



The Synodal Church in Mission

Listening Session Two Themes and Report

Archdiocese of Newark

April 8, 2024

The Synod Team of the Archdiocese of Newark conducted eight listening sessions for multiple groups between February and March 2024. The purpose was to provide feedback on specific themes requested by the Vatican Synod and USCCB Synod Teams. One session was held for Archdiocesan Staff and staff persons from parishes as well as bishops and theologians. Two sessions were for priests, two sessions were in Spanish and two were general which also included women and men religious, regional bishops and a few priests. One session was held with women religious. Each of these sessions represented a cross section of the many language and cultural communities who make up the Archdiocese of Newark. Approximately 360 attended the sessions.

Participants expressed appreciation for the synodal process and Pope Francis' decision to include the laity in this synodal process, allowing us to participate and encouraging us to continue the process of walking together as a Church.

The major themes identified are Welcome, Hospitality, and Outreach; Mission; Formation; Leadership and Ministries; Cultural Diversity; and Social Justice/Social Concerns. The Conversations in the Spirit utilized the questions from the synod office of the USCCB with a few additions or clarifications for our particular Archdiocese:

1. A. In your experience, how does Church structure(s)/organization/leadership/life encourage mission and help you and others to encounter Christ?
B. In your experience, what Church structures and culture cause distress or confusion, and hinder the mission today?
2. A. What specific Church structure(s)/organization/leadership welcome, invite, motivate, include and equip all the baptized to be co-responsible in spreading the Good News of Jesus?
B. How can these leadership groups help all the baptized in the community proclaim the Gospel and fully participate in the mission of the Church?

Welcome, Hospitality, and Outreach

Convergences

Welcome, Hospitality and Outreach is a continual theme in each of our listening sessions 2024 as in the first round in 2022. Participants noted that “a welcoming parish is the first way for people to encounter Christ and can meet people where they are. This was mentioned as critical to life moments and times when people gather for sacraments, especially baptism, first Holy Communion, marriage, and for funerals. Each of these times are opportunities for welcoming and moments of evangelization when priests and lay ministers reach out with care. It is critical to have well prepared priests and laity who welcome and inspire through their leadership. All must feel welcome in the Church and parish: LGBTQ+, persons with disabilities, persons who have left the church, those divorced and remarried, immigrants,

youth, young adults, women, and all. Parishes need to assess how well they are reaching out and welcoming all.

Some noted that the current structure of the church provides us with the opportunity to offer our gifts, allows us to value community members, and offers us spaces in which we can express ourselves and grow in faith.

The synodal process is helping the growth of parish groups, as well as improving the relationship between clergy and laity. Many groups mentioned that the way to encountering Christ is through its members who are welcoming, joyful, caring and witness the beauty of their belief in Jesus through personal and communal prayer, service, and action. Personal invitation was repeatedly mentioned as the most dynamic way to reach out, welcome, and engage others.

The primacy of Sunday has been lost in our society. Parishes that concentrate on Sunday as the gathering of the community welcome and build community through liturgical and other ways, such as RCIA, Baptismal groups, and others, reinforce the life of the community through the resurrection of Jesus. Again, there must be intentionality about how we welcome and prepare the Eucharistic liturgy, music, homily, greeters, and ministers to ensure that each celebration is a great celebration that touches hearts and sends us forth as disciples. This includes liturgical celebrations that include the traditions of different cultural groups. As one person noted, “the universal Church celebrates the Eucharist and no matter where we go, in whatever language, Mass is the same, but not always celebrated as well as could be.”

Matters for Consideration

Priests, lay leaders and indeed, all parishioners and those in movements or organizations, need a change in mentality and skill training in how to reach out to those who feel marginalized or who are not connected to the community.

More formation is necessary for ministers of hospitality and welcome, so roles are not perfunctory but genuinely caring, especially at Mass. One example of the need from a participant, “I was going to a parish for a while, and the only words that I ever heard out of a person’s mouth was ‘The Body of Christ’, not one welcome, hello, nothing that would make that me feel like I belonged or was wanted there.”

