

Overview of the Process

When diocesan staff, priests, and faithful first heard the announcement of the upcoming Synod on the topic “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission,” there was a mixture of confusion, excited curiosity and questions. Responses ranged from struggling to understand the topic to enthusiasm that the Church was actually asking for their input. Person after person expressed their joy that someone, finally, was asking what they thought. Someone was finally listening.

Getting the synodal process underway was met with some challenges. About half of the 94 parishes in the Diocese of Erie held some kind of listening session, along with a handful of religious orders and college campus ministries. In addition, there was an online survey made available for those unable to attend a listening session. Approximately 3,100 people participated in the listening phase. The vast majority were active members of their parishes. There was difficulty reaching the unchurched and those on the peripheries of society. It is a regret that very few of those voices came through. Interestingly, as an understanding of the synodal process grew among participants, it became apparent that much of the pastoral planning and parish restructuring conducted in the diocese in the last few years has included synodal listening in some form, even though it has not been called by that name.

An element of confusion remained as people grappled with the Synod questions. The online survey and most of the listening session facilitators focused mostly on the main question: “A synodal Church, in announcing

the Gospel, ‘journeys together.’ How is this ‘journeying together’ happening today in your local Church? What steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow in our ‘journeying together?’” This question was sometimes modified and supported by other questions to draw out its implications and make it more relevant to each particular group. However, many respondents translated questions about the Church “journeying together” for themselves and ended up answering whether or not the Church is “welcoming.”

While reading through the responses, it was evident that much misinformation is prevalent in people’s understanding about what the Church teaches and espouses. The responses remain relevant nonetheless, especially in helping to identify the numerous misconceptions operative in the lives of many of the faithful. The information gathered in the listening sessions has been invaluable in shedding light on the beliefs, hopes, and struggles of the faithful in this diocese, and in pointing out how much work needs to be done for the Church to be seen by all as the credible and compassionate witness to Christ she is called to be.

Many themes emerged, most of which can be summarized under a few categorical headings. One thing, however, became abundantly clear: There is a great desire to continue having open, frank discussions about difficult topics. Many people asked that similar listening sessions become a regular practice, even after this particular Synod ends.

Welcoming and Inclusivity

The good news is that the Eucharist and the feeling of community is most people’s favorite part of being Catholic. When asked, almost everyone named going to Mass, receiving the Eucharist, and fellowship with the people around them as the great joys of their parish. In listening sessions where that was not a specific question, some people still brought it up. People love to be in communion with Jesus and with each other.

Unfortunately, the overwhelming consensus is that the Church, both the local parish and the entire Catholic Church, is generally unwelcoming. While a few people did say that their particular parish community is friendly and inclusive, overall respondents saw the Church as judgmental, self-righteous, exclusive, and rigid. There are too many rules and too much focus on regulations and requirements. Several respondents asked why regulations for things like weddings are different from diocese to diocese. Probably responding from their own experience prior to 2016 when Pope Francis asked dioceses to make annulments free, a few said that annulments are difficult and expensive. The requirements surrounding RCIA, baptism, confirmation, sponsors, and child protection clearances are onerous. Because of this, many people just give up. Inquirers do not become Catholic. Parents do not get their children baptized. Couples do not get married in the church. Volunteers will not work with children. Many people do persevere and receive their sacraments, etc., but many questioned whether all the hoops are necessary. They certainly contribute to a feeling of exclusion for many who were already barely connected to the Church.

Final Listening Session Report assembled and reviewed through a collaboration between the Chancery, the Office of Faith Formation and facilitators at parishes across the diocese.



Further, some people expressed their belief that the Church's prioritization of regulations and rules extends to larger issues. They brought up the restriction of the priesthood to celibate men, and advocated for allowing women and married men to be priests. Some felt that the rules surrounding Communion are too strict, and that everyone should be welcome to receive the Eucharist. It is apparent that there have been significant failures in forming the faithful well in the sacramental theology of the Church, especially in relation to the priesthood and the Eucharist. So, for many people the limitations and practices rooted in that theology come across as plain discrimination.

Just about everyone agreed that there are people excluded. Interestingly, there was considerable variation in identifying exactly who comprises those marginalized groups. Many called out the treatment of Catholics who are divorced and remarried outside the Church, and of those who identify as LGBTQ+. Many people expressed that they have to choose between their church and their LGBTQ+ family members. Other respondents were concerned about those who are poor, homeless, minorities, and addicts. Still others asked for greater care for and inclusion of youth and young people, single people, the elderly, young families, and young children. Those who attend the Mass that is celebrated using the 1962 Missal (commonly referred to as the Traditional Latin Mass) felt marginalized and excluded by Church leadership. All of these groups share the perception that the Church is not welcoming of them, and at times they feel offended by the Church.

Also, there was a certain dichotomy evident as people discussed the lack of inclusiveness. Both progressives and conservatives reported feeling unwelcome in their parish because of their social and political views, and a few parishes noted that the political divisions in secular society are visible within the parish. A similar situation is happening between parish volunteers. Long-term volunteers reported feeling burned out. Only a few people do everything, and there is a desperate need for new and more volunteers. At the same time, several people had found it impossible to join an existing ministry because new volunteers are not welcomed by existing ones. Both sides are frustrated.

