



# Diocese of Brownsville

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Office of the Bishop

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September 2, 2022

To the People of God in the Diocese of Brownsville,

Together with Catholic Dioceses throughout the world, the Diocese of Brownsville recently concluded its synodal consultative sessions in the parishes and missions, schools, and other centers of pastoral activity within the Diocese. I am grateful for the generous work and missionary zeal of the pastors, delegates, and many volunteers that organized and participated in the listening sessions. Your voices and input have helped illuminate our discernment and have contributed to how we, as a diocesan church, can better hear the voice of the Holy Spirit in the prayerful voices of our people. Our parishes, missions, schools, religious communities, and apostolic movements reported consulting over 8,600 people since we began this journey in October 2021.

After the local parish and mission consultations, teams of delegates prepared syntheses of parish and mission church consultations, and these in turn were the basis for a diocesan synthesis of the consultative voices who participated. It is with great joy, therefore, that I share this diocesan synthesis report of the diocesan consultations with the whole diocese. The synthesis has been prepared in both English and Spanish. The diocesan synthesis is a tangible sign and fruit of our synodal journey of prayer, listening, and dialoguing together. This document, together with the syntheses generated in local parishes, can aid in our local discernment moving forward.

The many occasions for listening within the diocese during the consultative phase have served as moments of encounter with the Lord and with one another in a spirit of respect and attentiveness. This, in turn, has initiated important conversations on many levels of the local Church. What comes through most clearly is the great desire of our people to work together to heal what wounds have afflicted us, and to become more effective signs of the presence of Christ in our communities. There is also a great desire to work together, despite our differences, and with the help of the Holy Spirit, for a renewed vigor in the evangelizing and teaching mission that Christ Himself has entrusted to us.

This synodal journey is not concluded, rather it now enters a new phase. An ongoing challenge for us is to continue efforts to reach out to those who were not reached during our first synodal consultations. There are still many who feel distant or exiled from the Church; we must continue to invite their participation. The stronger we are in our communion with one

another and our communion with the Lord Jesus, the stronger we are in the grace God gives us to fulfill the mission he gives us.

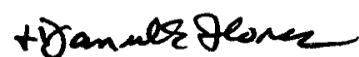
The next phase of the synodal work will involve a discernment about the priorities that have emerged from the local synod, and then how best to practically address them. Some hopes and needs expressed in the local consultations can be addressed by individuals and families, while others can be most effectively addressed at the parish, deanery, or diocesan level of the Church. Deciding about these matters will require prayer and continued consultation. Our response to these needs and hopes will rely on the Lord and his generosity and on our common efforts to work together in parishes, deaneries, and on the diocesan level to address the challenges our times present to us.

With the publication of this diocesan report, I invite parishes and missions, schools and centers of pastoral activity, clergy, laity and religious to continue to pray and dialogue about how to address our local challenges, and to reflect, and discern about the future we chart together as the Church of the Rio Grande Valley. I urge that our reflections together always be accompanied by frequent meditation on the Scriptures, particularly the Gospels, so that our hearts may be animated with the desires that animate the heart of Christ. And I ask everyone to pray that our way forward as a People of God in the Rio Grande Valley will be always marked by a deep love and fidelity to the Lord Jesus Himself.

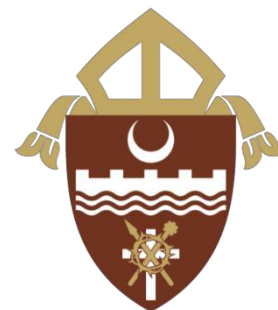
In the coming months, clergy and diocesan leaders, and consultative groups will gather to discern the priorities from the synthesis of consultations. On October 15, 2022, synod delegates will gather with myself and others to consider the response to and implementation of the diocesan synodal action. Parishes and missions are invited to engage in a similar discernment about how they will respond to their local findings and implement a pastoral way forward.

Let us continue to journey together towards deeper communion, fuller participation, and greater zeal in fulfilling our mission in our part of the world.

In Christ the Lord,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Daniel E. Flores".

Most Rev. Daniel E. Flores, S.T.D.  
Bishop of Brownsville



# **Diocese of Brownsville**

## **Synthesis of Diocesan Phase Consultations**

June 30, 2022

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## Important Note Regarding this Report

This synthesis report pulls together the various consultations with the People of God that were shared through parish and ministry listening sessions and activities throughout the Diocese of Brownsville. It does not seek to provide a plan of action or response to what was contributed. Corresponding action plans and priorities based on this report will be developed in the latter part of 2022.

## Introduction

### About the Diocese of Brownsville and the Rio Grande Valley

The Rio Grande Valley is located at the southernmost point of Texas. At the meeting point of Mexico and the USA, the four-county region called “the Valley” is one of the fastest growing areas of the United States. All four counties consistently have among the highest poverty rates of any counties in the United States with poverty rates over 30%. Together, the Rio Grande Valley has more than 1,000 *colonias* (residential subdivisions usually in unincorporated areas of a county lacking all or some of the basic services). It is a mission diocese (i.e., under-resourced and cannot sustain itself without outside funding) and also considered one of the largest Catholic areas in the United States based on population.

A rich and deep tradition of the Catholic faith has endured in the Rio Grande Valley for more than 500 years. The first seeds of the Catholic faith were planted in 1519 in the time of the Spanish Conquistadores. These seeds were later nurtured by the missionary work of many religious orders, most notably the Oblates of Mary Immaculate beginning in the mid-1800s. The teachings, rituals, and customs of the Catholic Church have been handed down continuously from generation to generation, fulfilling the mission that Christ entrusted to the apostles and to us.

