

**Region Three Synthesis
for
Synod on Synodality Second Round of Listening Sessions**

April 25, 2024

Region III Dioceses

Archdiocese of Newark, NJ
Archdiocese of Philadelphia, PA
Diocese of Allentown, PA
Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown, PA
Diocese of Camden, NJ
Diocese of Erie, PA
Diocese of Greensburg, PA
Diocese of Harrisburg, PA
Diocese of Metuchen, NJ
Diocese of Paterson, NJ
Diocese of Pittsburgh, PA
Diocese of Scranton, PA
Diocese of Trenton, NJ



Demographics

- 12 of 13 Dioceses submitted reports. Altoona-Johnstown did not
- Dioceses: Camden, Erie, Greensburg, Harrisburg, Metuchen, Paterson, Pittsburgh, Trenton, Scranton; Allentown seemed to submit their round one report from 2022
- Archdioceses: Newark, Philadelphia
- A total of approximately 52 listening sessions were held across the region, most in person and some virtually. Surveys were also sent out to gather responses from a few dioceses.
- Themes across the 12 dioceses were very similar. People expressed gratitude for being included in the Synod on Synodality process and thoughtfully prayed and discerned what the Holy Spirit is asking of the Church today.

Welcome, Hospitality, and Inclusivity

Many reports expressed a great need to make strong vibrant parishes. There is appreciation for a warm welcome from both clergy and laity which many believe is a critical and fundamental community builder. A place of hospitality and welcome for everyone who approaches a parish is something many find fundamental but often lacking. The message of welcome with mercy – regardless of the person’s life situation - can be life-changing, as everyone desires to be part of a community.

In the Hispanic population, there is a clear expression of appreciation for Spanish-speaking clergy and gratitude for understanding the homily as well.

Candor about needs is something referenced multiple times and noted as necessary so the parishioners could meet those needs, if possible. For example, the topic of accompaniment was raised in all sessions. The importance of accompaniment of the many diverse members within the parish community - shared by the clergy and the laity is an area that some feel is lacking.

Respondents also discussed many challenges regarding inclusivity and community. Though they felt that their own parish was welcoming, some said they do not feel welcome in other parishes. Others don’t feel comfortable even in their own parish. One newly merged parish reported: “Parishioners have an experience of ‘Even though I’m a part of this parish, I’m not really part of it,’ but somehow they’re still willing to give it a shot, to be in that place and try to work it out.”

Mission and Outreach

People who belong to parishes with many diverse opportunities to serve, particularly on the peripheries, express satisfaction. Those without these opportunities to serve believe they are fundamental to their spiritual growth. These moments help them answer the call of Jesus. It also helps to create this great sense of belonging while doing something outside of themselves.

Many shared the 'untapped' resource of lay testimony and witness; "not only is it a powerful resource but should be viewed as a need for the Church at this time. It is also a key way the laity participates in evangelization by sharing their testimonies to impact and inspire others" and the Church needs to pay attention to this request.

Parishes need to move beyond the confines of the church building. The people of God must engage with the community, address the needs of the marginalized, draw others closer to the Church's mission of compassion and service.

There was often mention of confusion about Church teaching. There is a need to ensure clarity of mission and identity: What are the teachings of the Church? How do we balance Church teaching with changing times? Does the Church "give in" to the culture? How do we integrate faith with daily life?

Some are challenged by the Church's "old traditions and difficult language," "the older teachings and sometimes closed mindset," "the issues in the Church that aren't addressed." Conversely, others were challenged by the Church's "indecisiveness," by "lack of reverence," and by the perception that the Church is "changing the traditional methods" and accepting current "things against our church rules."

Formation

There is a need for forming people as disciples of Christ through life-long faith formation. This is the basis of why we believe and carry out mission. It was also suggested that it is imperative to foster spiritual formation, that is, prioritizing ongoing spiritual formation for clergy, religious, and lay faithful to deepen their relationship with God and discernment skills. Participants asked for guidance in their own spiritual lives and help in evangelizing others. Developing a personal relationship with Christ is key for every person, but how?

Many reports said that it is essential to "get back to basics" about the faith and "basic Gospel principles." Others asked bishops and pastors to ensure focused and clear teaching on core tenets of the faith. Most mentioned were the Holy Eucharist and the primacy of life in Catholic moral teaching.

Providing small groups in parishes was mentioned often in each diocesan report. Many noted that laity grow together through bible studies, retreats, and small faith sharing groups (SCCs) and there should be ample opportunities in every parish to form groups.

It is essential for faith formation to have diverse offerings, and ways of learning and training. There is a desire for diocesan-sponsored ministry training, gaining a deeper understanding of church structure/hierarchy/decision-making. Participants, particularly in the Hispanic community, shared a need to be equipped to help others know Jesus and to be equipped and emboldened to share Jesus outside of church. The theme of becoming missional communities of faith was identified as an opportunity for clergy and laity to work toward together.

Prayer to the Holy Spirit is essential for evangelization – both communal and individual. The emphasis is placed on the importance of not only words but also actions in spreading the Gospel.

Youth and Young Adults

There were many references to desires for the inclusion of young people in ministry, service, and some higher visibility in leadership positions. There is definitely a gap between younger and older generations in the Church and what they think and feel and how they envision what it means to be Church. Older generations lament a lack of presence in their parishes from those in the Millennial and Gen Z populations while those generations described how Catholic community is different for them, much less rooted in a physical place and more in relationship. A question often repeated in many sessions was a longing to know “how can the Church help us bring our adult children back to the faith?”