Various groups gave input as to why people "walk away" from the Catholic Church. While very few "former Catholics" gave their input, their perception of the Church as judgmental and exclusive plays a big part in people's decision to leave the practice of the faith. One person wanted the Church to know that "The Catholic Church's antiquated beliefs, scandals, and condemnation of others have pulled me away from my church family." College students said that the equitable treatment of persons who identify as LGBTQ+ and of people of color was one of their biggest concerns and one of the main reasons for them to leave the Catholic Church.



Adriana Grosch of Our Lady of Mercy Parish was among the parish facilitators who made comments on the first draft of the report that was being finalized for the Diocese of Erie.

The large number of those leaving the Church has faithful and active Catholics concerned, especially about the loss of young people. Older parents are saddened and wonder how they failed their children. Several parishioners are worried that the Church will disappear. They think Catholicism is going to die out unless it changes with the times. For example, one respondent shared, "My concept of God has changed since I was young, but the Catholic Church has not changed." Those who remain committed to their faith asked how to find a balance between tradition and modernity. They struggle to know how to love their neighbor without condoning sinful lifestyles.

Finally, a large majority brought up the role of women in the Catholic Church. Some said that women should be allowed to be priests, deacons, and bishops. They should be allowed to preach. Women are more than half of the population and yet they are excluded. Those who did not go so far as to advocate for women's ordination still asserted that there should be more women in leadership roles. Keeping women out of the decision-making process means that those decisions are missing a key perspective. Many felt that women's voices are not heard by the Church hierarchy.

One person made a very striking comment about the overall situation. "People in the Church tend to be like the older brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son. How do we get past that resentment?" The question is not easily answered. Still, this seems to be a fair assessment of people's perception, and indicates a necessary step on the journey of accompaniment.

Mission and Outreach

People did not only have opinions on what the Church is doing wrong, but also had ideas for improvement. One common theme was the need for adult faith formation. There were some older people saying that the young ones were not taught well, but there was a wider consensus that Catholics in general are poorly catechized. Some people recognized their own lack of knowledge. They want to be able to talk to others about their faith, to evangelize

them, but they do not know enough to feel confident in doing so. They asked for more adult bible studies and classes on the liturgy, sacraments, doctrine, apologetics, and Natural Family Planning. They asked: Why do we do what we do? Which teachings and practices of the Church can change and which cannot? What is the difference between dogma we must believe and other doctrines? What exactly is “pastoral discretion” and how can it be used? Many people want to know their faith but feel that they really don’t. They want to understand it well enough to be able to defend it, share it, and teach it to those around them.

Middle and high schoolers also had concerns about faith formation. Some said that it feels forced on them. In the younger grades, youth say that information is just thrown at them. By middle school, learning more about the faith has become irrelevant to many of them. They want it to be more interesting and have more depth. They want more fun activities and meaningful, practical service projects. The teens, in particular, brought up the importance of being able to question what is taught. They feel the adults get defensive and shut them down whenever they bring up questions, which leads the teens to acquiesce, in order to keep the peace, after which they just ignore whatever the catechist says.¹

There is a strong sense of the need for outreach and evangelization beyond faith formation. People want to receive it and they want to offer it. Several, especially in the younger generations, mentioned how important it is to be able to put their faith into action. They want to live it. Youth want more direct service opportunities. Adults want to contribute to their neighborhoods and local communities. Many parishes have become disconnected from the local neighborhood. Parishioners from some of the more urban areas noted that neighborhood issues are negatively affecting their parishes. Building up the neighborhood would also be good for the parish, even just practically speaking. Some mentioned the need to really focus on a wide variety of social justice concerns and not only pro-life activities. People are feeling the call to evangelize their own neighbors and the neighbors who currently live around the churches.

Like welcoming, outreach seems to be a weakness of the Catholic Church in our diocese. Many people brought up the need to personally contact those who left when COVID started and invite them back to church. Some wished that their priest would use words that they could understand in homilies. A few mentioned that we will assist the homeless and marginalized only if they come knocking on the door. One person commented that the Church caters to faithful Catholics who are self-starters and can take care of themselves. Those on the fringes and those who need some personal attention, help, and encouragement keep falling through the cracks. Catholics need to do better at seeking out the lost.

Communication

One big issue that kept coming up was poor communication. People do not know what is going on at their parishes, and this was coming from people who are actively involved. They do not know what ministries their parish has, or what those ministries are specifically doing. Parishioners want to know what their parish council and finance council are doing. Several people asked that the minutes from those and other committees be published in the bulletin, or for periodic updates from council members at weekend Masses. Some few reported that their parish does not have a parish council. Someone mentioned that while those who want to complain always find a way, there is no clear proper way to offer constructive suggestions. Information does not flow easily from the parish to parishioners, or from parishioners to the parish. Many respondents also wanted improved communication with their pastor. Decisions just seem to happen without the input or knowledge of the parishioners. There seems to be a general lack of communication between pastors, parish staff, and parish councils and committees.

