

Synthesis Report

Synodal Consultation for Formation and Vocation Ministers

On March 20, 2024, the Religious Formation Conference (RFC) and the National Religious Vocation Conference (NRVC) sponsored a synodal consultation for formation and vocation ministers. 256 registered for the event and 105 participated. Participants are current members of the NRVC and RFC from around the United States, Bangladesh, Canada, Peru, and Singapore, including brothers, sisters, religious priests, and lay ecclesial ministers. The religious institutes represented were apostolic, cloistered, evangelical, missionary, monastic, and societies of apostolic life. The consultation took place for 1.5 hours in the evening by Zoom.

After a welcome and opening prayer, Sister Teresa Maya, CCVI offered brief input on synodality. Two rounds of small breakout group listening circles ensued before a closing prayer concluded the session.

The first breakout was asked to reflect on the following two questions:

- *How can we be a synodal Church in mission and help all the baptized to respond to the call to proclaim the Gospel and to live as a community of love and mercy in Christ?*
- *How does our mission and ministry of accompaniment inform the Synodal journey?*

The second breakout was asked to reflect on the following two questions:

- *Through our unique lens as formation and vocation ministers, what does this perspective offer the Church in this Synodal moment?*
- *What tools/recommendations might we employ to better equip and serve God's people?*

Each breakout group of 4-5 people was encouraged to report themes from their conversations in the chat field. These notes make up the input offered below.

Themes and topics that surfaced:

1. **Baptism** and the **universal call to holiness** undergird and buttress full and active participation in the Church. We all constitute the “Body of Christ” and the “People of God.”
2. “**God loves each of us**” and the fact that we have all been “**called by name**” is foundational to religious life’s witness and its prophetic role in the Church and world.
3. There exists a strong desire to “**attune to the Spirit**” and be attentive to “the Holy Spirit planting seeds of hope, vision, and dreams among us and inviting those who may not feel invited to come as an important part of the Church.”

4. There is a sense that “being open to change and being changed” begins with oneself and necessitates an **orientation of humility** and a **posture of agency** (e.g., acting to bring about the reign of God in the here and now). This was referred to in the consultation as the importance of “self-knowledge” and “knowing ourselves and our relationship with God.”
5. Prayer, reflection, and a “contemplative culture” are vital to discerning one’s vocation and making meaning of one’s purpose and life path. “**Contemplative listening**” integrates a prayerful approach, intentional listening, and purposeful decision-making (action). “Listening circles are an exercise we have been doing for a long time and can be a witness to the Church and to those who have no faith at all to heal relationships.”
6. **Active listening** is key, as is the concept and praxis of **discernment**, in religious life’s approach to “walking with.” “Listening is part of the DNA in vocation ministry and is what we can offer the Church.”
7. **Accompaniment** further informs the journey forward, a call to “be with” in a way that embraces “**horizontal sharing**” instead of “hierarchical sharing.” Similarly, there surfaced a desire to embrace **mutuality** and the dignity and giftedness we all bring to relationships.
8. Walking with and being with requires a **nonjudgmental stance** and an **attitude of openness** to other’s experience of God. Many spoke of “listening without judgment” as central to listening and accompanying well, **humbly pondering**, “How do we hold differences in tension and still respect each other?”
9. There is a need to **step out of comfort zones**, occupy marginal spaces, and cultivate spaces of welcome and inclusion. “**Meeting people where they are**” surfaced repeatedly, as did asking, “Who or what is missing?” “Living the **Gospel values of inclusivity and love for all**” are related to a “Church of hospitality” open to everyone and the world’s pressing needs, “particularly the refugees or new immigrants.”
10. Related to authentic hospitality, religious life’s increasingly **intercultural**, **inter-congregational**, and **intergenerational** character inform change and the emerging future. This “inter” approach seems to be a particular gift religious life can offer the Church and the world. A “**culture of encounter**,” as Pope Francis has emphasized, opens itself up to the dignity and diversity of all God’s people.
11. The role of **community** and religious life’s “**convening**” praxis (e.g., chapters, assemblies, etc.) is another gift religious life offers the larger Church and world. If given more intentional access, those in consecrated life could better leverage this ability among entities that value being more **discernment-focused** and consensus-driven. This was also talked about as the “art of gathering” to co-create meaning. “We can encourage everyone to have a place and a voice, **validate women**, and others on the edges.”