Young adults in various dioceses talked about the importance of mental health as a critical pastoral issue and the need to pay attention to this in the Church and various communities.

Leadership and Co-responsibility

Participants expressed the great need for the laity to offer its time, talent, and treasure. Some expressed a desire to be invited, while others shared that their talents were not embraced by the pastor or the parish staff. The importance of co-responsibility for laity and clergy specifically highlights the need for collaboration, transparency, and shared responsibility. Again, the importance of accompaniment of the many diverse members within the parish community is an area that some feel needs more development and skill training for leaders.

There was mention, and frustration, about how much parish life and vitality depends on the person of the pastor. “In the parochial model, the pastor still sets the tone in a big way for the life of the parish. This can be discouraging for people who do not connect with their pastor’s vision – or when it seems the pastor does not have vision.” Often mentioned is the trauma of pastor changes especially when there is no respect for the current development of the parish or immediately changing things or ending programs because it is not of his liking. That prompted the question of evaluations for pastors to assess the effectiveness of their leadership and ministry. In general, concern was voiced about clericalism and the quantity and quality of clergy.

Suggestions were made that the outdated model of parish be changed, allowing for more co-responsibility and new models of staffing. Attitudes like clericalism limit lay participation; and the elimination of lay ministry formation and training programs in some dioceses was mentioned is cause for concern in a time of diminishing numbers of priests and religious.

Several dioceses reported the need for more collaboration among parishes and partnership between diocese and parishes; sometimes there is this sense of disconnect between the diocese and parishes, a feeling that it’s the diocese versus the parish; new ideas are needed and should be shared.

A few dioceses are in the merging, closing or clustering of parishes. Some say that there are new possibilities to be gained but also there is real distress, hurt and grief in the process; there is a need for new ideas and ways of doing things to prepare people for mergers and closures as best as possible.

Women in Leadership and Ministry

Each report cited the need for women serving in visible leadership roles. Women should be involved in management and decision-making in all levels of the Church. Also, there is a need for women to be ordained as deacons with the ability to preach at Mass and serving in other ministerial roles. Both topics were shared as a path for forward for laity and clergy and a gift for the Church.

Liturgical Celebrations

In many reports, liturgical celebrations were mentioned. Sunday Mass must be a joyful celebration. There is a need for good homilies and good music and ministers. It is a gift to have churches with different rites (Byzantine etc.) A few dioceses mentioned the Latin Mass as a draw for younger adults. Young people also said that “they are finding casual ways to pray that might not involve Mass.”

Communication and Technology

Effective utilization of technology and the ability to teach lay people how to use technology for the benefit of Church activities can expand outreach and engagement with broader audiences. Also, there is a desire to move beyond the confines of the church building. The people of God must engage with the community, address the needs of the marginalized, draw others closer to the Church's mission of compassion and service. Technology can help this by reaching a wider audience. Also, pro's and con's of livestreamed Masses were discussed. Many felt that livestreaming is still a way to connect people to the parish, especially seniors and homebound. A lot was learned over the pandemic.

Church Structures

There is a perception among many groups that the Church as an institutional hierarchy is unwelcoming. Several people mentioned their impression that Pope Francis is trying to be more inclusive, but the bishops and others are resisting him. They feel there is a lot of judgment and hypocrisy, and that the attention is much more on the Church as an institution rather than on the transforming power of Jesus.

Many spoke about a more pastoral approach being needed in meeting people where they are. There is the perception that structures, rules, and bureaucracy can get in the way of human connections and ministry. Many noted that there are too many rules, which make it difficult for people to convert or return to the Church, which leaves the question, which rules are essential, and which can bend?

Those on the Margins

Many reports stated that the Church is still removed from those in the peripheries; many voiced that they know people who struggle with being accepted by the church because of gender (especially LGBTQ+) and marital status (divorced, or marriage outside of the church). Many people feel hurt by the Church and are not willing to come back. They have gone to Protestant churches or are no longer practicing any religion.

Ongoing Synodal Process and Listening

Those in parish leadership, particularly the clergy, should encourage attentive listening to the insights, concerns, and perspectives of others; thus, promoting a culture of dialogue and mutual respect – and take into account all groups and races comprising the community. All agreed that this is important for the growth and health of the Church.

Conclusion

In each report, participants stated that they are praying that the synodal process bears fruit and that needed changes are taken seriously and put into practice. As one diocese stated, “The Synod process needs to produce meaningful change; there should be a plan and action steps at universal level.”

The Synod process is a positive sign that the Church wants to listen and be all inclusive. For example, “this project gives hope that decision-making will not just be left to church authorities, but people’s voices are being heard and might be able to influence what the church teaches and upholds.”

All were saying that the Church is losing people, particularly, but not limited to, the younger generations who do not grasp or have little or no experience with the deep spirituality in a call by Christ, nor a sense of church history and how theology and practices were shaped.

There is a sense of frustration that the Church is slow moving, and an even greater frustration and disappointment in the way that the hierarchy in our country and around the world are not united with the Holy Father.

There is a strong desire for things to happen and change for the better. This is the opportunity to continue to listen to how the Holy Spirit is calling and guiding the Church of the 21st Century to meaningful change that will foster the spreading of the Gospel in this, our time.

Again, there was a sincere gratitude for being invited to participate through prayer, listening and discernment.

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