

Detroit's Synod/69, Vatican II-style: A Precursor to Francis' Synod

In 2021, Pope Francis invited Catholics around the world to build together a “synodal church... that listens to one another and to the Holy Spirit,” sharing their concerns, hopes and dreams.

Over 50 years ago, a similar path of engagement and discernment was initiated and fully embraced by Detroit Archbishop John F. Dearden whose transformative experiences as Council Father and first President of NCCB prepared him well for consultation, collaboration and dialogue. “*John Francis Dearden*” was a bridge, spanning the decades between John XXIII and



Francis—an ambassador of John's Council and a forerunner of Francis' Synod.

Archbishop John Dearden invited people to participate in a synod, Vatican II-style—not only to “listen” but to “**Speak Up.**” The end result was *Synod/69* which, to this day, offers a **viable model** for others planning their own synodal experience in order to share concerns about Church governance, policies and practices. In 2000, one Detroit parish team used the model to involve parishioners in setting parish goals and writing a new mission statement, both implemented on Pentecost.

The following highlights are taken from primary sources published by the archdiocese: History of the Synod in Detroit prior to 1967; public announcements made in June and Sept 1967; and the leaders' Parish Participation Plan Booklet.

HIGHLIGHTS: Parish Participation Plan, Speak Up Groups and Synod/69

- ✦ The three-year plan (1967 to 1969) involved 335 parishes (population of 1.5 million Catholics)
- ✦ A series of three programs, “**You are the Church,**” with Archbishop Dearden was produced on Kinescope (prior to video) and viewed on closed-circuit TV in parishes, convents and schools to introduce **Vatican II** and the **Parish Participation Plan.**

- ✦ Printed educational materials engaged **190,000 adults and high school students** to study and discuss a **choice of 9 topics:** clergy, religious, laity, worship, education, administration, ecumenical affairs, community affairs, and missionary activity.

- ✦ **7,200 Speak Up groups met for 6 weeks.**

- ✦ Booklets with “reader-friendly” content and discussion questions were distributed to the participants: **6 booklets for each topic** presented Council teachings in those specific areas of interest.

- ✦ **65,000 recommendations** were written/typed onto carbonless forms and submitted: one for the Speak Up group chair, one for the pastor, and one for the deanery (regional) committee. The proposals from each group were to be published in the church bulletin and voted upon by the community at large.

- ✦ The proposals were tabulated and **synthesized into 3,629 proposals** on computer punch cards (Burroughs Corp.) and distributed to the synod commissions in three stages: regional, deanery and diocesan.

- ✦ After 7 months of further review, edits of proposals and consultation with experts, preliminary documents were presented to **1100 deanery delegates.** They in turn discussed these over two days for approval with Archbishop Dearden and commissioners.

- ✦ On **March 30, 1969, a formal promulgation** of the documents, known as *Synod/69*, was made by Archbishop Dearden at a public mass held at Cobo Hall convention center, taking effect on Pentecost, May 25, 1969. “**By This Covenant,**” a publication about the synodal process, the restructuring of the archdiocese and the statutes/recommendations, was distributed across the Archdiocese of Detroit.

The results were all-encompassing and innovative: the archdiocese was restructured into vicariates led by *elected* vicars to encourage discussion and decision-making on the local level through mandated vicariate and parish councils. Departments and offices were established to broaden the educational foundations and serve the pastoral needs in areas of worship, Christian service and Christian formation. Delegates for laity, religious and clergy were appointed as the Archbishop's representative to handle matters directly. Additional statutes and recommendations were enumerated in the **80-page Synod/69 document.**

The initial June 1967 announcement was addressed “**Dearly Beloved in Christ**” and expressed the archbishop’s fervent wish “to hear the free voice of our people on all topics—even those beyond my authority. **How else can I know what is in your hearts?**” His plan to educate, engage, energize and empower the People of God to grow the Church of Detroit was an exciting and inspiring journey that people still talk about today with deep gratitude and nostalgia.

At the mass of promulgation in 1969, Archbishop Dearden framed the three-year process with these words: “After months of preparation, of collaboration and of shared responsibility, we are to enact today what reflects our aspirations, hopes, desires and dreams of the Church of today and tomorrow. The document [*Synod/69*] reflects the course we are to follow. It traces the patterns of our movement forward. **The Synod breathes the spirit of the Vatican Council.** (*Emphasis added*) It was needed to give life, warmth, strength and intensity to the council directives. What we have done is so significant to the Church, what we have accomplished is clear. The Synod is a beginning, not an ending.”

In the foreword to “**By This Covenant,**” Archbishop Dearden reflects: “Our 1969 Synod is now a reality. The Church of the archdiocese will be stronger because we as a people were able to share the responsibility for its growth in Christ. I am personally grateful for the unwavering dedication of so many in this singular event.

“...Since 1977, we have deliberated to find Christian answers to the fundamental questions of our times. With the Holy Spirit moving among us to guide us, the world which we are trying to shape reflects the world as we would have it: the fulfillment of God’s design for the people of our community.

“The Synod guidelines are set forth to bring order to our efforts. Because none of us can anticipate the newness of tomorrow, the guidelines purposely have the flexibility that the times demand. Together we must accept an era of change as a time of opportunity...we must move into it with a confidence and trust born of the Holy Spirit.”

In chapter one, Dearden acknowledges the **limitations of any effort like the synod** when he writes, “The full and real results of our seeking progress together are inscribed in our hearts and embodied in our lives. The written word cannot capture all that is real in our hearts. The printed conclusions...are then, at best, our partial,

inadequate and human response to the urgings of God’s Holy Spirit. As imperfect these documents may be, they are our response in faith to God and express our covenant with Him to live as the people He calls us to be.”

The chapter laying out the history of Synod/69 draws a parallel with the Council and Detroit’s Synod/69: “To make the 103,014 words of ...the Council’s documents ...real...meaningful and concrete within the Archdiocese..., Archbishop Dearden, himself one of the leading figures at the Council, decided to model as closely as possible a similar assembly here. **Thus, Vatican II finds its replica in the Detroit Archdiocesan Synod/69.**” (*Emphasis added*)

On April 28, 1969, one month after the Synod’s promulgation, John Francis Dearden was elevated to the College of Cardinals by Pope Paul VI.

On a personal note: I was a team member of the **Institute for Continuing Education** responsible for preparing the printed materials for the Parish Participation Plan and *Synod/69* in consultation with the Synod Coordinating Commission. Jane Wolford, mother of seven, was its talented executive director. She was instrumental in designing **other concurrent adult educational programs** with the full support of Archbishop Dearden. He stressed the need for ongoing Christian formation and education for the People of God to grow in wisdom and grace and to live in covenant—with God and with one another.

Not only did the Institute for Continuing Education handle the planning and logistics of the massive Parish Participation Plan, **the office also sponsored ongoing adult education opportunities: 8-week classes** in the fall and spring in 8 counties, it also brought prominent authors, theologians and international experts to speak to large, receptive audiences as part of its “**Signs Series.**” The office consisted of nine women and one priest consultant. At this time of renewal and reform, Detroit was known across the country as a dynamic archdiocese, dedicated **to living the wisdom of Vatican II.**

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT:

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“Let us have a good journey together!”
Pope Francis