

Using this document

Everyone in the Archdiocese is invited to participate in the Synod consultation process. This document gives some background information on each of the topics together with some questions.

Input to the participation process is welcome from both individuals and from groups.

Your response can cover all the topics, just one topic or a selection of them.

The questions in the topics are “starters” to stimulate thought and reflection. Your response to the topic should not be limited by the questions.

Discernment

Whether the response to this document is from an individual or a group, it should be the product of prayerful discernment.

Discernment is a process of making decisions or arriving at answers in a prayerful way. Many of you will be familiar with it in the context of *The Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits. Pope Francis often talks about discernment:

“Discernment is one of the things that worked inside St. Ignatius. For him it is an instrument of struggle in order to know the Lord and follow him more closely... Discernment is always done in the presence of the Lord, looking at the signs, listening to the things that happen, the feeling of the people, especially the poor.”

POPE FRANCIS, AUG 2013

Father James Martin SJ explains the essence of discernment:

“At heart, the process begins with the belief that God wants a person, or a group, to make good, healthy and life-giving decisions; and through the ‘discernment of spirits,’ that is, sorting out what is coming from God and what is not, one gains clarity about the best path. God therefore both wants and *enables* individuals and groups to arrive at good decisions.”

Our relationship with God is at the heart of discernment. God respects our freedom by acting very gently with us. This means that we need to continually fine-tune our listening to God. Listening

to God amid the other interior and exterior voices in our lives is discernment.

How do we know that we are listening to God and following the movement of the Spirit within ourselves or in a group? Ask, “Am I at peace with this? Am I at ease now, especially if what I had previously thought was the best course of action is not what I now think? Or am I uneasy or anxious?”

A good discernment process brings clarity and inner peace. If there is unease or anxiety, personal issues are getting in the way.

Individual discernment

If you wish to make an individual response to this document, then this simple process may help you develop clarity about what you want to say.

1. Take some silent time to pray about how you will arrive at your response. Don't focus on the topic initially. Instead seek the freedom to follow where God leads, to let go of biases and negative feelings, and the patience to allow your response to evolve over time.
2. After a time of prayer, reflect upon the words “Go you are sent”.
 - What is my first response to these words?
 - Am I led towards any particular topics?
3. When you come to consider one of the topics, be willing to first let thoughts and feelings which may be influencing your response to surface:
 - How do I feel about this topic?
 - Are my feelings the result of my experience? Are they influenced by other people?
 - What happens if I bring my imagination into play?
 - What is God saying to me about this topic?

Negative thoughts and emotions or feelings of anxiety triggered by the topic get in the way of hearing what God is saying. We know we are listening to God when our thoughts are refreshing, peaceful, generate new inspiration and ideas, and direct us beyond ourselves.

4. Make notes as you reflect for use in preparing your input to the consultation. Send your response to the Archdiocese (see section Submitting your Response).

Group discernment

A discernment process is not the same as discussion.

Group discernment requires a commitment to listen attentively and to trust the intentions of others, together with a willingness to share our own insights, and let go of our assumptions or biases.

Above all, the members of the group must be committed to following God's will wherever it may lead. The freedom to follow the Spirit of God moving in the group is at the heart of the process. It means having an open mind and an open heart. If you approach the group with a feeling of anger or close-mindedness, or with determination to push a particular agenda, you will disrupt the group.

The group should have a *facilitator* whose task is to keep order, ensure listening and bring together what has been said. There are many people in our parishes who could fill this role, so look first among your own people for facilitators.

Groups should also appoint a *scribe* who can make notes for preparing a written response. Reflection on the topics will be valuable in itself, but it is important that the group's insights are submitted.

Participants need to speak honestly, but be prepared to listen to others. Openness means being prepared to let go of my ideas after listening to others. It is not a matter of my thinking being accepted, but I do need to be heard and listened to. Openness also means using the power of imagination to think about what might be.

The process should not be rushed. It takes time for people to listen to God, and time is needed for everyone to be heard. Time is needed for the deeper thinking which is part of discernment, and for people to reflect on what others are saying.

The process

1. Prayer

Use the group's own material for prayer or the material provided, and take time to be silent.

2. Understanding "Go you are sent"

Each person gives the thought which is most significant for them about the words "Go you are sent". (If a group is having more than one session this step applies only to the first session).

After a silence, each person is asked: what has someone said that is significant for you about "Go you are sent"?

3. Clarifying what the group will do in the session

The facilitator clarifies which topic(s) the group will reflect upon in this particular session.

4. Addressing a topic

Remember that the questions are "starters" to stimulate thought and reflection, and should not limit the group's response.

Step 1: Each person in turn gives their thoughts about the question. These thoughts should relate to the topic but participants are free to go beyond the question. They can share ideas, insights, experiences, new directions, dreams for the Church – this stage is a sharing process, not a discussion in which you respond to what another person has said.

Step 2: The group can repeat Step 1, or it can go on to Step 3.

Step 3: The facilitator asks: "What has someone said that is significant for you?" A time of silence before people begin to answer will allow them to discern what their response will be.

5. Summary

The facilitator then summarizes the ideas and insights of the group. Each participant is then asked how they feel about the summary.

If all are at peace with the summary then the group's work is done. (Note: "I can live with it" is not being at peace with the summary.)

If there does not seem to be agreement about the summary, the facilitator may ask the group to repeat the process after a time of silent prayer. The aim is for everyone to feel at peace with what will go forward from the group.

6. Written response

The group should make arrangements for someone (probably the scribe or facilitator) to record their ideas and send them to the Archdiocese (see section Submitting your Response).

