

## US dioceses solicit responses to synod survey

Brian Roewe | Dec. 2, 2013

If you can't find a synod survey these days, then you're likely not looking.

In the wake of revelations that the Vatican had requested a broad consultation of parish-level input ahead of a global bishops' meeting next year, lay organizations and now dioceses have given parishioners a variety of outlets to provide feedback.

As of Nov. 22, at least 46 dioceses have solicited some type of response related to the October 2014 Synod of Bishops, which will focus on the theme of "pastoral challenges to the family in the context of evangelization." The questionnaire asks about pastoral approaches and acceptance of church teachings on a variety of topics, among them: contraception, same-sex couples and families, divorce, and cohabitation.

In a letter explaining the questionnaire and the preparatory document, Archbishop Lorenzo Baldisseri, secretary general for the Synod of Bishops, requested bishops distribute the document "as widely as possible to deaneries and parishes so that input from local sources can be received."

So far, dioceses seeking lay consultation stretch as far south as Palm Beach, Fla., to as far north as Juneau, Alaska, with San Jose, Calif.; Grand Rapids, Mich.; Rapid City, S.D.; Dallas; New Orleans; and Great Falls-Billings, Mont., among others, scattered in between.

The bulk -- more than a third of the identified dioceses -- came from the Midwest; 10 apiece resided in the West/Southwest and the Northeast, and another nine from the South.

The diocesan push follows [several lay-led initiatives](#) [1] (*NCR*, Nov. 22-Dec. 5) to collect responses from ordinary Catholics as early comments from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops had suggested that lay commenting could be limited. At their annual fall meeting last month, the bishops held a 30-minute discussion on preparations for the synod.

When asked about reformatting the questions to make them more coherent, the outgoing conference president, Cardinal Timothy Dolan, said he saw little problem with the approach.

"The questionnaire is intended for the bishop," Dolan responded. "I don't think I'm on thin ice to say a bishop might take it upon himself to rephrase some of the questions to make it more discussable or more understandable to his people."

Washington Cardinal Donald Wuerl, who has served in official roles at previous synods, including as facilitator of last year's synod on the new evangelization, said whatever form the survey takes, bishops should return it to the original format when sending it to the Vatican.

"Otherwise, it's going to be very, very difficult for that council to try to deal with all of those questions," he said.

Despite initial concerns, many bishops have sought to show their openness to input. Pittsburgh Bishop David Zubik referred to the request for broad-based consultation as "a wonderful invitation from Pope Francis."

"It is abundantly clear that the topic of contemporary family life and marriage deserves our attention in the Catholic Church and society at large," Bishop David O'Connell of Trenton, N.J., wrote in a letter outlining the synod and questionnaire.

How dioceses have approached the collection of lay viewpoints offers a wide delta. Of the 46 *NCR* discovered -- through a Nov. 20-22 survey of 178 dioceses' website home pages, news releases and diocesan publications -- 30 dioceses posted the questionnaire online via a Web-based survey site. Another 11 requested that parishioners email or mail their responses, and several offered the option to respond online or by mail.

Most dioceses have made clear that the survey is not a poll of Catholic opinions. To give the questions greater context, nearly all dioceses posted alongside the survey the official preparatory document.

In addition, some dioceses provided links to church teachings and Vatican documents covered in the questions, with several providing a frequently-asked-questions section for additional information. In Juneau Nov. 22, Bishop Edward Burns held a discussion with parishioners on the questionnaire and its topics as part of a previously planned diocesan synod.

Others took a more narrow approach. The St. Louis archdiocese stated it would retrieve input from "targeted focus groups" composed of its pastoral and presbyteral councils, ministry team advisors, and the Office of Laity and Family Life. A similar consultation will occur in Belleville, Ill., and Madison, Wis., where the diocese has requested individuals only respond by mail in writing upon reading the documents and if they "feel that the bishop would benefit from their input."

The Harrisburg\*, Pa., diocese originally took a diocesan-based approach as well, before it added an online component "in light of the extraordinary interest in the survey." Richmond, Va., has limited responses to one per parish.

Most dioceses asked respondents to identify their home city, county or parish as a means to ensure their surveys specifically reflect views of the local church. Still, some allowed users to select an "outside the diocese" descriptor. While all surveys appeared in English, along with the preparatory document, many dioceses also offered Spanish versions as well, and even Vietnamese (San Jose) and Polish (Chicago) translations. San Jose also offered separate but identical versions for lay, clergy and religious.

As for the form the survey took, the majority of dioceses (30) chose to post it as it came from the Vatican -- 39 questions categorized under nine themes -- or with few noticeable variations. According to at least one diocesan official, that's the way Rome requested the questionnaire be conducted.

"In conversations that the Bishop [O'Connell] had at the Fall Assembly in Baltimore, he learned that the Vatican wanted the questionnaire kept intact, and unedited," Rayanne Bennett, executive director of communications for the Trenton diocese, told *NCR*.

But the bishops' conference said it did not say dioceses couldn't change questions. Echoing Wuerl, Mercy Sr. Mary Ann Walsh, director of media relations, said that the Vatican requested that responses to the questions be placed under the questions it provided.

"It's a matter of collating," Walsh said. "Doesn't say you can't change them."

About a dozen dioceses chose to summarize (often to nine questions centered on the nine themes) or reformat the questionnaire. In some cases, that meant reworking the wording; in others, modifying the open-ended questions into multiple choice and Likert scale (agree-disagree) queries. The Seattle archdiocese advised parish priests to administer the survey as they saw fit.

In Owensboro, Ky., Catholics can choose to complete the full or paraphrased version. A few (Hartford, Conn.; Norwich, Conn.; Spokane, Wash.) posted only the preparatory document, or linked to it on the Vatican's website without further instruction.

Once the consultation deadlines pass, dioceses will send their reports to the bishops' conference General Secretariat, which will handle compiling the report for Rome. In Austin, Texas, after the Dec. 9 deadline to respond, diocesan staff will process the information for Bishop Joe Vásquez to review and include as he completes the survey himself.

"The bishop will review that information and then figure out the best way to incorporate what he sees in those responses in his response to the survey," said communications director Christian González.

As for the feedback process itself, González called it "an important step forward" that dioceses nationwide have sought new technologies to collect input from parishioners.

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**Editor's note:** *An earlier version of this story misidentified the Harrisburg, Pa., diocese as Harrison.*

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