

A CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE

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Synodal Insights for Catholic Education - the Story of the Synod

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The Story of the Synod: A Journey of Listening and Grace

Stories have the power to shape understanding and inspire action. As we reflect on the Synod and its meaning for Catholic education, we are reminded why storytelling matters.

“Good stories capture attention and engage the imagination. A good reason to tell a story is to respond to people who question our message or our mission. We learn from Jesus, the master storyteller.”

Just as Jesus used stories to bring meaning to light, the Synod's journey is itself a story, one of listening, communal discernment, transformation and grace.

Where the Synod Story Begins

On October 10, 2021, Pope Francis launched the Synod on Synodality, inviting Catholics worldwide to reflect on what works well, what needs attention, and their hopes for the Church's future.

The method chosen was ***Conversation in the Spirit***, a process rooted in prayerful listening and communal discernment. Its purpose was to understand the lived experiences of laity, clergy, religious, and all who journey with the Church through various ministries and initiatives.

Across parishes, dioceses, provinces, and continents, listening sessions unfolded. From these conversations emerged a global synthesis: *“Enlarge the space of your tent”* (*Is 54:2*). This document shaped the questions that would guide Synod delegates during the October 2023 and October 2024 assemblies.

In April 2023, Pope Francis made a surprising announcement: seventy lay people, primarily women and young adults, would join bishops and cardinals as voting delegates. Ten would be invited by the Pope from each of seven continental regions. In July 2023, an unexpected message arrived: I had been selected as one of the delegates.

Conversation in the Spirit

While this is a story about the Synod, its central character is ***Conversation in the Spirit***, the prayerful methodology that guided over 350 delegates as we listened, discerned, and worked together.

This Synod was unique not only because lay people served as voting delegates alongside bishops and cardinals, but also because of its format. Lecture-style seating gave way to round tables. Listening, not presenting, took centre stage.

Throughout the eight weeks of the Synod, table groupings changed with each module, connecting us with delegates from across the globe. My first table included cardinals and bishops from France, Malaysia, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Australia, the United States, Trinidad & Tobago, and India.

As Pope Francis said in his opening address to the assembly:

"You have come from different roads and from different churches, each bearing your own questions and hopes. I am certain the Spirit will guide us and give us the grace to move forward together... Let us experience this moment of encounter, listening and reflection as a season of grace."

When Process Became Transformation

At the close of the first session, our Canadian delegation gathered over plates of Italian pasta and reflected on what we wished to share when we returned home. We all agreed: it was the process itself—*Conversation in the Spirit*.

This process not only shaped our experience; it made possible all that we accomplished. A format relatively new to most became the foundation of what is now known as the *synodal process*. We witnessed firsthand its grace and transformative potential.

Through weeks of prayerful listening and communal discernment, a synthesis of our shared work took shape, developing from table reflections to a final text. Each paragraph of the final document was approved by no fewer than 80% of the delegates, with the majority receiving well over 90% support.

Enduring Gifts

At the conclusion of the Synod in October 2024, our assembly presented the Church with two lasting gifts: the **Final Document**, immediately approved by Pope Francis and the process that made it possible—*Conversation in the Spirit*.

As delegates, we left Rome with cherished friendships and lasting memories. At our opening retreat, Father Timothy Radcliffe said: “*This synod will be fruitful if it leads us into a deeper friendship with the Lord and with each other.*” It truly did.

The Process: Walking the Path of *Conversation in the Spirit*

At its heart, ***Conversation in the Spirit*** is a structured approach of prayer, attentive listening, silence, and discernment. Guided by the Holy Spirit, this process moved us from individual reflection to shared discernment.

Listening to the Holy Spirit – *Preparing the Heart*

Before every conversation, we entered into prayer, reflected on Scripture, and prayerfully considered the guiding questions before us. Each delegate prepared a four-minute reflection to share with the group.

Insight: *Prayerful preparation laid the foundation for meaningful and Spirit-led conversations.*

Listening to the Other – *Beyond Responding*

The *first round* invited every delegate to speak without interruption. After all had shared, we entered a period of silence. The silence created space for prayer, setting aside judgments, and listening for the Spirit’s guidance.

