



## DIOCESE OF BRIDGEPORT

238 Jewett Avenue • Bridgeport, Connecticut 06606 • 203-416-1352 • FAX: 203-371-8323

OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

December 8, 2022

My Dear Friends in Christ:

I am delighted to share with you the results of our diocesan participation in the global Synod on Synodality begun over 18 months ago. The full diocesan report and an executive summary have been released for your review and information.

Allow me to express my sincere appreciation to Deacon Steve Hodson, who served as the diocesan coordinator of the process and author of the full diocesan report, along with the many parish delegates with whom Deacon Hodson collaborated very closely. I am grateful to all who participated in the listening sessions, whether they were held via Zoom, in large or small group settings or through personal conversations. I very much appreciate your feedback and insights.

As you know, the purpose of the Synod on Synodality is to create a process of graced listening to the thoughts and prayers of all the members of the Church, including clergy, religious and members of the faithful. It is a discernment that will remain faithful to the teachings of the Church, while under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, addressing the needs of all who form the Church. Its principal goal is to help us more effectively encounter the living presence of Christ, while being accompanied in our individual discipleship. In a world that is growing ever more confused and hostile to religious belief and practice, this process will better equip us to address the challenges we face while deepening our knowledge and appreciation of our Catholic faith.

The Synod on Synodality is now entering the continental phase of discernment, having completed work on a national synthesis of all the diocesan processes to date. I ask for your continued prayers that this process will bear great spiritual fruit for the re-evangelization of our world.

Please be assured of my prayers for you and your families as the holy days of Christmas approach.

With every best wish, I am

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Most Reverend Frank J. Caggiano  
Bishop of Bridgeport

# **2021-2024 Global Synod on Synodality**

## **Executive Summary**

In response to Pope Francis' call for "listening sessions" in every diocese worldwide, Bishop Caggiano invited all our parishes to participate. Over thirteen hundred people from forty-two parishes shared their experience of God and their hope and suggestions for the Church. Each parish chose the discussion format, with options for community town halls, virtual meetings, and one-on-one interviews. In all cases, people spoke without others commenting while someone took notes. The participants were grateful for the opportunity to be heard without judgment.

A majority expressed a strong desire for vibrant parishes that bring people to Christ through the three transcendentals: truth, beauty, and goodness. For example, many noted a need for more effective catechesis, including professional development for catechists and continuing formation for parents. There is also a need for additional sacramental catechesis, especially on the Eucharist and Reconciliation. "Community" was often highlighted by participants as a characteristic of vibrant parishes. Likewise, they said that helping others brings people together in fellowship and prayer. A particular concern cited was outreach to the homebound. Across the board, people expressed a desire for beautiful liturgies that include excellence in homiletics, liturgical music, and a welcoming environment. Although there was some discussion between the Novus Ordo Mass and the Traditional Latin Mass, Pope Francis' *motu proprio Traditionis Custodes* addresses this topic. In summary, people expressed a strong desire to create multiple opportunities to encounter Jesus Christ in and through the Church.

Several topics emerged that are consistent with issues debated by the universal Church, such as married clergy, the role of women, and the inclusion of LGBTQ Catholics. While most participants expressed support for Pope Francis' leadership, some felt the Holy Father's comments on these issues were inconsistent with Church doctrine. Regardless of a person's position, many stressed the importance of regular communication at all levels of the Church: universal, diocesan, and parochial. Of equal importance is complete transparency and accountability.

Bishop Caggiano is grateful to all the participants who shared their candid comments and reflections from the heart. The following paper provides a composite summary of the listening sessions. The consolations and desolations expressed give us insight into our diocesan community that will help us build a bridge to the future. Bishop Caggiano is currently working with a subset of participants to determine the three to five critical issues that need immediate attention and action plans.