Small Groups for people to share faith was mentioned often as a way to reach out and welcome new people. They might be faith sharing groups or cohort groups, such as bible study, retreat, ministry groups with specific areas of learning. Peer ministry groups, and other spiritual and service opportunities are personal approaches to engage with people of all ages and welcome them. Small groups also provide opportunities to expand their focus and engage with the community in less structured places to meet and talk with others. All these types of organizations (parish, small groups, ecclesial movements) need to be invitational and interpersonal.

Proposals

- More emphasis needs to be on skills for leaders to invite but also welcome people to the parish, ministries, and other organizations.
- A particular way of welcoming people into church life is to encourage the use of their interests, gifts, and skills to build community and leadership.
- Be brave and evaluate the way ministry is done in parish and other areas. For example, taking “a long, loving look at the real” (*Walter Burghardt, SJ*) of Eucharistic liturgy, homily, music, ministries, welcome, hospitality and outreach to different generations, those who are marginalized or on the peripheries, etc.

- Seek information on how ecclesial movements reach out to evangelize and learn from them.
- Continue listening sessions and other opportunities such as small groups, to hear people's stories; when we hear stories we are compelled to go out in mission, provide pastoral care and advocate for those on the margins. The Conversations in the Spirit style is excellent for this.

Mission

Convergences

Mission is an important topic from many group reports. In the Archdiocese of Newark, we have many parishes, priests, pastoral leaders, lay ministers, schools, Catholic and secular universities, organizations, and ecclesial movements. There are many ways that the mission of Christ and the Church is advancing. Conversations in the Spirit identified a need for formation around the mission of Christ and how the Church on multiple levels carries out that mission. This need was mentioned by priests as well as religious and laity.

All agreed that the parish and the structure of the parish (and other institutions, as well) has great potential to lead the mission very effectively. One person said that this is evident in the number of catechumens this year. It would also help if the archdiocese clearly articulates the mission and provides a path for parishes and other institutions to vision and clarify how they share the mission of Christ. This would set a direction since "the perspective of many parishes is very inwardly focused, not mission focused in the neighborhood or in the world; many are also stuck in mindset of charity, not serving or advocacy; just focused on who is here in the pews, not willing to reach out."

Matters for Consideration

It was noted that by stating a vision and mission from the archdiocesan level, there would be the impetus to create a culture throughout all the parishes, schools, and ministries, to promote listening and creative ideas to reach out with the Gospel message. This would encourage synodality as an ongoing way of listening and refining the mission at all levels. Again, focusing on formation is critical to understand what the mission is, what synodality is, and how it affects the call of each person to participate as a disciple of Christ. One group asked, "How can we spread Good News if we are not disciples ourselves? When a parish is focused on making missionary disciples, mission is strong; as disciples we discern how we are called forth in mission; we need to form our people into dynamic disciples." Yet, younger generations perceive the lack of creativity and acceptance of cultural change and makes them sometimes feel unwelcomed in their community.

Another group shared, "We have a lack of understanding of the mission and lack of a clear vision; we do not seem to be working toward a common goal; our diocese must have a clear vision and needs to be of the same mind and heart, all the parishes and pastors working collegially and sharing a common vision/mission." Another said, "We need to encourage mission beyond the simple structure of the organization. It needs to be collaborative with other structures within the parish [and all institutions in the archdiocese.] Dynamic disciples start with families who then go on to encounter and engage other individuals with compassion. The structure of the parish [et. al] needs to take on the mission."

What parishes offer in the many ministries and activities, brings people to Christ. The Archdiocese shares what is happening around the diocese through various bulletins (Communications, Evangelization, Catechetics, Youth and Young Adult Ministry, Jerseyatholic.org, and other offices for training opportunities, etc.) There is an advantage through our deaneries to have parishes share what each other offers. Collaboration with other parishes to share resources and offerings which help foster pastoral

conversion and the sense of mission of the whole archdiocese of Newark. *As a body is one though it has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though many, are one body, so also Christ.* 1 Corinthians 12:12-27

Proposals

- The Archdiocesan leadership should consider forming a mission and vision statement for the diocese to help all journey together.
- Training is needed in parishes to reflect on the mission on Christ and the Church.
- Reading and discussing documents such as the Joy of The Gospel (Evangelium Gaudium) for all parish and other leadership is helpful for articulating the mission.
- Learning new ways to collaborate more with other parishes, through deaneries, and all movements and organizations in the diocese is necessary.

