DIOCESE OF HARRISBURG
Interim Stage
Synod on Synodality Synthesis
April 2024

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 88 parishes and 6 mission churches; 34 Catholic schools; approximately 201,000 Catholics; 90 Diocesan Priests; and 78 Permanent Deacons.

During this Interim Stage of Synodality, the Most Reverend Timothy C. Senior, Bishop of Harrisburg, instructed the Secretariat for Catholic Life & Evangelization to proceed with the forum. Two online sessions were held with an invitation to all the faithful of the Diocese of Harrisburg, which led to representation of the deaneries throughout our geographical area. Those who participated in the Interim Stage of the Synod were appreciative of the opportunity to have input, which led to lively discussions within the breakout session.

What follows is an overview of the responses collected during this process of the guiding questions. About 40 people of the Diocese participated in the Synod Interim Stage. At each event, participants were divided into an average breakout group of 5 for discussion. Each breakout had a volunteer who took notes and shared the record of the discussion at the end of the breakout session. Extra time was allotted for open discussion at the end. Given that the Synod is an opportunity for people to speak openly, we wanted to allow for that time.

The following are key points to the Synod questions with added comments that may or may not have pertained specifically to the questions; however, they are being shared for an overall view of our session.

In response to the successes the faithful have experienced within the Church's structure, parish life has had the most positive effect. The parish communities that offered opportunities for small group gatherings led to a "personal lived faith" within a communal atmosphere. "Christ Life Series," "That Man is You," "Eucharist Revival Series," as well as RCIA Programs were mentioned as highlights. For some, the first time they recall openly discussing their faith was in a parish small group, and it was a welcome experience. Such programs provided opportunities for open dialog, even within the structure of a prepared lesson or series.

These positive small group gatherings were not limited to more formal structured programs. Parish-formed Bible studies, small prayer groups, Charismatic Renewal, and groups formed to discuss the upcoming Sunday readings also attracted parishioners. Synod

participants went on to mention the “Bible in a Year" and the “Catechism in a Year” podcasts as beneficial because many people from a broader area “have access to the same talks,” bringing a sense of unity.

Respondents viewed the inclusion of the laity in the liturgy to be a success, pointing to the “stronger sense of participation” the change engendered. The roles of Readers, Sacristans, Cantors, and Extra-Ordinary Ministers of Holy Communion (EMHC) positively affected several of our Interim Stage Synod participants who, as a result, felt drawn deeper into their faith. Extending the active role of EMHCs beyond the Mass to visiting the homebound, hospitals, and nursing homes helped inculcate greater devotion to and reverence for the Sacramental life of the Church.

Several participants appreciate the availability of the Extraordinary Form of Mass and the growth within this community. One of the breakout groups noted that the Latin Mass Liturgy is “thriving with young Catholic families” which brings hope in holding on to this traditional celebration.

Ecumenism is considered a key role of the Church in building the Body of Christ. A participant mentioned a parish community’s ecumenical efforts which has helped in “mutual understanding and common ground.” This has created an atmosphere of commonality and “dispelling myths” about Catholicism in a positive active format. Another noted that her Pastor has been active in these ecumenical efforts which has been very much appreciated by the parishioners.

Several others stressed how an “engaging pastor” can have an incredibly positive effect on the parish. Positive impacts due to an engaging pastor ranged from the good relationship the pastor cultivated with the parishioners to the beauty of the liturgical celebrations. A pastor is crucial to creating the atmosphere of a parish. He can move a parish from stagnant to vibrant or from withdrawn to engaging. Some emphasized that parishes would benefit from having a pastoral associate/assistant because so much is expected from our priests as they carry both administrative and ministerial responsibilities.

Some respondents also indicated lack of pastoral support for people in the LGBTQ+ community. Concerns continue to come from both sides of this issue: either in support of Church teaching or dissent. There was an individual in our discussion session that said they benefitted from past group support when a program, Desert Stream/Living Waters, had been established in their parish and he lamented that the program eventually ended. The Church does teach we are all children of God with equal dignity; yet, people living in this community, even if not acting on their inclinations, feel abandoned by the Church community. Courage International is a pastoral support opportunity for these faithful individuals in our Diocese, though awareness of the program may be lacking. It was noted that the Diocese actively and diligently seeks pastoral support ministries for all. Most

recently, Eden Invitation was added as a new ministry for people who experience same-sex attraction or gender discordance. Indeed, this topic and area of ministry remains a concern to the faithful from various perspectives.

