



For a Synodal Church: Interim Phase Synthesis Report Diocese of Grand Rapids, Michigan

Introduction

The Diocese of Grand Rapids, Michigan participated in the Interim Stage of the Synod by hosting three listening sessions in March 2024. The desired audience included the voices of those who may not have been heard in earlier stages of the Synod, or groups that were underrepresented in diocesan consultations in 2022. After meeting with Bishop David Walkowiak and the Diocesan Synod team, the audience focus was identified as: those under 55 years old, individuals of Hispanic culture, and youth. Listening sessions were offered at Cathedral Square Center in Grand Rapids, St. Patrick/St. Anthony Catholic Church in Grand Haven, and the Newman Center, Big Rapids (Campus Ministry, Ferris State University).

A priest and member of the diocesan Synod team approached each parish priest and asked them to personally invite individuals who align with the desired audience to attend a listening session. They were provided with a draft invitation to use for this outreach. The communication strategy included an article in *Faith Magazine*, presence on the diocesan website, bulletin promotions, pulpit announcements, and social media posts.

Each listening session was rooted in prayer, using materials offered by the national Synod team.

Synthesis

Question 1

- a. **Where have I seen or experienced successes within the Church's structure(s)/organization/leadership/life that encourage the mission?**
- b. **Where have I seen or experienced distresses within the Church's structure(s)/organization/leadership/life that hinder the mission?**

Synodal Experience

Synod 2021-2024 is a new and unfamiliar process. One parish cited success in adopting a synodal style and has "begun implementation of what came out of the Synod. We now have a caregiver's organization and a grief group. Those groups are flourishing, and they are led by the parishioners, not the priest. So, I'm encouraged by that." This level of success is the exception rather than the rule. "Millions of people have heard about this process, which is remarkable. As a local diocese, we can do more." A sense of skepticism or lack of understanding exists. Participants acknowledged becoming a synodal church will not be a quick process. "Hierarchical structures are good, but the Synod is an important process to engage with people on the



‘fringes,’ with sensitivity to mutuality.” Awareness, training, and hearts open to change are essential to further adopt a synodal style.

Universal Church

The uniform catechism and Bible hold the church together. Emphasis on the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, was frequently mentioned. *Into the Mystery: A Day of Eucharistic Revival, Unity, and Adventure* (Aquinas College, June 10, 2023) was appreciated as an opportunity to come together as a diocese. “Increasing the Eucharistic presence in the community could be fruitful.” “I want them to do that every year. It was great to come together as one!” Silent adoration of the Eucharist is a much-appreciated element of prayer life with a desire for more access and broader participation. “The opportunity in any Catholic church to sit before the Lord in the Eucharist is a beautiful strength for individuals as well as the whole Church.” “Our priests have encouraged the beauty and benefit of sitting with the Lord and we see our priests in there on a regular basis.”

Engaging all our senses during Mass with beautiful cathedrals filled with Catholic art, stained glass windows, icons, music, use of incense inspire a deeper sense of reverence and awe during times of prayer. Devotion to the saints was mentioned. “I love our traditions of the saints because they are all people like you and I. Mary is always held up as someone to emulate and for good reason. Saints are luminaries, shining examples to help us figure out the sojourn, depending on the chapters/stages of life, there is always a person who has gone through what you’re going through. A glimpse of how they dealt with it and the Lord lifted them up – queens, princes, martyrs, hermits, monastic people.”

The diversity of traditions, devotions, and ways of praying help individuals connect with the Church through variety, depth, and richness. Lack of respect for the Mass, evidenced by immodest dress, restless children or inappropriate timing of fundraising appeals detracts from the prayerful experience of Mass.

