

DIOCESE OF HARRISBURG

Synod on Synodality Synthesis

July 2022

The Diocese of Harrisburg, established on March 3, 1868, comprises 15 counties in central Pennsylvania: Adams, Columbia, Cumberland, Dauphin, Franklin, Juniata, Lancaster, Lebanon, Mifflin, Montour, Northumberland, Perry, Snyder, Union and York. The Diocese includes 89 parishes and 7 missions; 36 Catholic schools; approximately 230,000 Catholics; 98 Diocesan Priests; and 78 Permanent Deacons.

In October of 2021, the Diocese began its work for the Synod on Synodality with the appointment of a synodal leadership team at an inaugural Mass, held at Saint Patrick's Cathedral in Harrisburg. The Diocesan phase of the Synod concluded on June 29 with a closing Mass at Holy Name of Jesus Church, also in Harrisburg. What follows is an overview of the information collected during this process, starting with the fundamental questions to consider throughout this process.

“How does this ‘journeying together’ take place today on different levels (from the local level to the universal one), allowing the Church to proclaim the Gospel? And, what steps is the Spirit inviting us to take in order to grow as a synodal Church?”

Guided by the Holy Spirit, parishioners from 56 of our parishes and missions participated in the synod through local gatherings, prayer services, small group reflections, written responses, social media, online surveys, and artistic expression. These conversations involved members of the clergy, women in consecrated life, and a generous representation of our lay faithful, including 6th through 12th grade students from 26 of our schools. When considering the three main areas of this question, this process led to the following observations:

- Participation - Listening without prejudice and journeying together were welcomed experiences. The consultation process provided for meaningful dialogue and open reflection on personal experiences and encounters with the Church. Many recognized that the Holy Spirit is indeed active among us, even amid the struggle to be faithful to Christ as individuals or as an institution. The synod has enkindled hope that these opportunities will continue to bear fruit as an integral part of our Catholic communities of faith.
- Mission - A major theme throughout this process was the call of the local Church to invite, welcome, and make all individuals feel wanted and needed as a part of every parish family. From those who attend Mass every Sunday to those who sense they are on the margins of ecclesial life, every person is called to evangelize and become more engaged in the life and mission of the Church.

- Communion - Christ's prayer that we all be one inspires a genuine impulse for unity among our people, whether across generations (especially youth, young adults, and the elderly), among different races and ethnicities, inclusive of those who are marginalized or who sense exclusion, and among believers and non-believers alike. At the same time, tension exists among recognizing the need to meet people where they are, welcoming them without prejudice, and helping them to respond to the Gospel call with integrity and faithfulness. We seek to discern well the balance between lovingly welcoming and lovingly challenging people, especially as the chasm between Church teaching and social norms grows. Ultimately, the fulfillment of Christ's prayer will manifest more perfectly when we live the truth in love.

With the Diocesan phase of this process now complete, we can acknowledge honestly and confidently that, however imperfect, the Church of Harrisburg is calling others to and experiencing among ourselves a Spirit-filled participation in the life of Christ, a sincere response to the mission entrusted to us by Christ, and a mature desire for deeper communion with Christ and one another.

In the sections that follow, we provide additional details on specific areas of evaluation during this process.

Companions on the Journey

Many of the ideas, prayers, and reflections found throughout this report were expressed, some briefly, in this section of the synodal questions. Whether being more welcoming, listening to understand, coming together more as one family of faith, or even recognizing the damage that has been caused because of clergy abuse and the COVID-19 pandemic, many thoughtful and timely suggestions were made on how, as a Church, we can better support each other and walk together on our faith journeys.

There were many positives expressed by respondents on how parishes are already walking together; visitation for the homebound, involvement in parish groups, active participation in youth and adult religious education programs, and parish community activities are all ways some parishes are already building community.

However, respondents gave voice to just as many areas of concern. One of the most common is related to reaching those who may consider themselves marginalized, like the elderly and homebound, the divorced, refugees and immigrants, and those with LGBTQ tendencies. But these groups are not the only ones respondents identified as needing more attention; youth, new families, single parents, and those who have fallen on hard times were all identified as also needing additional welcoming.

Many shared ideas on how to welcome and journey together. Some of the suggestions include offering more activities for all parishioners, especially the youth; having opportunities to express feelings and thoughts in a non-judgemental environment; providing more faith

enrichment opportunities for those of all ages; offering regional or deanery-based events in order to share the resources of the local parishes; and engaging in more loving outreach to the LGBTQ community while following the teachings of the Church.

Listening

There were a number of themes that developed throughout this process related to listening. Some who responded noted that to truly listen, we must focus not just on the physical needs of those we are listening to, but also on the spiritual and mental needs. Specific groups identified as needing more outreach are the elderly and homebound, youth, young adults, immigrants, inactive or fallen-away Catholics, and those from the LGBTQ community.

