

SUBMISSION TO THE 2023 SYNODAL PROCESS

The NOVA Community has been in continuous existence since its first liturgy in January 1968. This liturgy followed encouragement from the diocese, submission of a proposal, and then a letter of approval from the bishop. From the beginning the community has been lay-led and bound together by liturgy and social action. Over the years it has had the benefit of mostly non-diocesan priests located in the Washington, D.C. area to preside at the community's liturgical celebrations.

In response to the American bishops' statement "Called and Gifted: The American Catholic Laity" the community wrote, in July 1981:

"There are many exciting, innovative and promising forms of Christian community evolving throughout the country. These are experiencing successes and failures that are part of community building. Unfortunately, not enough is being done to collect and use these experiences to the benefit of the whole Church. We see NOVA as one of these models. We believe that our experience could be particularly helpful as we move to smaller communities. In this regard, we envision that the Church of the future will exist largely on the basis of small, communal groups of the People of God who will raise up ministers from their own as the need for ministry arises. We feel that this future dictates that thought and care be devoted to the development and nourishment of embryonic, sub-parish groups and communities."

The community's preparation of this response for the Synod on Synodality follows a pattern common to many its activities. Those interested responded to a call – in this case, a call extending beyond the community

itself. Two small groups consisting of both NOVA members and other Catholics, including one from a local parish, others from elsewhere in the U.S. and one from Liverpool, England. Each group met eleven times between January and June of this year. The key purpose of these gatherings was to probe the following questions:

A synodal Church, in announcing the Gospel, "journeys together." How is this "journeying together" happening today in your local Church? What steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow in our "journeying together"? (PD, 26).

The context for these questions is the following statement of objectives (*Vademecum* 1.3):

The mission of the Church requires the entire People of God to be on a journey together, with each member playing his or her crucial role, united with each other. A synodal Church walks forward in communion to pursue a common mission through the participation of each and every one of her members. The objective of this Synodal Process is not to provide a temporary or one-time experience of synodality, but rather to provide an opportunity for the entire People of God to discern together how to move forward on the path towards being a more synodal Church in the long-term.

NOVA has been journeying together as outlined in the community's 1981 response cited above. In the early years community decision making followed the familiar model of discussion and voting characteristic of the democratic process. In the mid-1970s, following community reflection, we undertook what we have come to call a "consensus process" for arriving at community decisions. This process is somewhat slower than the conventional democratic process, taking pains to hear from everyone and

be attentive to the work of the Spirit within the assembled community. This process has served us well and we have from time to time further reflected as a community on how best to use the process. In practice community leaders are chosen and affirmed using this process and during their term of leadership they are relied upon to use the process as appropriate so that the community remains engaged and at one. In similar fashion particular projects for the community are undertaken by members, on their initiative or by request. The continued engagement and unity of the community is maintained through regular sharing of activities and trust that what is undertaken is for the good of the community.

The biweekly synodal process sessions have been undertaken in this vein. These gatherings have been conducted in prayer with an emphasis on listening so that participants not only speak from the heart but discern how their hearts respond to what others say. In many ways it is a messy process, but the path has been pursued with good grace by everyone involved.

As a community, NOVA has been living “a new way of being church” without calling it “synodal”. We welcome those who want to be part of what we are doing, in liturgy and in service. It is the Gospel, after all, so we haven’t thought about giving it another name. The presence of the Spirit is central to our liturgical life and our work for social justice. The community has welcomed without fanfare those who are divorced and remarried. It has encouraged women called to ministry, two of whom

went to communities outside the Roman Catholic Church to fulfill their ministries.

Outline for this Submission

We are mindful of the tension between developing practical structures and processes for “being a more synodal church in the long term” and responding now to evident needs for reform of our broken world, including brokenness in our Church. This outline integrates these two sources of tension by using the first to illustrate the second. That is, to focus on how a longer-term mechanism could be used to address evident needs for reform.

A Mechanism

It is not obvious how “each and every one” can participate. There are formal examples such as the Irish Citizens Assembly that seek random and representative samples, so that the direct participants have a sense of being fiduciaries for the larger community and everyone else has a sense of participation. Another example is the Benedictine model where there is lots of input and discussion even though the Abbott makes the decision.

NOVA’s own experience of selecting leaders illustrates the mutuality of such a process. In the early years we made such decisions at general meetings, first by traditional election and then by a consensus process. More recently a team of all those in the community willing to assume community leadership meet to select by consensus a leader from among their number. Both then and now those who do not directly engage in this

leader selection process have some choice in the matter and trust in the outcome. Both then and now the community seeks the guidance of the Spirit in this process.

This leadership selection mechanism has the attributes of a synodal process— participation is equally accessible throughout the community, the outcome is trusted by those not participating, and the whole community seeks the guidance of the Spirit. As NOVA's experience has demonstrated, such a process can become integrated into community decision making over the long term.

It is maintaining these attributes that is critical, not the size of the community. While it is not always easy to maintain these attributes — especially in very large communities -- we are in an era where it is feasible to do so. In particular, the time and place flexibility provided by remote meeting technology has enabled a schedule of synodal process gatherings that would not have been feasible otherwise.

The small group format of our biweekly synodal process gatherings supports a dialogue and mutuality of interaction that could be a helpful complement to questionnaires and town-hall meetings that have been used elsewhere as the larger church has proceeded on this journey. The general pattern of our biweekly gatherings has been individual reflections following an opening prayer, then a period of silence to absorb what others have said, then sharing of what emerged during the period of silent reflection, then open discussion followed by a closing prayer. Often the open discussion featured contributions that built upon what others said.

We have experimented somewhat with this format but through it all the Spirit within each of us has been nourished by the perspectives and experiences of others.