# 2021-2023 Global Synod on Synodality

## Diocesan Synthesis

### Purpose

The purpose of this report is to summarize the insights provided by the parishioners in the Diocese of Bridgeport and others to Pope Francis' request to hold "listening sessions," to discern the steps the Holy Spirit is inviting us to take to grow in our collective journey of faith. These faith stories, or lived experiences, come from God, and enable us to witness how God has journeyed with us, as in the past, and will continue to guide us in the future. As of the date of this report, approximately 42% of our parishes have held sessions, and there have been over 1,300 participants, thus far. We are being guided to share true experiences of how God has brought us to Himself, healed and consoled us, brought us joy, and sustained us in sorrow. This summary is intended to highlight as many of the expressions that were courageously shared. Nearly all the participants were grateful for the opportunity to share their thoughts in a spirit of inclusiveness and charity.

### Process Overview

Each parish in the Diocese of Bridgeport was provided the *Vademecum*, as well as a Power Point Summary of the different options for holding prayerful "listening sessions." Bishop Frank Caggiano allowed each parish to conduct sessions, as they desired, to include one-on-one sessions, especially with fallen away Catholics or the disenfranchised, as well as small group sessions and town hall style sessions. Helpful consultation to the delegates was provided, as needed, to include suggestions on the best means of allowing the faithful to comment on anything pertaining to their faith. The goal was to let people speak about what was on their hearts – the more open-ended the questions, the better.

Some parishes formulated questions that may have had some specificity which might have elicited narrower responses, but were generally meant to give food for thought or fulfill the need of the local parish. Several used an open-ended question such as: "If you had an opportunity to have a conversation with Pope Francis, what would you talk about?" or "How would you imagine the Church helping you more in life?" Numerous other questions were asked or surveyed by the local parishes. In addition to the "live" listening sessions, several parishes held Zoom sessions and several conducted surveys to allow those who could not attend live or Zoom sessions to respond via written responses submitted via email, online survey services, or in-person drop boxes. Many parishes held listening sessions with their active ministry groups which proved to be very valuable as the participants were largely long-time parishioners with significant wisdom that was shared with love, along with honest critique.

## **Protocol for Listening:**

Each person was allowed to speak while all listened without any comment. The facilitator would confirm that the listeners understood what was said correctly and then notes were taken. The live and Zoom “listening sessions” were done with respect and a focus on “listening with the heart” and “speaking with courage.” We are grateful to Deacon Brian Kelly, Ph.D. for helping develop a Protocol for Listening (see addenda) that had been shared with all the delegates along with a behavioral health referral guide as a possible resource for parishes during these trying times. Most significant about the entire experience was the deepening of understanding among all participants who shared joys, ideas, fears and disappointments with courage and the knowledge that they would be heard and not judged. The prayerful sessions truly helped build relationships and strengthened the Body of Christ. One of the beautiful fruits of the “listening sessions” was the fact that they were done in a spirit of heart-felt understanding which fosters inclusiveness and healing. Even though others may not have agreed with the speaker’s opinions, they made the effort to understand the person without judgement or vocal engagement. It was akin to Jesus’ acceptance and forbearance with the wounded and persecuted of his time, while having full knowledge of the truth. The modality of Synodality has been a means of binding us together in Spirit during the process and has deepened relationships through the Spirit’s gift of understanding. Many participants have indicated that this process should be continued at their parish level on a regular basis.

## **Significant Consolations:**

High points of the sessions were the stories of conversion and the overwhelming desire for parishioners to come together “to build friendships and provide opportunities for putting beliefs into social action.” Many expressed sincere gratitude for their faith, the sacraments, the dedicated clergy, and the liturgy. Most participants were grateful for the Pope’s leadership and focus on mercy and acknowledged the Catholic Church, made holy by Jesus and enlightened by the Holy Spirit, as the true source of holiness and an anchor for their lives. Overall, most participants said that being supported in sorrow and sharing joy were common essential elements for each of us on our journey of faith and that the Church fulfills those needs for them personally. Numerous parishes proudly highlighted an extraordinary number of successful ministries within their local parish and beyond, which fulfill our Lord’s teaching to love God and neighbor.