Structure

Most participants believe the structure of the Catholic Church is largely positive, but it does have challenges. “The Church needs a change of structures less than she needs a change of hearts and leadership styles. Her divine constitution requires that she be governed by the ordained, and no amount of structures to force our bishops and priests to receive input from those they serve can actually cause them to wisely sift that input and act accordingly.” “We tend to forget that the Pope oversees 1.4 billion people.” “Pope Francis is trying to break down walls that have been built over centuries. He is trying to widen the tent and bring in people on the margins. I can’t say I agree with him on everything, but when I look at the spirit of what he’s tried to do, I have great respect.” Others voiced concern about the lack of harmony among the bishops. “I’m distressed by...polarity vs. unity – the Church, like society, is polarized. The Church should be a place where people can talk things through. The Church is still growing; we need to be ready to be pushed, stretched.”

“We’ve lost a unity of voice, and I don’t know how to regain it amid mixed messages from clergy and leadership. I’m standing on a faith that’s two thousand years old and a tradition that’s older



than Scripture. Leadership needs to hold fast to the faith passed down by the apostles, that's all I expect of them." "The Church needs to stop caring about its approval rating. You can't outcool culture." "Younger people who are Catholic don't want ambiguity and confusion." "Saint Pope John Paul II spells it out. We can be welcoming without negating the teachings." "Doctrine does not change."

At the diocesan level, "The way we approached the *Healing our Church* process, when the scandals and abuses unfolded and the response to plans and actions is a good example of how the structure of the church works. The *Healing our Church* process in the diocese originally began at the laity level and moved up through the diocese for the Bishop's approval. It was a way for us as the laity to understand the process to improve the diocese."

Parish life is at the center of the Catholic experience and the parish priest is the anchor of the community. Leadership styles vary with participative styles admired. "Let the priests welcome and lead people into ministry and let lay people do the administration." "Synodality as a way of being parish should be developed further, e.g. pastoral councils should be re-developed and re-formed in this way of being Church." "The leadership welcomed us and invited us to discover where we might serve." "It is important that we get to know each other, to learn to know who we worship with and grow community."

Reassignment of priests is a challenge that causes distress because just when a system of working together is developed, a pastoral reassignment occurs, and the process starts over. The shortage of priests creates distress. Diocesan priests are spread thin managing two or more parishes in addition to special roles such as campus ministry. The permanent diaconate is respected, "I think about how much a deacon could help him out – another person for our people to go to – if you have questions, the priest is too busy to ask and having more people to help minister in the parish helps." "Our priest cannot be in twelve places at one time. High expectation to place on one man."

While we have twenty men discerning the priesthood, participants voiced concern about the initial assignments made on new priests and their seminarian formation. "How will young priests work with community? New priests need good mentors to help expand their pastoral training before being placed in charge of a parish. Lay people, including women, can be mentors for seminarians and new priests."

"Where seminarians are sent for priestly formation makes a difference. Are seminaries focusing on pre-Vatican II or post-Vatican II practices? There is more to the priesthood than knowing rules and liturgical rubrics."

Role of women

Young female participants expressed a void in their ability to learn about consecrated life. "We have a parish priest, but we don't have parish religious sisters." "I know there is a lack at the top – somebody taking care of women who are interested in religious life. We have a handful of guys discerning the priesthood – women don't know that religious life is an option to them. Young women should have the model to experience it the same way as men experience it. We



are expecting the sisters to recruit new sisters without having a role and presence in each parish.” The structure of women religious orders being separate from the Diocese may impede the ability to recruit and expand the mission. There is disparity in allocation of financial resources to support seminarians over women religious.

Becoming more inclusive is viewed as both a success and a distress. “The whole inclusion of women and women’s place in the Church is part of the synodal process.” “There is a lot of fear when we talk about inclusion. What does it mean to be inclusive? Why are people resistant to that word? How can the Church better trust God as it relates to that word?” “As a woman, I want to be recognized, accepted and a valued part of the community.” “The voice of women is needed in leadership to make decisions in the Church.” “I understand the dogma behind women not being deacons or priests, but there is no reason only men get to preach at the pulpit.” “The Church is still not listening to what people are saying. I want to see women ordained.” “The continued oppression of women makes me feel that I am viewed as less valuable and less capable of holiness than a man.” Conversely, one male participant expressed; “We need to keep priests male. Females have taken over too many responsibilities that used to be male.”