In some cases, the information that people are looking for is available, but they do not know how to find it. Some people asked that parishioners be given access to diocesan and Vatican communications. While most of these are published online and linked in social media, they do not seem to be making it to the person in the pew. Some respondents encouraged the Church to improve its use of social media for evangelization and regular communication. Others reminded the Church not to forget those who still rely on print publications. As diocesan hard copy news disappears, a good number of parishioners are left out of the loop. A number of people recommended that more information be printed in parish bulletins. There should be transparency about finances and pastoral decisions at all levels of the Church.



Deacon Steve Washek, executive director of the Office of Faith Formation, interacts with college students during a synod session arranged specifically to elicit their comments. Bishop Lawrence Persico appointed Deacon Washek to organize and train facilitators who held listening sessions in the Diocese of Erie.

¹ Note: The Diocese of Erie has been studying youth faith formation programs for some time now. A few weeks after the close of the listening sessions, it announced a new system for grades 6-12. Hopefully, the new program will be able to address the concerns noted here.

Finally, a few people said that they were disappointed and confused by the conflicting messages they hear from the Pope, bishops, and priests. Someone asked, when the Pope speaks, is it his opinion or doctrine? They wish that the hierarchy would speak with one, coherent voice. Instead, they are left unsure what to think about important issues.

Leadership

Respondents had several issues and constructive suggestions about parish and Church leadership. There is a real distrust of the hierarchy overall. This is not necessarily limited to the Catholic Church. As someone pointed out, the younger generations especially do not trust institutions in general. In the Church, this is compounded by the sexual abuse scandal and even more so by the fact that bishops tried to cover it up. People are unwilling to submit to a hierarchy that has proven itself untrustworthy. One person stated that “We need the moral voice of the Church, but it has been weakened by scandal.”

At the diocesan level, several people called for more inclusivity on diocesan boards, cabinets, and advisory groups. They seemed to mean diversity of gender, race, etc., but others wanted more geographic diversity. Parishioners from one county in particular felt that there is too much attention given to the city of Erie and its immediate surroundings, stating that the publications and personnel decisions are all about Erie County. Also, several people said that parishioners should be consulted more in parish and diocesan decisions.

Respondents were especially vocal about the leadership at their local parish. Quite a few people made the point that the vitality of the parish depends almost entirely on the person of the pastor. A vibrant pastor equals a vibrant parish. A less engaged pastor almost always leads to a dying parish. They asked how we can build parishes around the gifts of the parishioners, so that the parish does not fall apart and die once the pastor leaves. On a similar note, many complained that lay people are rarely able to bring up new ideas or start new initiatives unless the pastor is personally invested in the project. The laity would like to share in the responsibility for and the running of the parishes, including the business side, so that priests can be free to celebrate the sacraments and minister to the people.

Everyone has noticed that the priests are stretched thin. In many cases parishioners mentioned how grateful they were to have such a good pastor. At other times, people regretted their pastor’s lack of pastoral outreach, personal sensitivity, and overall people skills. Some were concerned that priests are not getting practical, relevant, and modern formation in the seminary. They recommended more business courses and more training in pastoral outreach. Several groups brought up the need to combat clericalism amongst the priests. Everyone is against clericalism, but unfortunately the term does not seem to have one agreed-upon, set meaning. It is used as a catch-all phrase for whatever behavior the speaker does not like. Nevertheless, the consensus was that priests should share responsibility with lay people in the parishes.

Conclusion

Much work remains to be done. This synodal process has shown that synodality is weak in the Diocese of Erie, but it has not been entirely absent. It has been a notable part of diocesan pastoral planning, which has been ongoing since 2014. The pastoral planning process gathered data, created preliminary plans, consulted with clergy and lay representatives, and revised plans according to their feedback. Synodal consultation has been a large part of pastoral planning in practice, if not in terminology. However, the feedback from these recent synod listening sessions points to the need for synodality to play a much greater role in parish and diocesan life going forward.

This will not be easy. As several respondents noted, it is difficult to correctly discern what is coming from the Holy Spirit. A number of parish facilitators expressed discomfort that they received feedback from people holding positions contrary to Church teaching. Participants have shared much pain, frustration, and sadness. Hearing them is just the first step. Synodality will require a lot of difficult conversations.

Nevertheless, there is reason for hope. Participants and facilitators were excited for the opportunity to share and pleased when their concerns were taken seriously. A majority of facilitators who attended the Diocesan Pre-Synodal Meeting would like to continue holding listening sessions in their parishes. They pointed out that much can and should be done at the parish level, with collaboration between parishes and support from the diocese. The themes that arose from this synod will inform much of the work of the Diocese of Erie in the coming years.



Diocesan administrators available to dialogue with listening session facilitators included, left to right, Father Chris Singer, chancellor; Deacon Steve Washek, director of Faith Formation; Bishop Lawrence Persico; Msgr. Ed Lohse, vicar general; and Maria Caulfield, a graduate theology student at Franciscan University of Steubenville and executive assistant in the Chancery, who penned the first version of the draft.

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