The Catholic faith is deeply rooted in the Valley’s history and culture. While the area was part of the Vicariate Apostolic of Brownsville from 1874 to 1912, the Diocese of Brownsville was established on July 10, 1965, by Pope Paul VI. The ninth diocese in Texas was formed by detaching four counties – Cameron, Willacy, Hidalgo, and Starr – from the Diocese of Corpus Christi. Today, the Diocese of Brownsville includes more than a million Catholics, who worship in 72 parishes and 44 missions.

## Methodology

The XVI Synod of Bishops has a focus on synodality and invites consultations of the People of God from across the globe. The diocesan phase was animated by delegates and ministry leaders from parishes, missions, Catholic schools, religious communities, and apostolic movements. Over 350 delegates attended an opening session to inaugurate the beginning of our synodal path on October 30, 2021. Six online and in-person training sessions were hosted through November and December 2021. Most parish listening sessions began in January and continued through April 2022. Eight deanery meetings were held for delegates to share oral reports regarding their initial findings and their experiences. Each parish/mission had five minutes to report an overview of their listening sessions and highlights about what they were hearing from the community. This input proved invaluable as it provided a colorful context of the parish and its community.

Final written reports based on the findings of listening sessions and activities were submitted to the Diocese in May 2022. Over the course of a few months, more than 70 reports were submitted and over 8,600 people were consulted and participated in synodal listening sessions. Responses were collected primarily through parish listening sessions hosted by their delegates and ministry

leaders. The diocesan synod coordinator also worked to conduct listening sessions with priests, religious men and women, Catholic school principals, the neighboring Diocese of Matamoros, ecumenical/interfaith groups, and professional business leaders. These focused conversations helped make the synodal process inclusive of various voices that may not have been included in parish activities alone. The parish reporting is the largest volume of input throughout the synodal process.

A concluding session and Mass to mark the closing of the diocesan phase was celebrated Saturday, June 25, 2022, with pastors and delegates from across the Rio Grande Valley. Some delegates briefly shared a testimony of the fruits of the synod for themselves and their parish.

## Findings

### Synodal Process, Walking and Listening Together

Pastors and parish delegates expressed that their synodal listening sessions were most effective when marked by authentic listening and prioritizing the other's voice. It was described many times that it was a challenge to withhold their own personal insights or corrections. But in doing so, it allowed participants to share more deeply. Many delegates reported people were surprised by even the idea of the Church asking their insights and experiences.

It is noteworthy that many people spoke to the profound impact of the synodal process itself. There were a great number of responses that indicated the joy and timeliness of this synodal path. They shared profound moments and experiences of God and the Church in listening to people in listening sessions. These encounters were marked by a prayerful atmosphere that genuinely sought their perspective and insights.

Many pastors, delegates, and ministry leaders worked hard and with missionary zeal to involve as many people as possible. A parish delegate in the rural community of La Sara described the power of a personal invitation. He shared that making personal phone calls and invitations to listening sessions was an effective way of engaging people in their faith community. He, like many other parish delegates, described that the pastor's invitation and encouragement to assume this important role was impactful.

Throughout the planning, implementation, and sharing, the diversity in God's People was obvious. Local communities and contexts revealed the rich texture and gifts of God's People in the Rio Grande Valley. The oral reporting at deanery meetings affirmed many common strengths and challenges while also bringing to light unique characteristics of small communities. The sharing was done in both English and Spanish, many times with both languages being used interchangeably within the same gathering. Many people engaged in synodal gatherings in a blended English and Spanish - a fruit of living, studying, and working in a bilingual and bicultural region. Careful attention was made to present converging points in this report while maintaining the significant divergent points of view that were shared.

Some challenges in conducting the synodal listening sessions included the greater lack of participation of the faithful in the life of the parish, even in attending Mass. Many reported large percentages of people are still fearful of the COVID-19 pandemic. The uncertainty and possibility of infection was and continues to be an obstacle to meeting with ministry leaders about their responses to the synodal reflection questions. Even parishes that conducted home visits found people were sometimes unwilling to meet for fear of infection. Another obstacle was people's lack of trust in the process. Many undocumented individuals were reluctant to share personal

information as they were unsure of how it would be used. For others, they expressed a skepticism or cynicism that their voice would be listened to or contribute to the life of the Church. This many times stemmed from a frustration of participating in a similar exercise and it not yielding their desired change.

### **Eucharist, Liturgy, and Prayer**

One of the initial and most apparent findings from the synodal listening sessions was a clear joy in celebrating the Eucharist and participating in Mass. Many participants shared their desire for the Holy Mass and the Eucharist. They recounted the extent to which they went to participate in the Eucharist as soon as they could during the pandemic. Some found the opportunity to visit a Eucharistic Adoration chapel as a source of healing and consolation in a time of great trial. They described their visits as profound encounters with the presence of Jesus.

The synodal listening sessions also provided parishes with the opportunity to listen to the needs and desires of their community. Some needs were daunting, while others much more actionable. In one such conversation, a small rural mission in Fronton learned about a small community's desire for a Holy Hour to be hosted at their mission. After hearing of this heartfelt desire in a listening session, the pastor arranged a Holy Hour at the small chapel. The person who initially shared this desire was one among eight people that participated in the Holy Hour. She was moved to tears of joy and gratitude throughout the entire time. Her love and desire for the Eucharist inspired others and reminded ministry leaders of the need to reach out to the peripheries.