Formation

Convergences

Many groups spoke about the need for a well-formed Body of Christ; that all the baptized in parishes and other parts of church life, need a deeper understanding of the faith and a personal relationship with Jesus. Also mentioned was the need to provide the environment and experiences to encounter Christ. It is not enough to teach the tenets of the faith without understanding who Jesus is, creating that relationship with him, and being a disciple to carry on the mission.

Understanding that the Church is a community of disciples who have the responsibility to carry on the mission of Christ is often missing among the general Catholic population. Many, especially the young, see the Church as a series of “dos and don’ts” rather than an authentic community of disciples who lives and serves as Jesus did. Many groups also said that sacramental life is key to everything we do, yet not everyone understands the power and call contained in baptism, the Eucharist and other sacraments that sustain our relationship with Christ and each other. Others noted that the Covid 19 pandemic has changed parish life significantly, not only in Mass attendance but in participation in ministries and parish life in general.

Adult faith formation was strongly discussed as a need across the archdiocese. Many parents of children in religious education do not feel sure in their faith and often say that they do not know how to answer questions a child might ask. Many parents are also marginalized or live on the peripheries of church life and are not engaged; church is one thing among many in their lives. If we proclaim that the family is the first teachers of the faith, there needs to be stronger ways to support them in this role. *Catechism of the Catholic Church 2223*

The Religious Education programs of the parishes are essential not only for the young but also for their parents. At the same time, these programs help the catechists, who recognize that by growing spiritually themselves helps others come closer to Christ. Also, many ecclesial movements, organizations, and programs, such as Cursillo, Charismatic Renewal, Neocatechumenal Way, Cornerstone and Alpha provide formation to their members to evangelize. Sharing ideas for outreach with these groups can be helpful for parishes.

It was suggested that messaging from the Church has been somewhat confused. What does the Church teach, what does the Church stand for? Scandals and abuse in the church and bishops who criticize Pope Francis or each other in public lead to confusion. The messaging needs to be simplified. Go back to the basics.

Matters for Consideration

Strong faith formation for children and families is critical. Parishes and schools need to be creative about faith formation for all ages. Parishes and schools can share resources to evaluate and create strong curricula that include the experiential and developing a personal (and communal) relationship with Christ for all. That also includes understanding the Eucharistic Liturgy and well-prepared homilies. But we need to meet people where they are and take time for understanding, compassion, and pastoral needs.

OCIA and Baptism ministries are at the heart of liturgical catechesis; these types of processes help focus the parishes on formation of disciples of all ages. In some cases, there is strong sacramental preparation but no accompaniment, such as for Marriage, Baptism, OCIA with no period of Mystagogy after. Formation in the art of accompaniment is needed with good mentors.

There is a need to capture the imagination in relationship to Christ and his message and strengthen faith formation of the community by being unafraid to give public witness to the gospel. It was suggested that “mission and ministry are utterly useless without formation, and the humility and compassion to accept dialogue, and different perspectives with gratitude and compassion” are critical to understanding in today’s world. It would be helpful to have clear messaging from the Church on social matters in today’s challenging culture.

There was much mention of sacramental policies, particularly by the priests, and that the archdiocese (and parishes) needs to be consistent in policies and look to see if they adequately address the needs of the times.

Proposals

- Religious education catechists need more training and formation in general and in working with persons and children with disabilities.
- Messaging from the Church has been somewhat confused. The messaging needs to be simplified. Go back to the basics.
- A significant question was raised as a good starting point for formation overall, “What are the Basic Core of Beliefs of the Church that need to be shared?”
- Celebrate the parish; do not be judgmental; be welcoming to newcomers and those with disabilities; kids, youth and young adults.
- There are many opportunities for faith formation and spiritual growth already offered to the laity: retreats and different courses are offered at the diocesan and parish level. Finding creative ways to attract and invite people to attend is essential.