Insight: *Listening without the urge to respond created space for deeper understanding.*

Reflecting on What We Heard – *Moving Past Debate*

The *second round* asked: *What resonated? What challenged us?* Silence again followed, creating space for prayerful reflection. Instead of debating, we were invited to reflect and, in that quiet, new connections and possibilities began to emerge. As Mother Maria Ignazia Angelini shared with us: “*If you love truth, be a lover of silence and God grant you to experience that which is generated by silence.*” (St. Isaac of Niniveh)

Insight: *Points of convergence and divergence surfaced and new possibilities emerged.*

Shared Discernment – *Where is the Holy Spirit Leading Us?*

By the *third round*, we transitioned from personal reflection to shared discernment, asking, “*Where is the Spirit leading us?*” Through these rounds, we moved from ‘me’ (personal reflection), to ‘you’ (attentive listening), to ‘us’ (shared discernment).

Insight: *Through shared discernment, our individual reflections were transformed into a common sense of direction.*

Bringing Meaning to Light: A Grace Received – A Grace Now Shared

In its introduction, the Synod's Synthesis Report captures something of our shared experience.

“...Our personal stories will enrich this synthesis with the tenor of lived experience, which no document can adequately capture. We will thus be able to testify to the richness of our experience **of listening, of silence and sharing, and of prayer**. We will also share that it is not easy to listen to different ideas without immediately giving in to the temptation to counter the views expressed; or to offer one’s contribution as a gift for others and not as something absolute or certain. However, **the Lord’s grace has led us to achieve this**, despite our limitations, and this has been for us a true experience of synodality. By having practiced it, we understand it better and have grasped its value.”²

Listening. Silence. Sharing. Prayer. These were not mere steps in a process; they were the path by which the Spirit guided our conversations and deepened our discernment. **A grace received; a grace now shared.**

Applying Conversation in the Spirit: Opportunities for Catholic Education

Whether serving as a classroom teacher, school leader, or board administrator, **Conversation in the Spirit** offers a powerful framework for listening and discerning a shared path forward.

Applying Conversation in the Spirit: From Classroom to Board

Context	Participants	Conversation in the Spirit Examples of Guiding Questions
Classroom: Students	<i>Science / Geography students</i>	<p>After reading <i>Laudato Si</i>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What has <i>Laudato Si</i> helped you notice about the way humans affect the Earth and its ecosystems? • How can we, as a school community, work together to care for our common home in meaningful and practical ways?
School: Student Council	<i>Student Council Members</i>	<p>Welcoming new students:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where do we notice new students feeling comfortable? • Where might they feel alone? • What actions can we take to help them feel they belong?
School: Teachers and Administrators	<i>Grade 9 Subject Teachers, Special Education Teachers, Guidance Teachers, Administration</i>	<p>Assessing student progress after the first reporting period:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What strengths have you observed in Grade 9 students during these first months? • Where are they struggling to make progress? • What steps can we take to provide further support?
Board: Senior Leadership	<i>Senior Leadership Team</i>	<p>Assessing strategic priorities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What evidence are we seeing; what are we hearing from schools; from our departments? • Where are we noticing areas of struggle? • Given what we have heard, what actions are needed now and what longer-term strategies should we consider?
Board: Committees	<i>District Parent Involvement Committee</i>	<p>Engaging parents:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What strategies are helping to engage parents in supporting their children’s learning? • What needs are we hearing from parents? • What opportunities do we see to deepen parent engagement?

Appendix: A Guide to Support *Conversation in the Spirit*

To ensure the listening session is a safe space where everyone is treated with reverence and respect:

- Listen to the views of others with an open mind
- Everyone is encouraged to speak
- One person speaks at a time
- Limit how long you speak so everyone has time to share
- Pause at intervals for reflection and prayer
- Maintain confidentiality: do not attribute any comments to individuals or groups

Conversation in the Spirit Rounds

1. Preparation

Before the session, each person reflects on their experience and prepares their contribution to the guiding question(s) provided.

2. First Round – “Listening to the Other” – Listening vs. Responding

- Each person speaks without interruption
- No discussion or response take place in this round
- Silence follows for reflection and prayer

3. Second Round – “Reflecting on What we Heard” – Reflection vs. Debate

- Each person shares what resonated most from what they heard in the first round.
 - What struck you?
 - What moved you during the silence?
- Once again, silence follows to allow time for reflection

4. Third Round – “Shared Discernment” – Where is the Holy Spirit Leading Us?

- Together the table group identifies points of convergence and common themes that emerged
- The notetaker asks the group to identify two or three key points that will be recorded and shared with the larger group

References

1. *Towards Full Presence: A Pastoral Reflection on Engagement with Social Media*, May 2023
2. *XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops First Session*, October 2023

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