## **Other Important Viewpoints:**

A minority of the parishes expressed concern that the Pope’s messaging concerning Church doctrine via social media does not match Church doctrine. Some individuals comments noted a lack of joy, passion, and love in the Mass, lack of inclusivity in the Church’s messaging and the lack of women in hierarchy and ministries of the church; the diminished belief in the true

presence of Christ in the Eucharist; lack of leadership; the shortage of priests; and the need for better communication, effective messaging, and catechesis; and the closing of schools. Others spoke of lingering wounds and sense of betrayal by the clerical sexual abuse scandal.

## **The Liturgy, Sacraments and Spiritual Practices**

**The Mass:** One parishioner noted: “The Holy Mass is the source and summit of our faith.” A theme that was common to most of the Diocese was summarized by one parish, as follows: “There were voices on both sides on the question about the liturgy. The majority prefer that the Church steer clear of pre-Vatican II liturgical practices while others were noted to appreciate the value of the Traditional Latin Mass.”

Some recommended that rather than having Masses that combine English and Latin, it might be preferable to designate certain Masses as Latin, but have the majority of the Masses in English. It was mentioned that parishes with large Spanish populations, or parishes with another dominant language other than English, would benefit by having Mass in that native language, to better engage the hearts and minds of the faithful. Some parishes requested a healing Mass once or twice a year while others expressed concern that “going back to pre-Vatican II will result in losing parishioners” and is less likely to attract the youth; however, one young adult wrote of “finding joy by worshipping God in the Extraordinary Form of the Mass” and is pained by the perceived chastisement for this preference.

Most of the respondents indicated that the Mass has been a source of healing and joy in their lifetime. It was suggested by many parishioners that the Mass and its component parts need to be retaught, possibly in the context of certain homilies. Many indicated that the Mass should be a positive, reverent, and uplifting experience which begins with our initial encounter with our Lord and a deep understanding of the richness of the liturgy, especially the Eucharist. It was said that the celebration of the Mass should model family life, which requires patience, mercy, and forgiveness. At the same time, it must hold a degree of reverence in its rituals, while always allowing the Holy Spirit to guide the celebration, and our Lord and Savior, fully present in the sacrament of the Eucharist, to feed us.

**The Sacrament of Reconciliation:** Participants in the Synod had various viewpoints on the Sacrament of Reconciliation. One parish commented:

“Many indicated that they were uncomfortable with the formal confession process and would like to see a monthly general absolution service adopted. One comment stated, “Mass was always filled, and even people who would not ordinarily attend Reconciliation would be there.” One parish noted: “If 70% of Catholics do not believe in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, then so goes the importance of the Sacrament of Reconciliation.”

It was suggested that we should address the fear of Reconciliation and provide more education about this sacrament. Some participants commented that they still took comfort in the sacrament and are grateful for more opportunities to receive it.

**The Sacrament of Baptism:** As related to the Mass, one person commented, “I love Baptisms during Mass – you get to know the younger people of the parish.” Baptisms have increased since the pandemic and provide a joyful opportunity that may be shared in conjunction with the Mass.

**Spiritual Practices:** Several parishioners commented that rosaries, novenas, Chaplets of Divine Mercy, and other devotions to Jesus, the Blessed Mother, and saints to be of great value in their spiritual lives, as are numerous other devotions.

Many mentioned retreats and pilgrimages to holy shrines as being life-changing. Also, some stated, “There seem to be fewer opportunities for Catholic charismatic prayer and worship services than in the past.” Some have asked that Pope Francis approve “Our Lady of Medjugorje,” who has already led to numerous conversions and healings.