Leadership and Ministry

Convergences

Great appreciation was expressed for pastors, priests, deacons, women religious and lay leaders who live, witness and advance the mission of Christ through parishes, schools, universities, diocesan offices, ministries, ecclesial movements, and organizations of the Archdiocese of Newark.

Many stated that leadership and communication are important and necessary so that everyone can work together in trust with the mission as the objective. An example was shared when lack of trust in delegation is present, “A pastor may delegate things to people and when it’s going, say “that is not the way it should go!” instead of working together for a common understanding.

Often mentioned are struggles with pastoral changes. When a priest leaves, a new pastor comes in and can support or undo all the ministries that are going well in a parish, because it might not be to his liking or style. Other parishes mentioned having a “revolving door of priests”, feeling the need for more stability. Others stated that they are or have been in flux due to pastoral changes which leave communities debilitated by upheaval, with no support from the diocesan offices.

A few comments on structure: “the church structure is not seen as servicing the people. How do we connect better with the people?” “The idea of the structure/organization is sometimes seen as an impediment or an obstacle, even though the individuals who actually serve the people are working toward the same ends or same goals as the people who are in need of the service or connection.” “We are struggling with a corporate structure in a spiritual institution, and because of this our message is inert.” “Prayer, formation and ministry have to have a clear focus and firm grounding in the gospel of Jesus Christ to withstand leadership changes.”

Clericalism was mentioned fairly often especially in relationship to including the laity in ministry and decision-making. Many see an increase in clericalism. This was expressed in the idea that some priests and deacons are “not accepting the idea that lay and clergy all have ownership of ministry; we just pay, pray and obey. People need to feel ownership of their parish. Clergy must allow people to be part of decision-making, and people must take responsibility to act and not be clerical themselves.” Many more laity feel they have no voice due to loss of previous programs that gave them a voice. There are many more comments along these themes of more inclusion of all, especially in parishes, in order to create an environment of co-responsibility and missionary discipleship. Also expressed was the “lack of pastoral commitment of some priests with their resistance to the changes indicated by the Church.”

Some groups also noted that “priests, through their leadership and closeness to the parishioners, their preaching and testimony of life, encourage the community to the mission and an encounter with Christ. Priests are fundamental in the formation and leadership of the laity.”

On a positive note, synodality and Conversations in the Spirit are seen as ways to foster inclusion, co-responsibility, and missionary discipleship. Many good comments were expressed about having parish pastoral councils (and archdiocesan training) to help parishes advance the mission of Christ and create future direction – for example, what does this parish need in the next 3-5 years to continue the mission of the church with changing demographics, cultures and diversity, faith formation, ministers and more. The collaboration of pastors, staff, finance and pastoral councils, all ministries and parishioners are critical to the future. Finding creative ways to continue the process of synodality is a great example of listening, gathering ideas and inclusion of all. There was mention that sometimes there is a lack of transparency on the part of some pastors regarding parish finances.

Inclusion of all people was cited multiple times in each of the listening sessions. The Church needs to be a safe haven of welcome for all. That includes many cultures, those in the LGBTQ+ community, persons with disabilities, newly arrived migrants, homeless, ecumenical and inter-faith relationships, everyday people who feel marginalized because of marriage outside of the church after divorce, and more. Clarity in church teaching or actions need to be consistent across the board. There is disparity in who says what about the varied types of people who should or should not be allowed to enter the community.

Comments were made regarding lay leadership where people remain [or are allowed to remain] for an excessive time in leadership positions in parish ministry groups, preventing the addition and training of new leaders. They are seen as an obstacle to the growth of their parish community. In some parishes it was noted that there is a lack of unity and coordination between the different parish groups. This is sometimes the reason for “anguish and disunity and even cause alienation of members of the

community as well as groups that are exclusive which become an obstacle to the mission of the parish community.”

