

A California bishop invited community organizers to help with the synod. So far, it's working.

J.D. Long-García February 28, 2022

Bishop Daniel E. Garcia has been leading the Diocese of Monterey, Calif., since 2019. He said he had about one year of “normal” before the pandemic began.

He had been serving as auxiliary bishop of the Diocese of Austin, Tex., when Pope Francis appointed him to the coastal California diocese.

“When I first got here, people asked me, ‘What is your vision for Monterey?’” Bishop Garcia said. He would laugh as he told them: “Well, I don’t know. I just moved here from Texas. Let me get an understanding of the landscape first!”

There are 46 parishes in the Diocese of Monterey, whose more than 200,000 Catholics are spread out over four counties and 8,000 square miles between Los Angeles and San Francisco. According to Bishop Garcia, it takes four to five hours to drive the territory north to south. So it took a while to get to know the local church.

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Bishop Garcia went for his first ad limina visit to Rome with the other West Coast bishops just a few weeks before pandemic lockdowns began in California. He said it was his first ad limina, and he was moved by the words Pope Francis shared.

“He really encouraged us to be spiritual fathers that would walk with our people. He uses the language, always, ‘accompaniment, accompaniment,’” Bishop Garcia said. “I see that the synodal process is doing exactly that. We’re walking with our people, we’re listening to our people, and it will make us a stronger church. It will challenge us, because it’ll probably identify some aspects of our church that we need to look at. And that’s O.K. He’s giving us permission for us to do that.”

Pope Francis initiated a roughly two-year synodal process on communion, participation and mission last October. Parishes throughout the world are called to participate in the process, which invites people of faith to reflect on their experiences with the church.

“I know that some are leery of the synodal process, but I think we have to trust that the Holy Spirit is behind this and has given us a profound leader that is trying to open our eyes to the realities right in front of us,” Bishop Garcia said. “So I hope we can trust the Spirit.”

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The Diocese of Monterey is in the beginning stages of the synod, training parish groups to go out and listen to the experiences of everyone, including those on the margins. Bishop Garcia and Deacon David Ford, who is leading the process in the diocese, both have experience working with community organizing groups in the past. They were quick to enlist their help with the synod.

“We don’t need to reinvent the wheel,” said Bishop Garcia, who had been meeting with [Communities Organized for Relational Power in Action](#), or COPA, since he arrived in Monterey. COPA is an association of community organizers based in California. “There are already some processes out there,” the bishop said. COPA “does a really good job of getting the pulse of the people. We’ve been really happy about how, at least initially, it’s going.”

Diocesan leaders planned to host five separate regional meetings to train leaders throughout the diocese about how to carry out the synod at their parish. Bishop Garcia invited pastors to attend along with a group of parishioners who would lead the synod at their church. The fourth of these regional meetings was on Feb. 12.

“In my lifetime, this is the first time the Catholic Church is asking to work with other institutions or other groups being part of this journey together,” said Maria Rocha, a COPA leader at Our Lady of the Assumption in Pajaro. Ms. Rocha has been working with COPA for 13 years and said she was delighted to see 150 people show up for the first meeting.

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“It makes me happy that people are coming and are willing to work together for the betterment of the group and the community,” she said.

Timothy McManus is a lead organizer in California with the Industrial Areas Foundation, a national network of faith and community-based organizations, of which COPA is a member. He said there are some key elements to community organizing that can help the church carry out the synod. For example, it is important for parishes to form the right kind of team.

“The team should reflect the diversity of the parish and get into different pockets of the parish,” he said. “Team members should have certain leadership qualities; it should be someone who can listen, is curious about others, has imagination and is not closed off to possibilities.”

Mr. McManus said COPA has been helping participants at the diocesan training sessions learn how to actively listen, engage people and ask questions. He said that it is essential to focus on people’s actual experiences and not to spend time focusing on theories and ideologies.

One question he asks participants is, “What recent stories can you share, positive and negative?,” he said.

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“Because that’s real,” Mr. McManus said. “Your experience is real. And it gets much closer to the truth of something than when we have our theories or opinions or worldviews of things.” COPA also shared how to move the conversation when difficult issues come up, like immigration on outreach to the L.G.B.T. community and divorced and remarried Catholics.