Applying the Mechanism

It is likely that the Synod scheduled for October 2023 will in turn result in document issued in 2024. We thus have about two years to further explore how this process can work as an integral part of a new way of being church. How will NOVA proceed?

One possible outline for this exploration is as follows:

- First, engage the broader community of Intentional Eucharistic Communities (IECs) in this experiment; such a collaboration follows organically from many years of collaboration within the IEC community.
- Second, continue to experiment with the process, to get a better appreciation for how the process itself can be used to foster this new Spirit seeking way of being church.
- Third, be mindful of the practical limitations that constrain the process; the process has little to offer long term unless its are documented and made available to the larger community.

In preparation for this exploration, this submission includes what the participants have discerned during these synodal gatherings, as gleaned either from notes made during the sessions or upon review of video

recordings that were made of each session. NOVA itself, as an IEC, is somewhat insulated from the challenges faced by larger parish and diocesan communities which are also seeking to become more synodal and for whom our experience might be of some use. Our synodal gatherings included several participants with current experience in parish and diocesan communities, and the compilation that follows includes their perspectives.

The bullet points below have been grouped under major themes that emerged over the course of our biweekly gatherings.

Major Themes

Animating Spirit

- In any gathering of Christians – whether two or three, a small community, or members of a parish or diocese – the connective tissue that holds the gathering together is a common attention to the presence of the Spirit.
- We need a radical shift in the Church, to focus on connection to the Spirit. We need action, not just talk. Lack of resources is always a copout; that's where the Spirit steps in and the unbelievable happens.
- We need to embrace the concept of *sensus fidelium*. The Spirit lives among us and we demonstrate our faith by caring for one another, for the poor, the infirm and those in need of our support. Regular use of the synodal process can give concrete expression to the *sensus fidelium*
- We need to develop a spirit of "Namaste," i.e., the spirit in me honors the spirit in you."

Leadership

- The Church should never be an organization that defines who is "in" and who is "out," who has power or influence and who doesn't. We need to think of Church as a community that shares its abundance. We need to be transformed from an organization that offers certainties to one that supports openness, questions, and

acceptance. We need a radical shift in the Church, to focus on connection to the Spirit. We need action, more than talk, about being open to "discernment."

- We need attention to the common good now more than ever, when "cancel culture", blaming, finger-pointing, violence and vitriol are affecting us deeply.
- If we live our faith, we (Christians) will model irresistible joy, sharing the bounty of God's love.
- Our leaders must strive to be servant leaders, those who model behaviors of trust, nonjudgmental listening, support positive initiatives, and value everyone's gifts.
- Most Catholic parishes do not reach out enough to those of other faiths, e.g., working on social action projects together, inviting outsiders to attend special events, and the like.
- Catholic leaders, both clergy and laity, should broaden their focus from purely doctrinal issues to the way in which doctrine suggests specific secular, policy, and economic reforms.

Role of Priests

- We need to practice a "theology of synodality" and go through the process of becoming a more synodal church, laity and clergy, together
- If a pastor/priest does not promote synodality, the laity will be unlikely to do anything more than participate in the initial effort to discuss what synodality means. The clergy needs training and support in how to model and encourage others in this process.
- We need to figure out how to restructure the role of priests and laity so that more time is devoted to synodality and the administration of hierarchical structures is offloaded to laity; remove gender barriers to vocations to the priesthood.

Hierarchical Power

- While a hierarchical Church is the simplest and most administratively efficient, *it doesn't model the network of caring enabled by the Holy Spirit*. There is an "emergent connective tissue" that arises from individuals being alert to

opportunities for responding from the heart where "you were in my path." As an Intentional Eucharistic Community, the NOVA Community strives to encourage that kind of emergent connection.

- The Church hierarchy holds too much power, particularly bishops who do not have enough contact with those in the pews. A remedy for this deficit would for the laity to have a voice in selecting our bishops.
- Those in power resist change and do not model openness to change. For example, Bishops could hold regularly scheduled listening sessions or seek the input of all church members, beyond the circle of those who are closest.
- We should consider using models of governance that provide workable alternatives that would overcome deficiencies of the hierarchical Church, such as the Citizens Assembly used in Ireland.

Long Term Synodal Process

- The kind of synodal church Pope Francis envisions leads to revitalization, engagement and participation. People would feel encouraged to participate in discussions of issues of concern to all; they would feel valued and appreciated. When we are grateful, there's a sense of surplus not scarcity.
- Initiative for using the synodal process should be shared by the faithful, not reserved to pastors and bishops.
- A synodal process over the long term should become a regular and routine part of community life.
- To become engaged in their church requires using a synodal process of asking questions that stimulate dialogue, engaging others to speak about what went wrong in their relationship with the institution. They need to recommend changes that resolve root causes of their alienation (which may well be a component of governance).
- People become converted to ways of behaving that are manifest in everyday life. For example, one can engage in deep listening for short periods of time, in the supermarket, a department store, or a restaurant. Respectful listening has no boundaries. Synodal behaviors become a way of life and right relationships are developed. The common good is served.

Openness to Change

- Catholics are used to following rules. How does one develop trust in the Spirit? How do those of us who have participated in synodal discussions bring what we've learned back to the larger community or parish?
- There are many Catholics who don't really know their faith and function as children doing what they are told, with a dependent relationship "with Father" (a parish priest). Now we are asking them to think for themselves.
- It's not just the institutional Church that changes. Synodality has extended consequences for family, neighbors, parishes, other Christian denominations, other religions in the communities and workplaces that we live and socialize in.
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- We need to be transformed from an organization that offers certainties to one that supports openness, questions, and acceptance. Are we, the laity, prepared to do that? Do we want to change? Have we prepared? Are we ready to own necessary changes?

Links to further materials 