The hierarchy is considered an important aspect of the church in bringing stability to the message. There were several points made on this topic, both positive and negative. "With the hierarchy and the structure, you know where you stand; as humans we need that certainty;" though, some did mention that, at times, the message is not clear. Some countered that the messages from the Pope *are* clear and then obscured through the media. Others believe that the messages are ambiguous from the onset, especially on the statement of blessing couples in a same-sex relationship. Both comments reaffirm the importance of the hierarchy's role in the church when the faithful search for clarity and direction. The Magisterium can either bring peace or distress to the faithful depending on how it chooses to address difficult topics.

Furthermore, some expressed a lack of knowledge and understanding of papal documents and encyclicals among the faithful, and worse, among the clergy. Homilies are an opportunity to bring awareness of these documents to the faithful who otherwise would not be familiar with them, particularly regarding Catholic Social Teaching. This concern reflects the importance of the "universal message" of the Church reaching all the faithful in the pews.

Several points were made regarding the distresses of the structure of the Church. The faithful sense a disconnect between the parishes and the Diocese as to not having their concerns addressed, or of "not having a voice" at the Diocesan level. At the parish level, concerns may be mentioned to their Priest/Pastor with the final say being the Priest's decision to relay the message or not. This Synod Interim Stage at the Diocesan level was considered a positive experience and appreciated as an opportunity to share their "individual input," an opportunity "to have a voice."

Among the disconnect mentioned was that of religious education and the dichotomies between programs and families in Catholic Schools versus Parish Religious Education programs. Also, a sense of "two different Churches" prevails from what is mentioned in the "universal media" versus what is lived in the local parishes. This breakout group, in countering this divisive trend, stressed the importance of the parish and diocesan communities holding social events that bring a sense of unity.

The handing on of "Faith" to the next generation remains an ongoing concern, one based on the common and individual experiences of multiple participants. The inability of young people to find their place or role in the life of the Church, particularly the local parish, causes them to abandon the faith as they become young adults. The importance of belonging is a need that pervades all spectrums of age in parish life. Though volunteers may

be difficult to find, some believe volunteers are not always available because the parish has stagnated; that is, if it were open to change, more people would get involved. This brought a point during the discussion that "Pastors and laity would benefit from the encouragement of new growth within parishes."

Participants expressed their desire for the synod to bear fruit, to know that it would be more than just a "committee on committees." Our Diocesan Synod session was described as an avenue for the faithful to live their baptismal promises: We return to the point of having a voice in a relational setting, discussing concerns and victories in our Catholic way of life, and having opportunities for participating at the parish. The faithful desire an openness from Pastors and parish staff to accept that they "may need help" to accomplish the mission of the Church, to expand growth by creating an evangelization effort through the talents of the faithful parishioners ready to do the work within and outside the parish walls.

An opportunity for input was given to all participants after our initial review of the questions. Comments were made regarding the possibility of married priests to increase priestly vocations, women as deacons, too much focus on the sins of persons who identify as LGBTQ+ (recognizing that we are all sinners), a lack of Catholic Social Teaching from the pulpit, and teaching of Church history. This led to a lively discussion with the understanding that the Synod is about listening to all voices.

Overall, participants appreciated this opportunity and expressed their desire to have future discussions in a similar format. Likewise, the Diocese of Harrisburg is grateful for the participants of this Interim Synod Stage who were engaging, prepared, and committed to fruitful discussion. Most importantly, through all the comments of distresses and successes mentioned during the session, the virtues of faith, hope, and love were evident, and we understood and observed that everyone involved wanted the best for our Catholic Church. Together we pray for the whole Church, hierarchy and laity alike, to fulfill our roles faithfully as the Body of Christ.