12. In addition to the emphases on mutuality and co-creating, **co-responsibility** and **shared leadership** surfaced as a significant theme. “We’re comfortable with the idea of team leadership.” In many religious congregations and organizations, this shift to a shared / co-responsible approach has already begun.
13. Among vocation ministers there existed a deep concern for and desire to **accompany young people** yearning for life meaning, purpose, community, and belonging. Described as a “real hunger,” the young church values voice, a spiritual life, and the opportunity to journey through “pains and fears.”
14. Formation ministers spoke about the need to understand their ministry as being **broader than congregational formators** to those involved with adult formation in general: “So much of what we do in formation is broader than religious life.”
15. Religious life through the **diversity of charisms is vital** to the Church and the world. There is a need for “religious life to have more of a place in seminary formation programs” for diocesan seminarians to learn from and interact with the hundreds of religious institutes of sisters, brothers, and religious priests.
16. **Peer supervision** was raised as an important tool for formation and vocation ministers. This ensures accountability, ethical practice, and ongoing development and growth.
17. Participants referenced the fact that religious life itself gives witness to the synodal path by offering a **complementary approach** that gifts the Church a way of life rooted in God’s love, a faith that seeks justice, and a call to be prophets of peace. How can we embrace being “signs of hope?”
18. Vocation and formation directors offer a unique lens of **lifelong discernment** and assist others in discernment to respond to God’s endless call.
19. Some shared the importance of “**curiosity**” and “**imagination**” in envisioning the future God is calling us toward. What creative possibilities has the Spirit planted among us?
20. The sense of gratitude for this synodal gathering was evident as participants expressed appreciation for the format of **respectful listening** by bringing together two national organizations focused on formation and vocation.

Key quotes:

1. “We are called to be listeners and have a listening and discerning heart.”
2. “It is not us but the Spirit who does the real work.”
3. “Understand what baptism means and live out of baptism to be community with one another.”
4. “The synodal Church is enlivening us as the Body of Christ, we are missionary disciples, moving out of our comfort zones into the periphery.”

5. “The Holy Spirit is planting seeds of hope, vision, and dreams among us and inviting those who may not feel invited to come as an important part of the Church.”
6. “Everyone spoke to the idea of “WITH” as the keyword.”
7. “We can offer our experience of working with a young Church in various ministries and be a voice for the young Church.”
8. “Allow our lives to be engaged in the lives of others so we can truly journey together as a Church who listens and cares.”
9. “Listening circles are an exercise we have been doing for a long time and can be a witness to the Church and to those who have no faith at all.”
10. “Connection with others in the accompaniment process can inform the Synodal journey.”
11. “We are listening deeply to the dreams and desires and wounds of the young. It’s a privileged position. Listening is hard and we must always invoke the Spirit-essential.”
12. “We vocation directors have a lot to offer, but we also have to keep learning. Being open to new ways is very important.”
13. “So much of what we do in formation is much broader than religious life. We often simply enrich them in adult faith formation. This benefits a lot of people, not just those in religious life.”
14. “We are called to hear young people and to update our methods of formation to better respond to the needs of our time.”
15. “How do we hold differences in tension and still respect each other?”
16. “I felt the spirit moving in ‘What is missing?’ that is a dialogue with our Diocesan structures.”
17. “Our lifestyle shows what it looks like to be synodal, cross-congregationally too, in a rapidly changing reality. We can do this work together because we have the heart for this.”
18. “People are crying for hope and compassion. All the laity and people of God have this power. Do not be afraid to invite.”
19. “Our role of accompaniment, to be with, walk with, is naturally a skillset/perspective that we have (as formation and vocation directors).”
20. “We as Religious have a prophetic role and voice which we must use to help move the Church. This includes deep listening and working together with those who have hidden gifts due to disabilities or other areas. We do this through living our charisms.”

To learn more about this consultation or for follow-up questions, contact Sister Deborah Marie Borneman, SS.C.M., [NRVC](#) Director of Mission Integration (debbiesscm@nrvc.net), or Ryan Hoffmann, D.Min., [RFC](#) Executive Director (rhoffmann@relforcon.org), by email.