formed the basis for the 23 “propositions” that were discussed at the actual Synod weekend in 2019 (more on that later).

In late 2018, a request was put out to all the parishes in the Archdiocese to submit two parishioners to represent their church for the upcoming 2020 Synod. We (Steve and Trish) were selected as representatives for St. Thomas. Being a Synod “delegate” (as we were called), though, meant that we had to agree to certain time commitments and undergo some preparation before the “real” Synod weekend in Oct. 2019. This preparation consisted of studying, praying, and attending several weekend sessions/retreats run by Bishop Blair and Fr. Romans several months before the actual Synod weekend.

## **Pre-Synod Preparation Meetings in 2019**

At the first preparation session on Saturday, March 30, 2019 (held at St. Thomas Becket Church in Cheshire), all the Synod delegates gathered for the first time (about 250 people, representing all parishes, all diocesan ministries, and all religious communities in the diocese). We heard from four speakers that morning. First, Fr. Romans gave us a background of what a Synod is (with the last one held in our diocese in 1989). Archbishop Blair then gave us the theme for this Synod as “Go and Grow”, which has a missionary impulse to it. He was asking us through this Synod (and basing it on our own faith journey), what can we recommend as practical, spirit-filled ideas to help energize the church and guide him in overseeing his flock (community of churches) over the next 20-25 years. The third speaker was Fr. Steven Boguslawski (Vicar General of the Diocese, and yes, the brother of consumer advocate Mike Boguslawski of “I’m in Your Corner” fame). He advised us that culture is the collective representation of the faith of the people living in it. Consequently, we should not be avoiding culture because of the secular things that are going around us, but, instead, be imparting a beneficial influence on culture as spreaders of the Good News. Finally we heard from Joan Kelly (PH.D., Instructor of Theology/Catholic History at Sacred Heart University), who reminded us that our Catholic history in the US and Connecticut is one we should be proud of. She gave a wonderful overview of the obstacles and hardships that Catholics had to endure to start parishes in the 1700’s and 1800’s, but it produced incredible “fruit” over the years, such as the creation of the Catholic educational system for K-12 and colleges/universities, Catholic hospitals, the Knights of Columbus, and other movements that have had a huge effect on our American society. At the end of this meeting, we were given the *Catholic Catechism for Adult* and Pope Francis’ encyclical *The Joy of the Gospel*. We were told to be very familiar with its contents by the time of our next meeting in June.

The second preparation session was held on Saturday, June 8, 2019 at St. Bridget's School, Cheshire. After a few opening remarks and prayer from Fr. Romans and Bishop Blair, we heard from Peter Burak, who gave two talks in the morning. Peter Burak is a 2010 graduate of Franciscan University of Steubenville, has a Master's in Theology from Sacred Heart Major Seminary, and is a leader of a young adult outreach of the Renewal Ministries. Based on his experience working with young adults, he provided us some insight about evangelization and how the church is perceived by those that are unsure if they really belong to the church. He asked us some tough questions: Why is so hard to share our faith with others and to the generations after us? What does an authentic disciple think about when confronted with an issue or a decision? Why is evangelization not done by most of us, or is so difficult for us to start? And finally, what does the Synod's mission of "Grow and Go" really mean to us? At the end, we were given a copy of *Living as Missionary Disciples*. This was created by the US Conference of Catholic Bishops and discusses the "New Evangelization" first expressed by Paul VI in 1971 and expanded in more detail by John Paul II in 1983. We are also told to read "A Letter to a Suffering Church" by Bishop Robert Barron that described his reactions/reflections to the sexual abuse scandal in the church.

The last preparation session was on Sunday, September 8, 2019 at St. Bridget's Church in Cheshire. We met at 3:00 PM for Holy Hour and mass. Final materials for the October Synod meeting were handed out then (all contained in a three-inch "Go and Grow" green binder, which included the 23 "propositions" that we would discuss in October). New to this session was the request for all of us to fast every Friday for the nine weeks leading up to the Synod weekend in October.

The one thing, though, common to all the preparation sessions, was that we were reminded to go to confession, spend an hour a week in adoration in front of the Eucharist, and read the scriptures throughout this "preparation phase" for the Synod.

### ***Actual Synod Weekend (Oct. 25-27, 2019)***

The Synod weekend was held at the Marriot Farmington (CT) and ran from Friday night to Sunday afternoon. You had the choice to stay there for the weekend (at your expense), or commute there daily for each session (the latter was chosen by us as delegates). There was a Mass on Saturday morning at St. Jerome's church and a closing Mass on Sunday afternoon at St. Francis of Assisi church (both in New Britain). After the Sunday mass, a cocktail reception was held back at the Marriott for us to enjoy the company of the other delegates/priests/Synod staff in a relaxed atmosphere.

