

Participant Ground Rules & Small Group Process

Keys to Communicating and Listening Effectively

P – PRAY and PONDER before and after you speak. Ask our Lord to be in your heart and mind and on your lips as you begin to speak. Also, ponder what has been shared and what the Lord is putting on your heart.

R – Take RESPONSIBILITY for your own thoughts and feelings, avoiding the temptation to lay blame on others. Likewise, keep in mind that you are not responsible for the thoughts and feelings of others in your group. In a context of listening and sharing, it is okay for varying thoughts and feelings to be shared.

A – ALLOW others to speak and to share without correction or criticism. If you are more outgoing and assertive in conversation, it may be helpful to listen more and to allow those who typically do not speak to be heard first. We hope to hear from everyone during this synodal process, especially those on the margins.

Y – YOU – Be attentive to your own thoughts, feelings, opinions or even prejudices. Ask yourself, “Why do I feel or think this way?”

E – Use EMPATHETIC listening, and be attentive not just to words but also to feelings being expressed. Try placing yourself in the speaker’s situation to help yourself truly feel what he or she is feeling.

R – RESPECT every person as Jesus taught us: *love one another*. Avoid minimizing or dismissing other people’s thoughts or experiences. Always seek to control your emotions while speaking and listening, showing kindness and generosity towards others.

The prayer-centered listening sessions are ultimately opportunities to listen and share, primarily in small-group format. The goal is not to discuss or debate but rather to pray and to allow an opportunity for all to listen and share. A method of invitation is a way to include all people in the conversation in a very respectful atmosphere. While each person is speaking, the others listen. No one may interrupt the speaker or jump in to speak without being invited/prompted by the facilitator. In cases where there is one facilitator for a number of small groups, as is envisioned for many of the sessions outlined above, participants can go in order around the table to share, choosing to pass if they would rather not share at a particular moment. In cases where a volunteer table moderator is present, that person can assist to ensure that each person in the small group has an opportunity to share.

Table Moderators & Note Taker Roles

The role of the table moderators, if utilized, is to help guide the conversations. Please listen to their instructions. They will try to keep flowing the time of sharing, keeping an eye on the time allotted, so everyone in the small group can share the inspirations and insights they received during the pondering and praying time

There will be a volunteer secretary at each table taking notes. The notes will be anonymous. The notes from all of the small groups at the prayer-centered listening session will help in the creation of a parish/group summary report (one report per parish/group, synthesizing all of the prayer and listening experiences and sharing highlights). This parish/group summary report will be sent to the archdiocesan Synod Team who will create an archdiocesan report based on the parish/group reports, regional gatherings and feedback from the online survey and other meetings.

Questions for Listening Sessions – Small Groups

The following questions are offered as the leading questions to guide the parish/community prayer-centered listening sessions in the Archdiocese of Atlanta. They can be adapted or modified by parishes or other groups according to time, circumstances and needs. If adaptations occur, communities are encouraged to follow the suggested themes and questions in the Synod Preparatory Document and Vademecum as a guide (see also optional questions suggested below). An online survey will complement the feedback gained from the parish/community prayer-centered listening sessions and regional gatherings. Please go to archatl.com/synod to learn more and to complete the online survey.

The Fundamental Question

***A synodal Church, in announcing the Gospel, “journeys together.” How is this “journeying together” happening today in our parish/community?
How is the Holy Spirit inviting our parish/community to grow in “journeying together?”***

- What does “journeying together” mean to you? What experiences come to mind?
- What joys have you experienced in our parish/community? What difficulties and obstacles to journeying together, or to active and vibrant participation in the life of the parish/community, have you encountered?
- Where in these experiences do you hear the Holy Spirit inviting growth?

Supporting Questions

(1) Listening & Discernment

Listening is a first step that requires an open mind and heart, without prejudice. Discernment in a synodal style, which requires attentiveness to the Holy Spirit through the prayer and sharing of the whole community, depends first on listening.

- How do you listen to God's voice every day?
- How is God speaking to us through the voices that are in our midst, including those on the peripheries (the poor, marginalized, socially excluded, disaffiliated, etc.)? How do we hear the voices from the peripheries without prejudice?
- What space(s) does our parish/community provide for listening and sharing (speaking freely) among all the members as well as those not regularly connected to our community?
- How do we together discern God's will in our parish/community, and what role does consultation play?

(2) Co-Responsibility & Participation

Synodality is at the service of the mission of the Church, in which all members are called to participate. All the baptized are co-responsible for the mission of the Church—to proclaim the Gospel and make disciples of Jesus Christ.

- What enables or hinders you from witnessing and speaking up courageously and responsibly in our parish/community and in society?
- How are all the members of our parish/community called and empowered to participate in the Church's mission to proclaim the Gospel?
- What obstacles to active discipleship and participation do you see?
- How are teamwork and co-responsibility for mission put into practice in our parish/community?

(3) Prayer and Celebration

Central to “walking together” is the communal listening to the Word and the celebration of the Eucharist.

- How do prayer and liturgical celebrations, especially Sunday Mass, inspire and guide our parish/community in our shared life and mission?
- How does listening to the Word of God together (e.g., Holy Mass, Scripture study groups, Holy Hours, etc.) inspire our parish/community’s most important decisions?
- What does the Eucharist mean to you? How does the Eucharist inspire your life and actions?
- How do we encourage the active participation of all the faithful in prayer, the liturgy and the sacraments?

Concluding Question – Listening to the Holy Spirit

*Take 5-10 minutes to pray in silence with your small group, after invoking the Holy Spirit again through a “Come Holy Spirit” prayer or impromptu prayer. Then, from your small group sharing, **name one insight where you heard the voice of the Holy Spirit today, or share one insight that is on your heart after your time of prayer.***

****Optional Additional Questions** – *These could be integrated into the framework above or adapted for groups outside of parish life or ministry settings:*

On God and the Catholic Church

- What thoughts and experiences come to mind when you hear mention of “God?”
- What does a relationship with God mean to you?
- What thoughts and experiences come to mind when you hear mention of “Jesus Christ?”
- What does a relationship with Jesus mean to you?
- What thoughts and experiences come to mind when you hear mention of the “Catholic Church” or “being Catholic?”

Dialogue and Relationship with Others

- Are you aware of the ways the Catholic Church promotes dialogue and is in dialogue with others? How can this be strengthened?
- Are you aware of the ways the Catholic Church walks together with other Christians? How can this be strengthened?

Other Topics Related to Synodality

- What does authority mean to you?
- What does listening mean to you?
- What does discernment mean to you?
- How can we better communicate how decisions and actions are taken in the Catholic Church?
- Synodality entails receptivity to change, formation and ongoing learning. How do you live synodality in your daily life?

Please note: As a reminder, the Synod [Preparatory Document](#) and [Vademecum](#) provide further possible questions that can be adapted by groups.