Lifelong formation

Mentioned with high frequency was the need and desire for lifelong formation, whether by a new generation engaged in campus ministry or by earlier generations who feel poorly catechized. Lack of comprehensive formation was cited as a reason individuals feel ill-equipped to evangelize. An overarching thought was our ability to understand Catholic teachings as we mature, and our level and depth of understanding expands.

A successful formation begins at home with involved parents providing instruction and modeling what it means to be Catholic. Catholic education, received by attending Catholic schools can be a mixed experience, depending on the school. “I went to sixteen years of Catholic education and making that available is particularly important. As a young person, it is important to be strong in your faith.” Another viewpoint stated, “Our education was hindered by our Catholic school – both instruction and catechesis. Neither really rooted. It is not their fault; they are short on resources. Inconsistent quality of Catholic formation at each level.” “We need to focus on our youth and not just the youth that attend parochial schools. We need to get a vibrant youth ministry to attract and involve the youth. I see so much effort and money put forth for parochial schools while the majority of kids attend public schools and are forgotten.”

“RCIA gives people more training than cradle Catholics receive. The RCIA process is valuable and should be a model for adult faith formation.” “RCIA is focused on receiving the Holy Spirit, but we lack a strategy for ‘launching,’ what comes next?”

Youth

Older adults feel distress that younger generations are not as engaged with the Catholic Church or have left altogether. “We need our youth so badly and we need them now.” “How do we touch younger people’s hearts and spirit, with the graces of the Church?” Young listening



session participants expressed, “Young people want authentic Catholicism, not watered down.” A millennial shared their peers were leaving the church due to the mistreatment of minors and loss of the Church’s moral credibility.

Cultural Diversity

Members of the Hispanic community participated in the listening session at Cathedral Square – of the twenty-eight participants 18% were Spanish speaking. The Synod team offered a combined listening session in Spanish and English, with the breakout session in separate rooms. Our Hispanic brothers and sisters feel well supported by the bishop. “The priests have been a great help in celebrating Masses in Spanish, even though this is their second language.” “The celebrations of the Virgin of Guadalupe are more on time.” There is a desire to promote unity through scheduled meetings, so that the Spanish-speaking and English-speaking community get to know each other better. “God doesn’t see whether you were born in a different country, and it is wonderful to see the diocese embrace the diversity of our community.”

Developing community while not sharing a language is a distress. “There is a structural problem with different languages. The Hispanic cultures need to be helped to assimilate culturally so the interactions can be more genuine.”

Same Sex Attraction

Listening session participants expressed tension about the reality of Catholics with same sex attraction. “Catholics don’t know where to turn to talk about genuine issues like same-sex attraction. So, they leave and don’t come back. We need to have space for people to talk without being ridiculed.” “I have family members and friends that don’t attend anymore. I boil it down to treatment of women, treatment of gay people, and the sex abuse scandal.” “I am not fond of instances where people who are LGBTQ are asked to leave their positions – I find this distressing – and see a cascading effect on people who have left the Church and will not come back.” “The diversity of people at Marywood – LGBTQ or those who are discouraged at their parish – feel welcomed and comfortable. The stories we hear explain the pain they feel toward the Church.” The desire to uphold the dignity of each person as an equal member of the human family was expressed.

Others shared, “We need to talk about Catholicism and its roots better. We’ve gotten caught up in the culture. We worry too much about feelings and we need to stand firm on teachings.” Pope Francis’ *Fiducia Supplicans*, December 18, 2023, re: blessing couples in irregular situations and same-sex couples, created confusion and he himself clarified that there is a need for compassionate pastoral care while upholding the Church’s teachings on marriage. “To live as a ‘community of love and mercy in Christ’ is to act in the charity that includes fraternal correction for sins that, to the modern secular eye, are merely lifestyle choices. If we are unwilling to affirm the Magisterium and resist the secularization of the faithful...then what is the point?”