Related to this joy in the celebration of the Eucharist is the concern of low Mass attendance. There has been a slow response of the community to return to Mass as COVID-19 protocols have eased. The dispensation of the obligation to attend Mass on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation was lifted effective Sunday, March 20, 2022. Some reported feeling that the creative approaches parishes took to engage parishioners during the beginning of the pandemic, especially with live-streaming Masses, were now a hindrance and an excuse for parishioners to not return to Mass and activities in-person. The live-streamed Masses were initially used this way to reach out to and engage those that were homebound during the stay-at-home orders from local authorities.

There is a pastoral concern for how to form and catechize the faithful regarding the Mass. While this has been a longstanding concern, it has taken on an urgency in light of the new habits many formed over the pandemic. In a more general sense, delegates also shared concerns for the active participation of the faithful in Mass. Some expressed concern for the lack of reverence among the clergy and laity in the liturgy and the need to address it with formation and catechesis.

Some delegates expressed a concern for the language in which the Mass is celebrated relative to the needs and desires of the community. There are challenges in certain communities in which Spanish Masses are difficult to access. Interestingly, some communities have had the practice of celebrating Spanish Masses for their families but there is a growing desire and need for English Masses, particularly for young people who prefer English. Some participants also expressed their desire for more Masses to include American Sign Language (ASL) interpretation for the deaf community. Some described having to travel far each week to participate in a Mass in ASL. A few participants in the listening sessions shared their experience of having attended the Extraordinary Form of the Mass ("Traditional Latin Mass") and finding it a nourishing experience that they wished others to share. Some particularly noted the reverence in the liturgy to be an inspiration for their faith.



The findings of the parish listening sessions also indicate the power of prayer to encounter God and to build community. Especially during the height of the pandemic and the strictest COVID protocols, many parishioners found solace in praying for one another and finding closeness in intercessory prayer. Some prayer groups found ways to gather in socially distant outdoor settings, while others stay connected via Zoom, WhatsApp, or Facebook. It was clear that they were approaching this challenge with persistence and creativity.

### Community, Hospitality, and Communion within the Church

An interesting finding from the oral reporting at the deaneries was that parishes were surprised to learn many other parishes were experiencing the same challenges and opportunities. They expressed a joy for the communion within the Church as a mystical body of Christ and the Church present in the Rio Grande Valley.

The communion of the Church here in the southmost part of Texas shares a unique relationship and accompaniment with its neighboring border diocese in northern Mexico, the Diocese of Matamoros. In a special listening session, 20 delegates from each side of the border, and from different states of life, came together to celebrate the Eucharist and share a meal. They expressed unique perspectives of living and working on both sides of the border. While the Rio Grande River serves as a physical divide, it also serves as a source of life and water for the region. It becomes a symbol for what unites us rather than what divides us. In a similar way, the same Catholic Church present in two countries is a powerful witness of the unity in Christ and the Church faithfully serving and walking with the people of the region particularly during times of struggle.

While many people permanently live and work in the Rio Grande Valley, it is worthy to note there are many other people with a more transient lifestyle. The experience of living in the Rio Grande Valley can be a fluid experience. Many Catholic parishes have retirees from across the country who travel and stay in the Valley for about six months out of the year. They are affectionately called Winter Texans and serve in many important ways in their parish leadership and the community. Other groups include daily border crossers that frequently travel back and forth from Mexico to the USA (e.g., students residing in Mexico attending school in the U.S.) and vice versa (e.g., engineers residing in the U.S. working in maquiladoras in Mexico). Other transient groups include migrant workers (that move seasonally throughout different parts of the country in search of agricultural work), and immigrants and asylum seekers (typically seeking a longer stay and more permanent residence, but often moving further north outside the diocese).

Some communities located alongside the river experience the border reality in a unique way. For Brownsville, which borders the city of Matamoros in Mexico, many people cross back and forth each day for employment, schooling, and personal reasons (e.g., visiting family). In many ways, it is akin to a large metro area that happens to span two countries. The pastor of Saint Michael the Archangel Catholic Church in Los Ebanos described how the town is close to *el chalán* (the hand-drawn ferry) and the international ports of entry. He underscored a physical and relational closeness to their Mexican neighbors. Similarly, Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Hidalgo describes itself as a door to the United States and a parish for the Latin/Mexican community.

During the listening sessions held with interfaith and ecumenical religious leaders, participants described an admiration for the work of the Catholic Church in the region, especially with regard to its social ministry to those in need. They shared an appreciation for the ongoing



conversations among different religious traditions, like the Bishop's participation with the local rabbi and imam in multiple public events.

Christian pastors during an ecumenical listening session described their collaborative work with Emily's Meals (a social ministry operated by a local Catholic McAllen family focused on feeding the homeless). The also spoke with pride about their work with Proyecto Desarrollo Humano (a community center in western Hidalgo County operated by the Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary), and La Posada Providencia (an emergency shelter in San Benito for people seeking legal refuge operated by the Sisters of Divine Providence). A local Lutheran pastor expressed his appreciation for the joint celebration of the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation during the 2017 Joint Commemoration of the Reformation. A special ecumenical prayer service was hosted that year at Saint John the Baptist Catholic Church in San Juan bringing Lutherans and Catholics together.

Many participants spoke about their local Catholic parishes and their embodiment of hospitality and welcome. In many ways, their identity is concentrated in the value of love and helping everyone feel like they belong. One pastor in San Benito said many people attribute the parish being friendly to his pastoral leadership, but he quickly redirected the credit to as gift of the community (*don de la comunidad*), and one that he is seeking to cultivate. Many respondents to one parish mission described the how the pastor includes, affirms, and welcomes children into the Sunday liturgy, and how he invites the parishioners to reconsider crying not as a nuisance but as a hopeful sign of life in the parish. Many participants affirmed that parish life in several ways is the culmination of many personal relationships among individuals and families; there is a great joy in belonging to the family (*alegría de pertenecer a la familia*). Many people have the experience that grandparents, parents, children, and grandchildren grow up in the same parish.