Another key facet of successful meetings is turnout. Mr. McManus referenced what civil rights activist Ella Baker termed “spadework.”

“It takes a lot of phone calls and being outside after Mass, repeating an announcement several times at Mass and follow-up calls,” Mr. McManus said. “It’s just really working it so you can get as many people as possible into the circle.”

The danger in not delivering good turnout, he said, is having the group of the same people who show up for every church event. That is not the point of the synod.

“Sometimes the only way for the church to move forward is to really connect to what we’re hearing from people,” Mr. McManus said. “The real thing that we’re after here is, will people have a different experience of their parish because of this process?”

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“If it stays as the College of Cardinals or the bishops figuring out a way forward, it’s just going to cut out so many people and such a wealth of knowledge and wisdom out there that comes from people’s experience,” he continued.

That kind of clericalism is not limited to the ordained, Deacon Ford noted. Sometimes lay Catholics perpetuate it as well.

Luis Arreguín, a COPA leader at Our Lady of Refuge in Castroville, said members of his community thought the synod only involved clergy members. “So I’m telling them, ‘No! This is the time for you to be involved with your church and your parish,’” he said. “It’s taken so long, but this is the way for our church to be more proactive. It’s more than just spiritual thinking. It’s about giving people power and helping to address their problems at their roots.”

In a way, the potential impact of clericalism is why he and Bishop Garcia were adamant that a survey was not the right way to carry out the synod. Face-to-face conversations are the way to answer Francis’ call for the synod, Deacon Ford said, and COPA has been helping with that.

“It’s important to resist the temptation to ask too many questions, which could become guiding questions,” Deacon Ford said. “Have faith in the process and in the Spirit and in the power of reflection that the needs that you’re concerned about and lots of other things are going to surface.”

The two questions leaders are stressing in the Diocese of Monterey are: “How do we experience the church’s journey together?” and “Where do I feel the Holy Spirit inviting us to journey in the future?”

After they ask these questions, Deacon Ford is urging group leaders to promote “prayerful listening.”

“We’re being countercultural in a society where nobody listens,” he said. “Instead of reflecting, we react. And sometimes it’s loud and mean.”

He stressed that the process should be more about listening than conversation. Sharing should be about personal experiences, not about ideology. For the most part, that has happened, Deacon Ford said. However, at one of the sessions, one of the participants

stood up before the large group and said disparaging things about the L.G.B.T. community, he said.

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“Sometimes I have to put on my coach’s uniform, you know. I had to shut him down,” Deacon Ford said. “I told him: ‘I’m sorry sir, but the demeanor in which you’re talking is clearly hostile. And that’s not in the spirit of what we’re trying to accomplish here.’”

He invited the man to speak with him privately about his concerns, but the man ended up leaving the training session early.

Deacon Ford said that he believed the L.G.B.T. community, immigrants and the divorced and remarried were among those groups whom Francis had in mind when he asked the church to reach those on the peripheries.

Barbara Meister, a COPA leader and parishioner at Holy Cross Church in Santa Cruz, said the church’s involvement in social justice was the reason why she was attracted to the faith in the 1980s. She noted the U.S. bishops’ advocacy for economic injustice at the time.

“If I listen with my heart and soul, as a Catholic, as a person who attests to these values of loving your neighbor as yourself, then I [have to] care about them getting rental assistance, regardless of whether they have papers or not,” she said. “I’ve got to care about whether their kids are in school and if they have enough food and if they have an internet connection. And what can I do about it? If I’m truly their neighbor, I have an obligation.”

Mary Litel-Walsh, a COPA leader at Resurrection Church in Aptos, said it can be difficult to have dialogue within the church. During one session, she noted that some of the lay participants were waiting for the priest to speak first. She encouraged the group to speak up. “There was real excitement once they started participating,” she said.

“I love this process,” Ms. Litel-Walsh, who has been a member of COPA for 13 years, said of the synod. “This process fits with COPA and I.A.F.’s ideals and philosophy so much because we’re looking for marginalized groups, for diversity, to include everyone, to work from the bottom up. And that’s just exactly how we do it. So it’s a perfect fit with us.”