Media

A point of distress is how the Catholic Church is portrayed in the media. The current trend in media makes it difficult to distinguish reliable information from misinformation. “If you don’t



know your Catholic faith well, it is easy to be led astray and difficult to understand who we should be listening to and how accurate the information is. According to the media I have been exposed to, there is a concern that some things our pope has been teaching is confusing the masses. Then you hear something from a Catholic news station and get to listen to the same story with a different flair. It is hard to know what to think.”

Question 2

The Church seeks to help all the baptized to respond to the call to proclaim the Gospel and live as a community of love and mercy in Christ. How can the Church’s structures and organization better support this mission?

Welcoming/Co-responsibility/Greater Participation

At the parish level, expressions that the Church can be more welcoming were common, especially to those exploring Catholicism. “Walking into a Catholic church isn’t a great first-time experience; it is not a welcoming environment.” “I’ve had an experience with a friend who was curious about the church. But he felt embarrassed because there was so much he didn’t know.” Comparing individual faith communities, some succeed in welcoming more than others. “The Cathedral is profoundly different as far as welcoming – not only the priests but with the laity.” “We have a Sunday Assembly at Marywood, and a lot of people come because they feel a sense of family.”

“I underlined the word, ‘co-responsibility.’ Co-responsibility means we need to support each other, especially when we do not have enough priests.” “The best pastor in the world cannot do it all. The laity needs to step up and be trusted and given authority by the pastor.” These messages reflect the desire for solidarity; embracing the laity’s right and responsibility to participate in the life of the parish.

Uniformly, a lack of volunteer service was cited as a point of concern. “We all have gifts the Church needs. Openness to encouraging everyone to share their gifts and participate in the mission of the Church.” Placing young people in leadership roles is essential, “the priest should put young people in positions of lay leadership – pastoral council, finance council, to bring in a new perspective.”

Community Outreach and Service

When asked how we can live as a community of love and mercy, the most common response was to site opportunities available through the parish to serve those in need. Examples were provided of how the Catholic Church is successful in being in solidarity with those living in poverty and the struggle against structures of injustice: mission trips, supporting baby pantries, food banks, and other fundraising efforts.

“A much greater emphasis on the absolute necessity of the works of mercy and justice. There are real problems in the world, and our mission is to do the work of solving problems, creating a world of peace and justice for all.” “Social justice issues are seldom if ever mentioned in



sermons – nothing about climate change...war, racism, poverty, and what parishes and individuals might do to ease these realities.

Evangelization

Participants struggle with the responsibility to evangelize beyond works of service. The challenge to evangelize was expressed “See the apostles go out in the Acts – they went out and became part of the community and got to know people. St. Paul was sharing love before he started giving messages about what to believe in.” “Everyone clearly wants to live in community and show mercy, but I feel ill-equipped to enter dialogue, ask questions, enter conversation when I believe a certain truth and see others profess to be Catholic and not live that truth.” “We don’t separate from people we don’t agree with. We keep them coming along.”

“Pope Francis is trying to open the doors more widely to non-believers.” “One thing I liked is ‘seeks to help all the baptized’ – not limited to Catholics but reaching out to all Christians. We need to not only understand our faith but reach out to people who aren’t Catholic.” “I want to see our faith flourish and bring brothers and sisters with me. The Lord has put us on this path.” A person talked about a favorite graphic; a large boat representing the Catholic Faith, sailing straight. “Follow what we teach.”

Conclusion

The synodal style offered listening session participants an opportunity to experience dialogue with other members of the faith community. “The fear of not being accepted by the Church is real – either through sexuality, nonbelievers, whatever. We need to take the steps to get our points shared with the Church, even though this process is hard.” “It is hoped that our local bishops and priests will be inspired to trust the gifts of their flock and make use of those graces freely given for building up the whole.” In closing, the following reflection on works of St. Faustina seems appropriate: *“Think about the most basic fact that you share an unbreakable bond with each and every person who is baptized into Christ Jesus. Regardless of whether or not another is embracing their baptismal calling, the unity remains.”*



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