The responses from the deanery-wide meetings with parishioners/priests earlier in 2018 were compiled into 23 "propositions" that were presented during the weekend sessions. These propositions were grouped into four categories:

- **Encountering Christ** (three propositions) - Friday evening session
- **Becoming Missionary Disciples** (seven propositions) - Saturday morning session
- **Sent on a Mission** (six propositions) - Saturday afternoon session
- **Collaborating in the Local Church** (seven propositions) - Sunday morning session

The four sessions in the weekend all followed the same pattern:

1. A speaker spoke to the whole assembly of delegates on the overall theme for that session.
2. The delegates broke into small groups of about 25-30 to discuss the “propositions” for that session.
3. Each small group session was about a 75-90 minutes long, led by a moderator, a time keeper, and a secretary.
4. Each proposition was read.
5. Time was allotted to comment if we agreed to the proposition as stated or if we needed to make changes.
6. After agreeing on any edits to the proposition, we could then make suggestions on how to implement the proposition on an individual, family, parish, and archdiocese basis.
7. We repeated steps 4- 6 until we finished all propositions for that session.
8. At the end of each session, a volunteer was chosen. This volunteer went over the notes recorded by the session secretary so he/she could then present our changes and suggestions to the propositions immediately after that session to the entire delegation.
9. All the delegates reassembled in the main ballroom. The volunteers from each group lined up at the podium and presented their “findings” in 1- 2 minute summaries. This was all being recorded, so these additional comments could be added to the official responses for each small group (and later consolidated as required).

The speakers that talked to the whole delegation before each session included:

**Encountering Christ** (*Bishop David Ricken, Diocese of Green Bay, WI*) – His main point is to be truly open to change in ourselves and be humble. This will allow us to see God’s grace easier and to respond more authentically. We need this first before we can begin to help the church.

**Becoming Missionary Disciples** (*Julianne Stanz, Director of Discipleship and Leadership Development for the Diocese of Green Bay and a consultant to the USCCB Committee on Catechesis and Evangelization*) – She focused on the four segments of becoming a missionary disciple (drawn in a circle):

1. Discover Jesus
2. Follow Jesus
3. Worship Jesus
4. Share Jesus

We do this on an individual, family, parish, and archdiocese basis. Also, when it comes to influencing others about our faith (especially the young), *culture beats strategy*. In other words, our living the faith needs to be affecting the culture rather than us devising strategies to “recruit” others to our faith.

**Sent on a Mission** (*Jack Beers, Dynamic Catholic, Parish Co-Leader*) – He covered evangelization in several ways. Our goal is to transform parishes, with less “words” (preaching) and more authentic engagement. Those that are most authentic and most effective for transformation are practicing: Praying, Studying, Generosity, and Evangelizing. On a parish level, decide who your audience is that you want to engage and really get to know who they are. This involves:

- What is your definition of evangelization?
- What is your definition of a “normal” parishioner? Are you striving for a missionary disciple?
- Do you have the “right people” sitting on the bus in the “right seats”? That is, are the people assigned to do a task the ones who have the strength and enthusiasm to do it?
- What are the priorities of the parish? What do we tackle, first, second, etc.?
- What is your path for discipleship?
- Who owns the “messaging” in your parish beyond Sunday (mass)?
- Why should I evangelize?
- How do I make evangelization simple?
- How do we keep Catholics growing?
- How do we know how we are doing? Do we have a way to measure progress?

**Collaborating in the Local Church** (*Peter Burak, Leadership team of i.d.9:16, a young adult outreach of the Renewal Ministries*) – He clarified these points when thinking of the church:

- The parish is not a church building
- We think in terms of a “scarcity” mindset; where churches are “stealing” parishioners from each other; instead of growing our members
- We need to celebrate the growth of others – no room for jealousy.
- The church is people on the move; modern day “Israelites”
- It is a family of families, where we are helping each other reach salvation The values we need to bring when collaborating in our church include our:
  1. Humility – realizing the truth about seeing ourselves the way God sees ourselves (don’t focus on us). Speak truth in love.
  2. Forgiveness - the Holy Spirit can move when the shackles of unforgiveness are removed.
  3. Zeal – channeled passion for the gospel (not the intensity). Like a furnace, we need to let the “heat” (good news) escape. We also need to validate that zeal in others.

He also discussed five ways to transform the local church:

1. Plan for the future, but cede to the moment. Don’t ignore the short-term goals at the expense of the long-term goals, and *vice-versa*.
2. Celebrate the fruits (not “successes”), and embrace the “failures” (things not according to your plans) for your rebuilding/evangelization efforts. Avoid using the amount of money or the number of people as metrics of your “fruits”. Celebrate the “action”, not the “results”.
3. Recognize who is, and who is not, the “enemy”. People are not the enemy; the devil is (people’s behavior). Use prayer and fasting to help you discern this important point.
4. Expect God to move. This will be evident in personal testimony and the workings of the Holy Spirit. Don’t deny the power of the Gospel. Confirm the Word in the hearts of those receiving the Word.
5. Keep it simple - it is not easy. Do the basics. Rediscover the simplicity of the Gospel. He quoted Corinthians 2: 6-10.

Before the Synod ended, Bishop Blair reminded the delegates that we do not have to wait for the final report to be released before we can start putting into action any inspired ideas that came as the result of the Synod. The final report was scheduled to be released on May 31, 2020 at a special Pentecost Sunday Diocesan mass at the Oakdale Theatre in Wallingford, but that was postponed due to the pandemic.

***\*\*Next Step - Special Diocesan Mass and Final Report (Postponed from last May)\*\*  
(Friday, August 13, 2021 at 6:30 PM at the Oakdale Theatre in Wallingford, CT)***

This special mass is open to all parishioners (as well as the Synod delegates) in the Hartford Archdiocese. This is the venue where Bishop Blair will publically celebrate the input he has received from all who participated in the Synod and communicate to “his flock” the findings that came as a result. We are all hoping that in this celebration of the Eucharist, something inspiring may be revealed to you and me. Please join us for this special Synod mass – the very future of our parish (and diocese) is at stake. If there is enough interest, we can form a carpool to leave from St. Thomas to attend.