Many participants are not aware of the how the archdiocese functions and the many conciliar bodies that advise in the ministries of the diocese. This is part of parish pastoral council formation that the members can share with the parish. Oftentimes there is an “us and them” mentality present among the priests and the parishes. Parish Pastoral Councils – where they exist – listen to the faithful and serve as communication between clergy and laity. There is a well-functioning Archdiocesan Pastoral Council which serves as a channel of communication between the parishes and Cardinal Tobin.

Discussion among most groups mentioned the sex abuse scandals and the impact it has had on priests personally and certainly the laity throughout the Church. A poignant comment from one group: “How do we help victims/survivors take the right path toward healing in a structure of clericalism where many have been abused, including women religious. We must change; there has been too much distress.”

On Women

The Church needs to be more open to the many roles that women can have in the Church. Many feel that although women make up the majority of parishioners, they are not recognized especially in matters of decision-making or equality. Many feel that younger generations see a church that is exclusive, and parents expressed that they are frustrated by excuses of their children who cannot separate role of women/abuse scandals from personal relationship with God. People feel that the role of women in the church is a matter of urgency for the larger church to move on.

On the other hand, many are not aware of the roles that women have. In the archdiocese, many women are leaders in their ministries at parish, school, university, and diocesan levels. Besides more inclusiveness in various roles, there is a need for education to know the contributions of both laity and religious in leadership.

As one group stated, “The world is made up of 50% women. The Church leadership [bishops, priests, deacons] should reflect the same.”

Matters for Consideration

The understanding of inclusion, collaboration and co-responsibility for the mission needs to be studied and reflected on across the archdiocese. Parishes must incorporate lay people into decision-making processes, learning the language and cultural identity unique to the parish and responding creatively as parishes change.

Some feel that pastors have too much on their plates and that trying to balance all of it does not allow for time for adequate reflection on how to create a strong, co-responsible community. Others try to do it all themselves without input from staff or councils. Many priests are alone and do not have the resources to hire pastoral staff or a business administrator. As one person stated, we need to “put the clergy back in the business of spirituality and out of the business of business.”

With regard to clericalism, one stated that there is an “Ugly Truth [in the Church]: Clericalism: Push back and lack of accountability from priests. Lack of respect for what has happened to some people. Lack of apology. Pedestal-looking reverence for pastors. Lack of collaboration.” Some priests do not allow the inclusion and formation of new leaders in their parish communities.

One person shared a story of a wonderful parish where many ministries were flourishing and Mass attendance and parent involvement in religious education was energetic. A new pastor came in and forbade Mass ministers from entering the sanctuary for preparing to distribute the Eucharist, no female altar servers, and multiple other changes were made overnight. Many people have voted with their feet. The question: Why is this allowed? Why is there no accountability or recourse?

Proposals

- A fundamental change is needed to understand servant leadership by the ordained and in some cases, laity.
- Skill training on multiple levels is needed by priests and pastoral leaders: leadership, diversity, inclusion, reading the signs of the times, working with councils, co-responsibility, and collaboration, working collaboratively with other parishes, and more.
- Ensure that priests from outside the U.S. are trained and familiar with the cultures of the parishes they will be working in
- There is a need for more visibility and understanding of women's roles and positions in the Church, what they do and how they lead. Perhaps a series of ongoing articles about their roles and roles of so many of the laity, religious, priests and deacons who serve.
- More women need to be part of seminary and priestly and diaconate training.

Cultural Diversity

Convergences

The Archdiocese of Newark is very culturally diverse with people of all backgrounds. Mass is celebrated in 20 languages on any given Sunday. There is hardly a parish that does not have a mix of diverse cultures. Hence there are many ways of celebrating faith and many ways of looking at needs. It was mentioned that pastors and pastoral leaders need skill training in knowing how to work with all people. This applies to schools, universities, and other ministries and institutions.

It should also be pointed out that diversity lies in seven living generations and the worldviews and needs of each generation are different in how they experience church positively or negatively. Getting to understand and include younger generations is key to advancing the mission of Christ as we go forward.