There were opportunities named regarding the Church's welcoming and hospitality. Some parishioners described the ongoing pattern of sitting next to people for years and not knowing one another's name. This presented a unique challenge once stay-at-home orders were put in place during the pandemic and compelled many ministry leaders to go out into the communities and make personal outreach checks on the well-being of family and friends.

As a diocese with many rural parishes and missions, it can be a challenge to gather in person. Some participants described a lack of unity and deep relationship with others in their community because of the physical distance between one another and the Church. Even some missions described feeling a lack of unity with the parish church for that same reason. Some of the delegates from mission churches shared their frustration that much of the church activity was based at the parish, considerably distant from the mission church and their residence. For many, a reliable means of transportation is an ongoing challenge, so getting out to the parish during the weeknights is difficult - if not impossible.

### Ministry Leadership among Clergy, Religious, and Laity

Regarding the questions and reflection on the theme of participation, attendees highlighted the importance of ministry leadership and formation. Some communities reported the joy of having a leader to lead the flock. Some participants reported their parish had many parish leaders serving in various capacities and groups that strengthened families within the community. Others indicated they needed more people and 'new blood' to help grow or sustain ministries. One delegate shared that 20% of the parishioners are doing 80% of the work. The challenges with attracting more

people included a lack of confidence in leading and sharing Catholic teachings with others, as well as few opportunities to serve in a meaningful way.

Many delegates recounted examples of how leaders rose to the challenge to find ways to minister to the very basic needs of the most vulnerable in their community during the pandemic. Their efforts to pray, feed, and visit those most in need were moments of powerful witness and great faith. Some particular roles and ministries recounted involved faith formation (i.e., CCD), *Talleres de Oracion y Vida*, Knights of Columbus, Catholic Daughters of the Americas, *Movimiento Familiar*, hospital chaplains, soup kitchens, *Cursillo* retreats, small Christian communities (*comunidades de base*), and prayer groups (*grupos de oración*). Some parishes indicated a frustration with not having a parish pastoral council, resulting in limited opportunities to share their voice with parish leadership.

One delegate from El Ranchito recounted the tremendous loss she experienced during the last few years with a rapid succession of deaths in her family as well as dealing with a bout of cancer. She found strength in serving God and the Church. She was particularly grateful for the pastor's encouragement to be a liturgical minister. She found her service to be a response to God's purpose for her life as well as a means for personal growth.

Regarding ministry leadership and formation, the delegates shared quite a few opportunities. Many leaders desired to be formed and trained to be more effective in proclaiming the kerygma and in their service to Christ present in the poor. They described humbly sharing the little that they knew with family and friends and those around them. They talked about the need for ongoing formation in theology, Bible studies, and pastoral ministry. While there are currently opportunities made available on the part of the diocese and from other resources, there are still various challenges in making them accessible to people at the parishes and missions.

During a synodal listening session with business leaders and professionals, participants expressed a desire to contribute their expertise, resources, and network to collaborate in the Church's temporal affairs related to its mission to announce the Gospel and to proclaim Jesus. It was a common sentiment in their sharing that the same people are serving in the few available opportunities in their parishes and ministries. They described a silo-style of leadership and service in which leaders were pulled in different directions and not always coming together to serve a greater purpose and mission. Some describe that this frustration was an obstacle to their faith and to inviting others to their parish. Some couples recounted their experience of serving in the Church for decades and finding barriers to lead within their communities because they were not married in the Church. Some married women described not being able to serve as catechists for the lack of a sacramental marriage.

The communities of religious men and women participated in listening sessions as well. They described the various ministries and social services they help animate throughout the Diocese. There was a general sense of closeness to the individuals and families they serve. A palpable sense of missionary spirit permeated their sharing. Their responses to the synodal questions were closely woven with the people they accompany in their ministries. They desired pathways to form more lay people for ministry roles and decision-making in the life of the Church. Some noted the desire to see more women in significant leadership roles within the Church.

An overwhelming majority of the synodal consultations affirmed a love and appreciation for parish priests. Many parishioners shared the impact of the pastor's personal invitation and encouragement. They recounted examples of difficult times, moments of celebration, and of active life and service of the Church. Many had profound experiences with their pastor in the sacrament of confession, the celebration of Holy Mass, and funerals. One pastor reiterated that priests need to encourage the people (*animar a la gente*) and cultivate the gifts of the community.

Some participants shared their frustration with pastors who were distant from their communities and the realities of many families. They desired a closeness to their pastor and for various reasons (e.g., health issues) the pastors were unable to connect with them. One pastor described finding people who wanted their priests to be more available and, mildly joking, said that people wanted access to him via a 24-hour hotline. For some pastors in a parish with missions, they encountered scheduling challenges to find time for building relationships with parishioners outside of Holy Mass. Several parishes only celebrate Holy Mass once a week on Sunday, yet some pastors found a way to coordinate a weekday celebration of Mass that allowed time for a meal and sharing (*la convivencia*) afterwards. People noted that these casual and social activities significantly deepened the relationship with their pastor and the Church. Delegates shared that it was effective to gather around a meal. They lightheartedly pointed to the ways the chicken barbecues, parish festivals, and Lenten fish fries were all a means of making an invitation through one's stomach (*haciendo la invitación por la pansa*) and building community.

