



Process for Facilitating Synodal Consultations

Facilitating Potentially Difficult Synodal Consultations

As a facilitator you may find some consultations are difficult because of people who have traumatic experience.

of Church through abuse, people who (often unknowingly) attempt to hijack a consultation for their own agenda, or who have few effective filters for what they might say. There are some ways to mitigate or respond to those situations.

1. Preparation and clarity of purpose

- Set clear expectations, process and purpose early and keep on topic.
- Set the tone as prayerful and reflective.
- What may be reported out of the synodal consultation is not what we all agree upon, but what we discern as having potential to be the will of God for the Church in the future. Even conflicting perspectives can be reported.
- Be clear that the synodal consultations are not equipped to provide the support that those who suffered abuse need, and at the same time we need to hear those who choose to raise the abuses by the Church as pertinent to our considerations of a future Church.
- Be clear that our purpose is to help form a more synodal and listening Church and that means keeping an open mind so the Spirit can work in all of us. Don't let our personal agendas limit our conversations.

2. Responding to a speaker who talks of the trauma of abuse by a minister of the Church

Tragically, some consultation participants will have had traumatic experiences of Church. Facilitators must take into account that those traumas are real and deserve our compassion above all. It is also true that the synodal consultation is not the place for long discourses of those tragedies. It is the place to recall and acknowledge that they happened, that they had a severe negative impact on individuals, families, faith communities, and the Church as a whole, and need to be prevented. For example, it is appropriate to recall that those tragedies happened and to talk about, for example, how a synodal Church might help prevent them happening again.

What can a facilitator do when an abuse survivor speaks?

- a. Acknowledge the trauma is real and deep.
- b. Thank the speaker for their courage, acknowledge the depth of hurt you hear as they speak.
- c. Set a boundary such as "I'm glad you had the courage to bring this tragedy up. While we cannot go deeply into the personal stories in this consultation, we do need to acknowledge the pain those abusers and coverups by Church leaders caused."



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- d. Set a direction such as “Those tragedies must be part of our considerations in these synodal consultations, which are forward leaning, looking at a renewed Church where such things cannot happen. As we consider the direction the Church needs to go, please keep the survivors and their families in mind. We do not want that abuse to continue.”

3. Responding to people with agendas

It may happen that either individuals or groups attend synodal consultations and come with particular agendas. When a facilitator can recognize this, there are approaches that may help keep the conversation on track.

When an individual or group expresses absolute certainty, a facilitator can respond with curiosity: “Help me understand...,” “I am wondering whether/if...,” or “I have a question...”

When an individual or group blames others, a facilitator can respond by inviting other perspectives and developing consensus: “How could any of us make a difference here?” “Are there some steps we would agree together that would be helpful here?” “How could all of us be part of the solution?”

Sometimes it is also necessary to restate the purpose and nature of the synodal consultation. “The synodal consultation is forward looking, envisioning the Church of the future, and we are approaching this in a reflective, prayerful manner, keeping an open mind so the Spirit can surface the direction forward for our Church. Let us all please take a moment to place ourselves in an internal space where we can constructively participate by how we listen and how we speak.”

4. Responding to people with no filters

Some people of goodwill speak without awareness of the impact they have on others by how they speak or the words that they say. It is more than just abrupt; it is doing harm to others even if they see it as “just being honest” or something similar.

The facilitator may need a graduated response to such people:

- Gently interrupt the speaker and remind them that we need to be respectful of others.
- Gently tell the speaker the impact they are having on some people in the room.
- Call upon the group to share how this speaker is impacting them (If you think they will speak up and if they are willing to share that through you as the facilitator).
- Ask the speaker to change how they are speaking (e.g., softer, more aware of how people are hearing them, focus on the question not the person).
- Suggest a break or a time for reflection and quietly approach the speaker and ask for a change in delivery or tell the speaker the group will be moving on after the break.