Therefore, when a new pastor is assigned to a parish, it is critical that he does his homework by knowing the culture and cultures present, building relationships and appreciation, and include people's expertise to respond to needs. Pastors and all in parish ministry must incorporate lay people into decision-making processes learning the language and cultural identity unique to the parish and responding creatively as the parish grows and changes. A comment was made that there is a lack of interest of some parish priests in truly incorporating the Hispanics with the rest of the parish community.

The Encuentro process has been influential and a real commitment to sharing a sense of community and leadership. It would be good to extend that experience to the whole of the archdiocesan community to understand the process and experience. It was also noted that in parishes with Spanish speaking parishioners, that some parishes do not have Hispanic/Latino ministry.

Matters for Consideration

It is essential to understand and appreciate the many cultures who make up the Body of Christ of the Archdiocese of Newark. We have a beautiful tapestry of many cultures, and it is imperative that we work toward appreciation and unity.

Proposals

- On the local level, consider writing materials to work in the particular community.
- People need to help pastors to learn the local culture as it changes [and remember American roots]
- Take time to understand, appreciate, be trained and work toward cultural inclusivity in the parish, school or other.
- Work toward creating one community on the parish level through inter-cultural activities, ministries, and other ways to bring people together to build relationships.

Social Justice/Social Concerns

Convergences

The archdiocese has a long history of social ministry. Many parishes agree that this is essential to the mission of Christ and the church and should be fostered. Parishes should look at their social concerns and justice outreach to understand the needs of the community and the whole archdiocese and to meet people's needs: Food, health issues, immigrants, housing and so much more.

Each of the universities as well as the schools participate in food banks, advocacy, and key institutions such as the Mercy Houses, Catholic Charities, Catholic Relief Services, and many national Catholic and local charities.

Many participants mentioned service projects that attract grade school age, and youth and young adults to learn what it means to reach out as a disciple. The Youth and Young Adult Ministry of the archdiocese was cited for their summer service camps and reflection with the groups on what their service means and how they reflect Jesus or see the reflection of Jesus in those they serve. Also appreciated are the efforts of this office to train and form leaders of those ministries.

Many parishes have multiple service opportunities including working with bereavement committees and assisting with mental health resources for people in need as well as other types of services.

Matters for Consideration

Many parish social concerns committees need some renewal. The Covid 19 pandemic slowed the services that many were doing. Some were able to carry on especially with food insecurity and helping to stock pantries or soup kitchens. Parishes, along with parish pastoral and finance councils, can help to reinvigorate these critical ministries by doing needs assessments and inviting parishioners to take part.

Many high schools in the archdiocese volunteer at Mercy House to organize and serve parishioners. Many parishes are participating with agencies in helping settle and establish migrants, teaching ESL and assisting with employment and immigration status.

There is a need for advocacy besides direct service. Training and support are needed in this area to project a consistent ethic of life.

Proposals

- Make service invitational and welcoming, especially to the youth – do not talk at them but give them something meaningful to do.
- Invite Mercy House to engage with community and youth through youth ministry and religious education students as well as parents and other adult parishioners.
- Support social concerns committees with training and project ideas.

In Summation

The faithful of the Archdiocese of Newark appreciate the call of Pope Francis to participate in the Synod on Synodality. They see the synodal process and the Conversations in the Spirit as a significant way to initiate a greater sense of welcome and community as well as ways to share experience, hopes, joys and anxieties in today's world. It was noted so often that the laity want to be involved in ministry but formation in discipleship is critical and creative outreach is essential. Priests, people, archdiocesan staff and all ministries, movements and organizations have a great opportunity through this experience to join more strongly together as a people of faith in Christ Jesus. There is a long history of collaboration and co-responsibility in the archdiocese and through the leadership of Cardinal Tobin and all the leaders, clergy, religious and lay, we can renew that energy and reach out to all with the Gospel in our times.

We thank all who have participated throughout the sessions and look forward to continuing the process.

With grateful hearts,

The Synod Team of the Archdiocese of Newark

Cardinal Joseph W. Tobin, CSsR

Bishop Michael Saporito

Sister Donna L. Ciangio, OP

Deacon Asterio Velasco

Ms. Milissa Else

Kathleen Dodds