### **The Eucharist, Transubstantiation and Adoration:**

**Eucharist:** One of the young students who responded to a survey summarized the thoughts of many parishioners by saying, “I feel the closest to God when I receive Holy Communion.” Another parish commented: “The ‘beauty’ of the Mass is that it is the same everywhere in the world.” It was apparent from the Synod that God ministers to many hearts, in the deepest way, immediately following one’s reception of Holy Communion or at Adoration. Therefore, the time after receiving our Lord in the sacrament of the Eucharist is sacred time.

It was recommended that shorter homilies and less music after Holy Communion will allow more time for the faithful to absorb God’s infinite love immediately after receiving communion, which will spiritually unite us in Christ and impel us to charity. It was also suggested that quiet, meditative Latin chants or instrumental music may be well-suited to the post-communion moment of mystery and wonder, as sung lyrical songs can hinder the contemplative opportunity to listen to God speak to us.

Some suggested that following the pandemic, an-increased effort is needed to bring the Eucharist to the homebound. Another parish stated, “No one should be deprived of Holy Communion; [if one] seeks to receive Christ, ‘Who are we to judge!’” “Other respondents supported decisions by priests or bishops to deny public figures Holy Communion based on their public support of abortion.

**Transubstantiation:** Several participants commented that transubstantiation is a stumbling block for many Catholics.

Continued catechesis was suggested to be crucial to helping Catholics understand this mystery of our faith. Also, real-life discussions of documented Eucharistic miracles were

mentioned as a valuable way to foster a deeper faith in the real presence of our Lord in this sacrament.

**Adoration:** Many have said that the spiritual practice of Adoration has borne much fruit in our Diocese. Several participants spoke highly of Adoration practices and spiritual refreshment from this devotion at their local parish.

**Homilies:** It was said by many that, "Homilies are very important to people." Most respondents stated that homilies need to be relatable to the lives of the parishioners and should be based on Scripture, but not a repeat of the readings. They should be instructive, yet not so exegetical/theological to the exclusion of their applicability to the lives of the parishioners.

Several participants commented that local parishes may have different audiences, so to speak, and the homilies need to be relatable to a given assembly and need to be inspired by the Holy Spirit, so God speaks to each person "in their own language." It was said: "We need words that inspire love and charity and also clearly communicate right and wrong, balanced with an increase in forgiveness, forbearance, and reconciliation."

It was also noted that it is important that the homilist speaks clearly and not too fast, as some of our elderly have difficulty hearing and understanding, especially if the homilist has a heavy accent. Most of the respondents ask that the homilies be concise and not extraordinarily lengthy.

**Liturgical Music during Mass:** This was noted to be an important component in the celebration of the Mass. Though musical tastes vary, the quality of the musicianship and vocals were noted by many to be very important, as are the lyrics, which should be scriptural to some degree. It was noted that numerous people are drawn to God through prayerful liturgical music that conveys and enhances the message of the Paschal Mystery during Mass. Also, it was acknowledged by several participants that young families are drawn into the depths of God's love and the mysteries of our liturgy by this ministry.

Several participants stated that having special music at Masses for youth and young adults can be inspiring to them and they should have a say in the selection of appropriate music. One parishioner commented: "There was music, but no joy" at the Easter Mass. Music ministers not only must be properly compensated, but as importantly, be people of prayer, lest they become like "a clanging gong or noisy cymbal." It was acknowledged that there is a beautiful body of traditional music that resonates with many people, but also, it was noted that there are other genres of liturgical music that may also resonate and inspire the faithful, who should be active participants in this aspect of worship.

## **Clergy, Religious and the Laity**

**The Priesthood:** A predominant theme of the Synod for the Diocese of Bridgeport was the feeling that there is a shortage of priests and deacons in the Catholic Church. Many Catholics have left the church due to the inability of the clergy to be present at times of significant loss or illness. Most seek a priest in these situations.