There were some responses identifying some members of the clergy who are positive examples of listening and communication; however, other comments noted that training programs for the clergy on having a good “bedside manner” would be beneficial. Some respondents recommended identifying those groups we wish to reach and develop specific plans to accomplish this. Still, others recommended a training session on how to welcome people into the church on more personal levels. As one responded said, “we need to open our eyes, ears, and hearts, and overcome our shyness to speak to people we don’t know.”

Speaking Out

Public practice of the faith and our church teachings are counter-cultural, so they are often unwelcome and may be met with reprisal because of the current secular/cultural climate. This has made some uncomfortable, or fearful, of expressing their faith publicly. However, in some areas of the Diocese, parishioners desire deeper formation in the Faith in order to confidently and effectively share and evangelize.

Reprisal is also a concern in our parishes. Fear of criticism or rebuke prevents some from speaking freely or participating fully in the life of the Church. Opinions on this ranged from the pastor seeming to be closed or reacts poorly to constructive comments. Some also note that there are obvious, politically-oriented concerns about the Church and fellow parishioners from both sides of the aisle. From either perspective, we’re not doing enough, or we are focusing too much, on some matters and not others.

Those who provided feedback for this section of the Synod reflection added that an option for anonymously sharing thoughts and suggestions, or for openly giving testimony to their experiences without being judged, would be beneficial.

Celebration

Responses on celebration range from a new appreciation for the Traditional Latin Mass and a desire to see the New Order of the Mass be more inspiring, while others are content with their

celebrations and speak well of the efforts in their parishes. Good homilies with sound, practical teaching that is faithful to the Magisterium was a recurring theme expressed in this portion of the Synod process.

Our liturgies, for many, are encounters of grace. A critical understanding of and reverence for the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist and fruitful participation in the Mass are of particular importance. Respondents especially desire celebrations that engage and involve our youth, and that are welcoming and inviting to our communities.

Finally, where two or more cultures with different languages existed in a parish, there exists a genuine desire to bring the family together, but answering the question of how to unify is difficult and people expressed frustration in their attempt to cross the barriers of language and culture. The good news is that unity is a goal.

Sharing Responsibility for Our Common Mission

Many agree that service as a form of mission is important, but this service does not always take the form of evangelization. A lived experience of contributing in acts of service was expressed and understood to be a cooperation in God's grace accompanied by personal satisfaction and a sense of purpose. An effort to form small, active Christian communities in a few parishes seems to provide areas for growth that show promise. A desire for the Church to be more public with the faith (e.g., through Eucharistic Processions, street evangelization, prayer at Catholic sporting events) is seen as a way to inspire.

Also noted was the rich history our Religious Sisters have for leadership in mission. They have been educators, administrators, and advocates for the marginalized: victims of human trafficking, domestic violence, individuals who suffered abuses from clergy, religious men and women.

But with that said, sustaining involvement or gaining new involvement in the mission remains a challenge. The following complications to building this common mission were noted in the responses:

- Poor catechesis or a lack of understanding of the faith, which leads to a lack of interest or confidence.
- A false ecumenism and a bland interreligious dialogue that treats the Catholic Church as one among equals.
- The bad example of grievously sinful clergy, bland and uninspiring preaching, and weak enforcement of any standards in the public sphere (e.g., allowing Catholic politicians who radically oppose Church teaching to continue in Communion without direct public correction).
- The idea that evangelization is only for the clergy or those with special gifts and training.
- The over-commitment of families to sports and extracurricular activities.
- The difficulty of reaching people through the many means of communication.
- Competition with the plethora of modes of entertainment, social media, and, worse, addictions.
- Sloth and other sin.

- The lack of any invitation or the demand for perfection among those who want to be involved in the mission.

Dialogue in Church and Society

As noted under the “Speaking Out” section, whether real or perceived, some believe their pastors listen, others say they do not. Examples were given of both pastors encouraging communication, while others take offense at suggestions.

Some see their Parish efforts in the community as both an engagement and dialogue with society and diverse groups, but there were thoughts expressed that this dialogue is limited to within the groups of interest in the parish. Responses indicated that there are opportunities for greater dialogue and for bringing all people within parishes together as a family.

Looking inward, respondents in some areas feel their churches are culturally one-dimensional. The lack of diversity in their region leads to a lack of diversity in the parish; however, diversity must be seen in more dimensions than just skin color or culture (socio-economic status and ability, e.g.). The need to engage all the areas of society with the gospel requires a broader concept of diversity.

In particular, renewed attention to our Hispanic Apostolate is desired. We tend to think the Hispanic community is one culture, but what we have are multiple cultures that speak the Spanish language. Approximately 10% of our parishioners are from one of these cultures. Our Diocese and our parishes should make intentional efforts to welcome and support our Hispanic brothers and sisters, ministering to them and with them, and providing a proportionate representation among our leadership.