Participants and delegates expressed their gratitude to Bishop Flores and Bishop Aviles for their participation and closeness during the synodal journey. Both bishops attended the eight deanery reporting sessions with pastors and delegates. They described that they modeled "good listening" to their joys and concerns.

In a synodal conversation among the priests, they expressed joy and enthusiasm in their vocation and service to the Church. They also shared profound experiences of serving those in need within their community. Among some of their concerns was the lack of priestly fraternity and some described feeling overwhelmed in meeting the needs of the faithful. One pastor in a small town shared his experience of a struggle conducting countless funerals during the pandemic. He reflected on the question, "Where do we get the strength to continue?" Another pastor shared that there is "too much to do, and few priests." It was proposed that to help with the shortage of priests, we consider looking at deacons for assistance with the administration of the parish ("Deacons would be very helpful to assist so that we can be with the people"). Then, a priest might be able to dedicate more time to prepare the homily and teaching for the week.

Several priests also mentioned the need for ongoing formation. One participant described the need for more spiritual formation so that they can be men of prayer more than CEOs of the church. It would be helpful if the Diocese helped with the formation of leaders and provide a pastoral plan or framework to assist with the work of the parish. The parish finance and pastoral councils also should be considered when looking at ways we can invite parishioners to assist with parish life. Several priests considered the possibility of delegating some responsibility to the lay faithful. A possibility is to have coordinators help with the various ministries and apostolates of the parish.

Parishioners frequently referred to the pastor's preaching regarding their Sunday experience. Some expressed a concern for more instructive homilies, and others desired more relevant preaching since much of it seemed out of touch with their life.

Hand in hand with a desire for their pastor's availability, another consistent concern was the lack of priests and seminarians. Many thought more should be done cultivate religious vocations. Some indicated the need for religious vocations and the pressing need to do more to challenge and assist young people in this discernment.

### Formation of Families and Young People

Every one of the eight deanery reporting sessions described the priority and concern for young people and families. It is a shared understanding that the family is a domestic church, and that forming family faith is critical to parish vitality. During the pandemic many parishes found home visits and outreach to homebound families an effective way to stay connected. Delegates reiterated that parents have a great responsibility in forming the faith of their children and that a responsibility of the parish should be to support parents in that role. Sadly, the challenge has been the failure to instruct parents, who consequently are limited in the resources and knowledge to pass on the faith. Some parishes have adopted a more family-focused approach to faith formation that puts the parent in the lead role as a catechist and teacher of the faith. Delegates affirmed ministry leaders need to begin with families and that the Church needs to create more attractive and accessible opportunities for them.

When considering and describing how young people leave the Church and fail to engage the parish after receiving the sacrament of Confirmation, it was also noted that young people may actually leave the community totally. In some of the most rural communities, they expressed an expectation that their young people will leave to larger metro areas to seek employment and educational opportunities. They also voiced a hope for parents who have formed their children to be young people of faith and engage with the Church wherever they may be. As one parish delegate shared, "Do they leave prepared? ...Whether they end up in the Austin area or in Dallas, but we hear that they're in church... [then] we're doing the right thing." Delegates of larger, more urban parishes described the departure of young people may be more related to the pressures and demands of competing priorities (e.g., school and afterschool activities) and the lack of family faith practices (e.g., praying at home as a family).

While many parishioners expressed a desire for ongoing spiritual formation, the principal way many parishes engage young people and families is through sacramental preparation. Many parishes conducted synodal listening sessions with these young people and their families. Many parents expressed not feeling welcome or comfortable in the parish. Some described the interactions for sacramental preparation as transactional and cold. The overwhelming experience is that participation of both youth and families significantly drops off after they have received their sacraments of initiation. Delegates shared that there could be missed opportunities in resourcing and teaching parents and godparents in the preparatory sessions. Some participants expressed frustration in the inconsistencies of sacramental preparation requirements in different parishes. Some described the sacramental preparation as too long.

Many parishes lack youth ministry offerings. In some listening sessions for young people, participants expressed frustration with not being valued as leaders in their parish community. Many times, they felt relegated to tasks that were unimportant and wanted to contribute in a more significant way. Some also shared a frustration and pressure from adult leaders in the parish to believe or behave in a certain way that was different from the current stage of their faith journey. Others recounted being embarrassed with being Catholic because they attended a Christian School that understood baptism in a different way. These participants also shared apprehension with not

being able to give a reason for their faith; when prompted why they were Catholic some described feeling judged and not accepted. One participant asked, “If I support my friend who is gay, then am I not accepted, too?”

Some participants recommended more social activities to further build relationships outside of CCD and Mass. Some recommended concerts and community building events that allowed them to get to know others. Delegates shared some of the strengths of working with young people as one marked by welcoming and relationships. There were special efforts to reach out to young people and to listen to their concerns. Some parishes have particular ministries for young people like a children’s or youth choir. These were sources of pride for their area. Delegates also described that young people have a desire to know and a curiosity about God. They shared an implication for this that catechists and adult leaders must be more willing to venture into dialogue with them, especially around moral issues. Some young people described that their teacher reads from the [text]book too much and they would prefer a much more engaging teaching style.

Catholic schools throughout the Diocese hosted synodal conversations with students, staff, parents, and also among principals. Their listening sessions revealed young people’s deep relationship with God, the Church, and the community, and their desire to further deepen it. The sessions created a welcoming environment for their input. They spoke about topics ranging from the school lunch menu to the Bishop’s role with young people.