Many Synod participants are suggesting that the clergy delegate more roles, in general, to the laity, which can allow the clergy more time for other pastoral activities. One contributor said, "Can priests and staff really know the unique gifts of each parishioner when time is not spent with each of them?" The ratio of clergy to laity was noted to be infinitesimal, and clergy are notably exhausted, per many respondents.

Several participants spoke very highly of their parish priests. It was said by more than one parish that, "the priests are accessible to parishioners for questions and spiritual guidance by their presence in our ministries, confessions and office hours" while other parishes decry the level of clergy interaction with the parishioners.

Also, it has been noted that vibrant parish communities nurture their clergy, spiritually and communally, both inside and outside the church walls. It was mentioned that the parishes benefit from having permanent clergy for an extended period, rather than having visiting priests that may be called on to minister periodically at a parish due to the shortage of priests. It was said that the stability of a parish begins with the pastor and clergy and is fortified by their enabling the laity to take active roles in the life of the parish, as the Spirit moves and as are suited to their talents.

**Other Commentary on the Priesthood:** One parish suggested, "In the face of dwindling vocations, participants would like leadership to consider its stance on married clergy." There were several parishes that had similar suggestions. One participant said, "If married Episcopalian priests can convert to Catholicism and serve as married priests, why not ordained "cradle Catholics?" It was noted that Jesus acknowledged Peter as the rock on which he would build His Church.

Considering Saint Peter was married, some people suggest due consideration be given to having well-catechized, married priests. It was noted: "God has ordained that life is brought forth by husband and wife, might not the Church experience renewed life by allowing priests to be married?" Saint Peter was noted as a prime example of God's appointed vicar witnessing through his sacramental married and priestly life. One parish stated, "The Church needs, and would benefit, from married priests. Many who left the Church to get married were powerfully anointed ministers of the Church. They need to come back into service."

There were also some comments that were "fully supportive of the Church's doctrine in this regard." Some respondents acknowledged the continuous line of men serving in apostolic succession, but a majority of the parishes suggested the Church seek to discern,



considering the shortage of priests, having married men and women serve in the priesthood.

It was said by one parish, "Because women are not given the opportunity to lead, we are missing a lot of talent for growth and formation of the Church." In more than one parish, the "issue of women and Church culture was reported with a sense of desolation," while other parishes' spoke highly of religious women fervently serving the church with love, joy, and humility in other roles.

**The Diaconate:** Several respondents believe that women should be considered for the diaconate as deaconesses. They express that this ordained ministry of service would be of great value in assisting at the liturgy, proclaiming the Gospel, and welcoming children and adults to their new life in Christ at baptism. Another respondent to this topic stated that women should not be deacons, because as it would add to confusion in the Church, and that there are many other ways for women to serve in the Church.

It was suggested that deacons be allowed to anoint the sick based on the shortage of priests. As noted, many fallen away Catholics have been deeply hurt when a loved one is near death and the pastor or other clergy could not make it to the hospital or home to bring the grace of the sacrament prior to death. Another noted the desire to bring back sub-deacons to include men and women which would allow them to fulfill greater roles than the laity.

The thoughts of many parishes regarding clergy is expressed by this quote from one of the respondents: "Priests and nuns and religious orders bring strength and beautiful gifts to the Church, as do missionaries and contemplative orders praying in convents and monasteries." Continued prayer for vocations is at the heart of inspiring more to seek to serve God via the priesthood, diaconate, and religious life.

**Laity:** Another predominant theme of this Synod was that the laity needs to be empowered in their respective vocations.

It was noted that some of the people do not realize that by the grace of their baptism, they hold the key to the unity and vibrancy of the Catholic Church. It is agreed that our Church will be energized by seeking and developing the gifts and charisms that the laity have been given for the benefit of all. One parish stated: "The whole Catholic world needs to be evangelized."