Looking outward, the faithful desire more boldness on the part of the Church, wanting her to “control the narrative”. Some repeated comments were collected about the aftermath of scandals and bishops who oppose one another on the fundamentals of Catholic doctrine. Knowing and speaking Catholic Truth are important to authentic dialogue – we should not have to water down or deny part of who we are or what we believe in the process.

Finally, the impact of the pandemic on our communities and relationships, along with the challenge of knowing your fellow parishioners enough to dialogue with them, were also mentioned. People go to Mass and maintain the minimum standard, without getting involved in the ministries and events of the parish that would put them in contact with others.

Ecumenism

Some parishioners do not know if the parish has good or any ecumenical relations with other churches. Still others are very confident with their collaboration with other churches. Working together in ecumenical food pantries, prayer services, concerts, nursing home care, and other joint efforts were all provided as examples of this outreach.

In some areas, however, suspicion still exists toward the Catholic faith, hindering collaboration. Also, opportunities for cooperation can be difficult as other Christians continue to adopt views of morality that are more secular than Christian in nature.

A few suggest we take note of the successes of other Christian communities and learn from them, others say we shouldn't see Catholicism as "better than" other religions, and yet others say we must continue to focus on our commonalities.

Authority and Participation

The Church hierarchy received mixed reviews. Respondents want more clarity and unity in teaching among the bishops; scandals were mentioned; and COVID-related decisions were criticized. Some want to see more women in leadership, while others have concerns over too much lay consultation and want the bishops and priests to be shepherds. Still others added that the "evaluations" mentioned in the list of questions are unheard of.

Communication is also a challenge. On the one hand, we are trying to provide information to parishioners using multiple media; on the other, people ask for more communication. Some suggest parish open houses, ministry fairs, and other ways to invite people to offer their talents.

Many discovered that there are many ministries their churches are accomplishing, while others lamented that they did not do more. Speculation was provided that certain efforts may benefit from an intermediate level of governance, perhaps regionally. The good news is that people want to see their churches thriving with involved parishioners.

Discerning and Deciding

The Diocese has a robust history of lay leadership in parishes, ministries, and apostolates. The "One Who Serves Book" was developed in the Diocese and is used throughout our parishes and other dioceses to establish, train, and guide parish pastoral councils. When pastoral councils or finance councils were mentioned, the remarks were generally positive. Some respondents want more voices to be heard and ongoing consultations would be welcome.

An appeal to prayer before decision-making was noted among respondents. Some people felt that community involvement in decision-making was already happening in their parishes, but others could not recall ever being consulted in their experience. People want their parish council meetings to be open or have a way to voice their perspectives with leadership more regularly.

Finally, without proper and ongoing formation, neither clergy or laity are necessarily fit to be competent participants in decision-making. The "divergences of vision and conflicts" (mentioned in the broader set of questions) will continue to grow unless the people involved are regularly informed, transformed, and practicing the faith. Christ established the Church to teach the people, not the other way around.

Forming Ourselves in Synodality

Respondents referred to the many good initiatives already happening in their parish and our Diocese as a way to form their communities in synodality. Let us not ignore the fact that we

already do this in many ways. A portion of the respondents, however, do not seem to know what those initiatives are. Evaluation of our efforts, both for leadership and programming, should improve – not to condemn or challenge, but to gain knowledge that reveal opportunities for growth or change.

Respondents repeated the importance of liturgy done well with clear emphasis on Church teaching, ongoing prayer and dependence on the Holy Spirit, and the need for more opportunities to share.

Allowing others to speak openly without judgment helps others feel closer to the community and can reveal areas of formation that need attention. Responding to open forums can come later without the need to engage in debate or disagreement. Many want to belong to their communities even when they disagree. Cutting them off with immediacy only makes bringing them closer to the heart of Christ and His Church more difficult. Pursuing the lost sheep is equally important to keeping the sheep we have.

Many also want regular opportunities for sharing in the spirit of this synod.

Conclusions

All responses have been recorded and will be used in our efforts to provide ongoing engagement, planning, and strategy with the parishes and ministries throughout the Diocese. We also plan to encourage and schedule recurring encounters in the spirit of synodality, both regionally and at the diocesan level.

As we come to the end of this synthesis, some further areas for discernment include how to encourage our faithful to approach the political realm as Catholics first and foremost, promoting ongoing opportunities to gather, share, and listen in the spirit of synodality, and understanding and dialoguing with those on the margins of faith, without dilution of the teachings of the Church.

With the Diocesan phase of the Synod now complete, our synthesis will be provided to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. The next phase, the continental phase, will begin in September, leading up to the end of the Synod with the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops at the Vatican in October 2023.