Many described an openness and confidence in approaching the principal, teachers, and counselors with personal matters. It was also noted that school communities are composed of families that belong to other surrounding parishes and communities. This made speaking about their participation within the life of the parish difficult to communicate. Plainly, many Catholic school students and families are not participating in the parish aside from attending the school. Others shared practical challenges like not being able to afford the registration fees associated with CCD and a lack of organization in scheduling youth activities (e.g., many altar servers in one parish/school stopped amid confusion about who’s serving each week).

In the listening session with principals, it was remarked that the love the principals have for the schools and students is evident. Principals described approaching their role in the school as a vocational call to evangelize young people and their families. They recognized opportunities to engage the parents of their Catholic school students to be more effective in forming young disciples. Catholic social teaching is a priority of Catholic schools, so students develop a greater awareness of the social issues and compassion to those in need. Some noted the difficulty in addressing the disconnect of students’ experience at school and their faith experience at home.

### **Evangelization and Mission to the Peripheries**

Delegates affirmed the Church needs a bold and compassionate outreach to the people away from the Church. As one delegate shared, there is much love needed on the part of the Church (*se necesita mucho amor de parte de la iglesia*). Participants expressed their desire to hear church bells ringing through the community, to take the Blessed Sacrament in exposition through the neighborhood streets, and the courage to share our faith on a personal level with those around us. Participants clearly described a desire for formation and instruction in the form of theology classes or Bible studies to be better equipped to share the faith.

The synodal path in the Diocese of Brownsville brought clarity to the task of evangelization of the local Church. The process involved many leaders who considered it a formative experience

in accompaniment. They described conducting prayerful listening sessions and dialoguing with various members of the community, akin to the disciples being sent two by two (cf. Lk 10).

Participants and pastors shared some of the challenges regarding evangelization. In one-on-one conversations, it was revealed that many people were misinformed regarding some of the sacramental requirements and conditions to approach the Church. This gave rise to pastors' and ministry leaders' recommendation to offer more formation for ministry leaders, both clergy and laity. There is much work ahead of us to evangelize even those that frequent the church and sacred spaces. It was shared that both the Basilica of Our Lady of San Juan Del Valle National Shrine and *la cuevita* ("little cave" shrine) of St. Jude Thaddeus Catholic Church in Pharr are frequent places of visitation and prayer for the faithful. But many do not enter the church or participate in Holy Mass; this practice is usually marked by a deep humility and sense of unworthiness.

The clear joy in ministry leadership is serving Christ and the Church by helping others in need. Delegates affirmed the wonderful work of pastors that were bold in their service of the poor and vulnerable. Some were walking the streets to visit and pray with neighbors. Certain parish communities described the pastoral challenges with homelessness, drug addiction, and migrant families. Regarding immigration, some pastors made a special outreach to the migrant camps along the southern border in both Mexico and the United States. The work of local Jesuit priests, religious communities, and especially Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley has been markedly important in accompanying families impacted by changing legislation and increasing law enforcement regarding immigration.

In early 2022, an open-air migrant camp of international refugees and asylum seekers was in operation in the Plaza de la República in Reynosa, Mexico. The above-mentioned groups were among the many that would cross into Mexico to minister to the people in need. In a listening session conducted with migrants, one migrant participant conveyed their gratitude that the Church was present to them in the sacraments, especially the Eucharist ("The Church has not abandoned us."). It was clear in the first meeting that the migrants did not expect to be asked about their own experiences and opinions. Another example of pastoral closeness, San Felipe Catholic Church in Cameron Park (an unincorporated and impoverished *colonia* immediately outside of Brownsville) held Sunday Masses especially for the young men held in the Bayview Detention Center. These men were transported from the facility each week to this Mass.

Delegates affirmed a great desire to help those most in need. They reported that economic poverty was only one of the pressing challenges they were facing. Some reported the need for counseling for couples and families in crisis. Some participants found political issues and positions to be overwhelmingly polarizing. Moral topics from LGBT issues to abortion were sometimes obstacles to faith conversations about God and the Church. Some delegates expressed a desire for clearer instruction and guidance from the local bishop, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, and even the Holy Father for those dividing challenges.

Many specific comments about the elderly were shared in the listening sessions. In many communities, elderly individuals play key leadership roles in the life of the parish. But as their health becomes more delicate, their ability to participate becomes more limited. Participants described that many elderly people don't want to travel at night or on cold days to partake in parish activities. There are still many immuno-compromised individuals in our parishes. And while many parishioners take Holy Communion to the elderly in facilities or their homes, parishes need to find new ways to continue caring for our older parishioners. Even while many people want to visit with

the elderly, the COVID protocols have limited opportunities to do so and, in some ways, continue to limit how they can interact with them.

Some participants described a desire to get married by the Catholic Church but were unable to do so for different reasons. Many pastors and delegates affirmed their parishes need to be better equipped to support people who want to participate in the life of the parish but have not been sacramentally married. The reasons for not celebrating a sacramental marriage were unique and particular. Delegates described moments of effectively accompanying couples in understanding why they don't approach the Church (*porque no se arriman a la Iglesia*). This sentiment extends to the children of these marriages. Many young participants questioned their place and acceptance in their parish if their parents were not married in the Church. One delegate expressed this as a great loss of a family to the Catholic Church, now and in the future. Likewise, children whose parents had marriages annulled in the Church often felt "lost."

Participants also expressed a concern for families impacted by LGBT members. One participant who has been away from the Church for 20 years saw the synodal listening session as a unique opportunity to share his perspective and experience in the Church. Family members of a LGBT person describe feeling turned away and judged because someone in their family was gay. One couple described not being able to have their child baptized because they were a gay couple.