A universal or diocesan-wide protocol for ascertaining and fostering these gifts will help endow the Body of Christ, so all will participate fully in the ministries of healing, consolation, evangelization, and communion. It was noted by many that once we get to truly know a person and their gifts, it is incumbent upon each of us encourage them to serve in a ministry that matches their God-given gift. It was generally acknowledged that a personal invitation at the right time from a friend, relative or priest will always elicit a more positive response than a request in a bulletin.

## **Inclusiveness**

**The call to the Church fostering an inclusive community was one of most predominant themes throughout the listening sessions.** All must be welcomed to our Catholic faith with sincere love as Jesus taught. That includes infants, the elderly, people of all races and cultures, the LGBTQ community, married, divorced, widowed, single, young adults, disabled, marginalized and children.

One parish commented, "There is a sense that the future of the Church may be hindered if leaders don't address the lack of acceptance of these groups, their gifts and values." It was suggested that any segment of the population that does not think they are an important part of the Universal Church or local parish should be surveyed to find out the reasons they feel excluded, so remedies can be taken. It was reiterated by many that most "people need to be personally invited to be part of the community" and need to know what the community of faith stands for.

**Women's Roles:** One respondent said, "Women need to be told they are valued by the Church." In addition, numerous respondents reported the need for the Church to include women in all aspects of the Church. The same holds true for every person we encounter. Many people spoke of the wounds in the Body of Christ that need healing. Others noted, "Small opportunities for simple gatherings can build momentum as people follow the promptings of the Holy Spirit to come back or to deepen their involvement," which leads to a more diverse, involved faith community where each member of the Body of Christ is valued.

## **Making People Feel Welcome**

At another parish it was said, "The thought from many individuals in every listening session was that if you make people feel welcomed and wanted, they will want to be an active member of the parish family." One remarked, "Clergy engagement before and after Mass" is an extension of Christ's love. A pastors openness to all people was said to be vital in fostering inclusiveness.

Some expressed concern about church communities being judgmental and the need to focus on mercy.

Others said, "It was through Church programs many of our newer members found Church (and) Christ. They went with friends to program meetings and were drawn to Church!" It was expressed that when people participate in a small group, faith-based and social activities they are "formed together" and can become like brothers and sisters. This community leads to further participation, mission, and a desire to want "to be part of the overall solution in the Church" – an integral member.

One parish with many activities and ministries remarked, "Our parish is like a family. It is welcoming with many opportunities for worship, activities, and events." It was also said that "the fellowship cultivated through meetings and volunteer work is important to both spiritual and personal growth."

Activities after Mass were noted to be a good way to further build an inclusive community. One parish positively noted, "Collaborative ministry model is evident and that, in itself, is invitational and welcoming." It was mentioned that some parishes lack this type of collaboration which dissuades inclusiveness.

One parishioner commented, "If we see others as God's children, racism wouldn't be an issue." They continued, "I know that's not as easy as it sounds because we've been conditioned to see another differently . . . we need to see in new ways, truly Christian ways." One beautiful insight from a parishioner noted, "Mother Mary looks like the people she is appearing to." And one middle school student commented, "The Holy Spirit invites us to take steps of acceptance with different cultures and communities, such as the LGBTQ community, people of color, immigrants . . . our actions should show kindness and respect to all."

### **Communication, Messaging and Outreach**

**Universal Church:** Some stated that "the Church does not adequately communicate with Church members" and the Pope needs to be better heard and understood." One comment stated, "Catholic people need clarity; need to know what is being spoken by the Church."

Might each parish email their parishioners the link for the Vatican News on a quarterly basis so more of the laity can avail themselves of the timely information and news from the Vatican? Others have strongly commented that "the Church's public face – seen as judgmental, insular and even bigoted – calls them to question their affiliation with this public face, and makes it difficult to invite others, particularly younger adults, into the Catholic faith."

**Local Church:** Many parishes suggested the need for better communication and messaging both by the Diocese and within each parish. At the parish level it was generally agreed that one-on-one conversations and personal invitations were the cornerstones of a welcoming and dynamic faith community.