## Conclusion

### Fruits of the Diocesan Phase of the Synod

An impactful and inspiring fruit of the Diocesan phase of the Synod is that parishes are already responding to the challenges that surfaced during parochial listening sessions. Some parishes organized faith formation opportunities that were more appropriately meeting the needs of the participants and others organized social ministry services to help families in pressing economic needs. It was because of the listening sessions and the intentional focus on reaching out to different people within the community, that the pastors and ministry leaders have developed a greater awareness of the strengths and challenges. It was also noted that parishes developed a greater sense of solidarity with one another within the deanery. During the oral reports and in listening to one another, delegates and pastors became more aware of the shared struggles and opportunities that exist just down the street.

### Hopes and next steps in synodal process in Diocese

The next step for the synodal process in the Diocese is to find ways to continue listening sessions in parishes and ministries. There is much work to be done to explore and articulate the needs of the community and recommend pastoral strategies and resources in certain areas of concern (e.g., ministry to young people, family catechesis). The Diocese has received a large volume of input that can serve as a springboard for further conversation, discernment, and action.

Faithful to the principle of subsidiarity, the Diocese will explore ways to form and empower the deaneries and parishes to leverage their strengths and respond to their local pastoral challenges. Many delegates reported the need to address challenges that may be too difficult to address as a parish alone and not appropriate for the chancery to resolve.

It is through our dialogue, both sharing and listening, that the Church can become more aware of God's presence in our midst through the People of God. As the Scriptures remind us, "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ" (*1 Cor 12:12*).



## Appendices

### Appendix 1 – Official Catholic Directory Stats

#### **DIOCESE OF BROWNSVILLE**

Established on July 10, 1965 | Square Miles: 4,296

Comprises the Counties: Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr, Willacy

#### **Statistics as of December 31, 2021**

Total Catholic Population: 1,171,199
Total Population (4 Counties): 1,377,882
<b>Parishes</b>
Parishes: 72
Missions: 44
<b>Personnel</b>
Bishops: 1
Auxiliary Bishops: 1
Diocesan Priests: 86
Religious Priests: 26
Extern Priests (on loan from other dioceses): 3
Priest to Catholic Ratio in Diocese: 1:10,184
Permanent Deacons: 102
Religious Brothers: 11
Religious Sisters: 60
Seminarians: 13
<b>Vital Statistics</b>
Infant Baptisms: 3,906
Minor Baptisms: 358
Adult Baptisms: 143
First Communions: 3,235
Confirmations: 2,933
Marriages - Catholic: 754
Marriages - Interfaith: 64
Deaths: 3,472
<b>Schools</b>
Catholic High Schools - Private: 3
Total Students: 493
Catholic Elementary Schools – Parochial (Pre-K to 8th Grade): 6
Total Students: 1,071
Catholic Elementary Schools – Private (Pre-K to 8th Grade): 3
Total Students: 368
<b>C.C.D. Students (Religious Education Prog.)</b>
C.C.D. High School Students: 3,808
C.C.D. Elementary & Middle School Students: 7,001

Appendix 2 – Map of Deaneries in the Diocese of Brownsville



## DIOCESE OF BROWNSVILLE

### MAP OF DEANERIES



 **Brownsville**

 **Pharr**

 **San Benito**

 **McAllen-Edinburg**

 **Harlingen**

 **Mission**

 **Weslaco**

 **Rio Grande City**

Appendix 3 - CNS Article about Diocese of Matamoros and Diocese of Brownsville  
[Synodal process is cross-border event for South Texas, Mexico contingents - Our Sunday Visitor \(osvnews.com\)](https://www.osvnews.com/story/2022/03/31/synodal-process-is-cross-border-event-for-south-texas-mexico-contingents-1017821)

***Synodal process is cross-border event for South Texas, Mexico contingents***

Paul Binz March 31, 2022



*Auxiliary Bishop Mario A. Avilés of Brownsville, Texas, left, Bishop Daniel E. Flores of Brownsville and Bishop Eugenio Lira Rugarcía of Matamoros, Mexico, pose for a photo with binational synod meeting participants at the Catholic University of Northeast Mexico March 27, 2022. (CNS photo/Deacon Roman Ramos, courtesy The Valley Catholic)*

**MATAMOROS, Mexico** (CNS) — The synodal process bridged an international border March 27 when the bishops of the Diocese of Brownsville, Texas, crossed the Rio Grande into Mexico to celebrate Sunday Mass with the bishop of Matamoros.

An afternoon of synod workshops and discussions followed.

As late morning Mass began at Our Lady of Refuge Cathedral, Bishop Eugenio Andrés Lira Rugarcía of Matamoros opened with a warm welcome to Brownsville’s Bishop Daniel E. Flores and Auxiliary Bishop Mario A. Avilés.

The Rio Grande Valley of far South Texas and the border cities of northeastern Mexico have historically enjoyed strong family, business and cultural ties.

Although these ties have been interrupted in recent years by border-crossing restrictions, the coronavirus pandemic and immigration issues, the events March 27 events were an opportunity to renew the close relations the two neighboring dioceses have maintained.

“The dioceses of Brownsville and Matamoros — we are sister churches,” Bishop Lira said. “This permits us today to have a binational synodal experience.”

“We greatly appreciate this invitation, this honor of sharing this Mass that manifests in a very strong way the communion of the universal Church,” Bishop Flores responded.

“We ask Our Lord’s help to keep us on this path that he has shown by his own example, and also the grace of the Holy Spirit to be able to open our hearts to the reconciliation and the communion — the principal themes of today’s Scriptures,” Bishop Flores said.

The Gospel for the fourth Sunday of Lent was the story of the prodigal son. Angel Barrera, the synod coordinator for Diocese of Brownsville, explained afterward how this parable played a key role in the day’s proceedings.

“The principal theme of Bishop Flores’ homily was on reconciliation,” Barrera said. “And that was woven in different ways into many synodal moments.”

In the parable, after the son squanders his inheritance and is reduced to hiring himself out to tend pigs, he begins to think over what he has done, and how he got there.

“In Spanish, the passage reads, the Gospel says, ‘Se puso reflexionar’ — ‘He began to reflect.’ ... That’s what we’re doing now. We’re reflecting,” Barrera said. “The other principal action of the son for this conversion was that he remembered. He remembered how good it was with his father. He remembered how generous his father was.”

After Mass, the South Texas delegation met with Bishop Lira and his contingent at the Catholic University of Northeast Mexico for lunch and then synod workshops. The 43 participants comprised the bishops and five priests, five religious, five laypeople and five deacons from each diocese.

“It was the work of the Holy Spirit to get the right people there,” Barrera told The Valley Catholic, newspaper of the Brownsville Diocese. “Some of our laypeople live and work on both sides. So they reside in Brownsville, but their workplace and business is in Matamoros. Many of them were coming from lived experiences of being on both sides, serving people on both sides.”

The hospitality continued at the workshop site, Barrera said.

“We had a wonderful meal, that amazing image of breaking bread together,” he said. “It was a very celebratory event.”

“The way I would characterize (Bishop Lira’s) presence was joyful. Every time I would see him with a group of people he had never met, he was just so joyful, so approachable,” he added. “He was talking to them like they were dear friends.

“It was just a very warm and welcoming experience.”

The delegations broke up into working groups for about three hours to discuss issues proposed by the general secretariat of the Synod of Bishops.

The Church in the U.S. and around the world is engaged in a listening phase in preparation for the 2023 meeting of the world Synod of Bishops on synodality, called for by Pope Francis, around the theme, “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission.” Diocesan phases of the synod are in progress through August 2022.

The questions posed to the groups at the Matamoros meeting included:

— What has been your experience of “walking together” in the Church, in your family and in society in general?

— Do you feel that we are reaching the people on the peripheries and those most in need?

— What steps do you feel the Holy Spirit is asking us to take in order for us to grow “walking together” in the Church, in the family and in society in general?

— Who would be good to invite to accomplish this together?

The questions echoed an oft-repeated theme of both Pope Francis and Bishop Flores about walking or journeying together through life. A saying often appears in Bishop Flores’ sermons: “If we don’t walk together, we’re not going to get there.”

The afternoon’s discussions proved to be more of a start than an ending.

Barrera noted, “I was encouraged by what Bishop (Flores) said: ‘We didn’t finish, but we’re getting started in articulating this.’”

“The questions were helpful, but we don’t have a finished document yet,” Barrera said. “For me, this could be the beginning of a series of conversations, or other ways of having these focused discussions.

“So what this really does for us is provides a witness to the communion of the Church, and the potential in the world, because we are two countries. ... It’s a sign of us moving toward that together.”

*Binz is assistant editor of The Valley Catholic, newspaper of the Diocese of Brownsville.*

## Appendix 4 - Questions for Small Group Sharing

### Small Group Sharing on *Communion*

Enlightened by the Word and grounded in Tradition, the synodal path is rooted in the concrete life of the People of God. (*Preparatory Document* no. 25)

“The meaning of the journey to which we are all called is above all that of discovering the face and form of a Synodal Church, in which “everyone has something to learn. The faithful people, the college of bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit.” (*Preparatory Document* no. 15)

- What fills you with joy about your parish life and the Catholic Church?
- What causes you concern about your parish life and the Catholic Church?
- How is God speaking to us through the voices that are in our midst?
- How is God speaking to us through voices we sometimes ignore, including those on the peripheries?

### Small Group Sharing on *Participation*

All are invited to speak with courage and *parrhesia*, that is, in freedom, truth, and charity. (*Preparatory Document* no. 30)

“The Pastors, established by God as ‘authentic guardians, interpreters and witnesses of the faith of the whole Church’ should not be afraid to listen to the flock entrusted to them. The consultation of the People of God does not imply the assumption within the Church of the dynamics of democracy based on the principle of majority because there is, at the basis of participation in every Synodal process, a shared passion for the common mission of evangelization and not the representation of conflicting interests.” (*Preparatory Document* no. 14)

- Are you encouraged to speak up courageously and responsibly about challenges and concerns? Do you feel heard? Do you respectfully listen to the voices of others?
- What space is there in our parishes for the voice of people including active and inactive members of our faith?
- How can we create greater opportunities for people to be heard in your parish? In the wider Church? In the wider community?

### Small Group Sharing on *Mission*

“Synodality is at the service of the mission of the Church, in which all members are called to participate. A Synodal church is a participatory and co-responsible Church.” (*Preparatory Document* no. 30)

The members of the People of God are united by Baptism, and “if by the will of Christ some are made teachers, pastors and dispenser of mysteries on behalf of others, yet all share a true equality with regard to dignity and to the activity common to all the Faithful for the building up of the Body of Christ.” (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 32)

- How are the baptized members of your parish able to participate in the mission of the Church to proclaim the Gospel?
- How are teamwork and co-responsibility put into practice in your local parish?
- What type of support do you need to grow in your personal relationship with Jesus and the Catholic Church?
- What type of support do you need to help others to enter into a personal relationship with Jesus and the Catholic Church? How can the Catholic Church accompany and support you with these?