"Greeters at the main doors of the church to make people feel more welcome was a wonderful suggestion," said one parishioner. "Invitations matter in broader ways: some parishioners who want to get involved may be waiting to be asked."

One parish stated, "Encourage and facilitate the development of small, interpersonally connected faith groups for learning. (web-based resources/readings; teachings; bible study programs, [devotions])." Instagram and Facebook were mentioned as platforms that should be better used to promote all the good that is done by the Church.

A well-planned calendar of social, spiritual, family and community events would allow us to invite newcomers and even those that are fallen away to continuous opportunities for engagement. All parishes of the Diocese can contribute their events to the calendar which

can be emailed to parishioners regularly or downloaded and sent to those outside of the parish. It should have at least six months of upcoming events.

It has been stated by a few parishes that the Synod “listening session” format of “listening with the heart” without judgement should be continued on an annual or semi-annual basis, as the process forms an excellent means of honest communication. It was said that “real friendships need to form at all levels.” It was also noted that there is a huge need for more social media communication that reaches the younger population. Advertising parish events that are open to all can be promoted via many more channels than currently being done. It was suggested that college or high school interns can be hired to help design and communicate parish and Diocesan social and faith events to a much broader audience. There should be a comprehensive, integrated publicity program that highlights some of the positive events that take place in the Diocese and promotes upcoming events via media that reaches a multi-generational audience.

It was recommended that the “Church should be more open, upfront, and transparent about corrective actions taken regarding the abuse scandal.” Some said, “The abuse scandal continues to run very deep” in some communities, while others less so. One comment noted, “The Diocese is doing more to ensure it never happens again.”

It is evident that more Masses of Hope & Healing can be done to help heal these wounds and reach every person in our Diocesan family that still suffers with unfathomable pain. More communication is desired by some respondents about ongoing preventative measures. In addition, those in higher leadership positions within the church need to seek inspiration of the Holy Spirit and have the special responsibility to continue empathetic dialogue that listens with the heart, heals and spawns active, integrated solutions that are communicated clearly to each parish.

**Outreach:** It was suggested that the Church must create outreach programs for families, seniors, youth, and singles.

One parish commented, “The sense of a focus beyond the immediate community is a powerful draw and that the Church’s commitment to social justice should be more widely known, particularly as this would engage young people.” It was said, “It is apparent that many more volunteers and even paid staff are needed to accomplish God’s work in our time.”

The Synod format of listening affords the opportunity to engage those with interests and gifts that match a need, which can lead to more participation. One parish noted that some “participants in our discussions expressed or implied a lack of participation and a lack of personal responsibility. Implicitly and explicitly, they do not see themselves as responsible for addressing the issues of the Church, rather they view the Church as responsible to lead.” Another parish commented, “two-thirds of their respondents indicated keen understanding of the mission of baptized Catholics (live the Gospel, live like did Jesus did, take care of others, etc.)” At times, respondents suggested that our messaging focuses too heavily on the burden of sin, as opposed to redemption and the joy of the resurrection. Noteworthy, is the

Ambassador Ministry which is now tasked to reach out to those who are away from the church and to invite them home.

One area of real concern is for our home bound seniors who may not be able to come to church, may be very lonely, or who might need assistance in coming to Mass. Eucharistic ministry to those at home has been hampered by Covid and needs to be reenergized. Those who are properly trained can carry both the Word of God and the living presence of our Lord to those who cannot attend Mass. Also, of great import is that some seniors have difficulty understanding the priests, lectors, and deacons, especially those with accents and those who speak quickly.

### **Faith Education, Formation, Catechesis and Evangelization**

It was reported by most of the parishes that catechesis is very much needed on numerous levels in our Church. "Faith formation needs to be more than just learning information. It should be a continuous process of surrender; falling love with Christ, being present to others and their needs, person to person; and being a witness to others so they can be open to the opportunities the Holy Spirit is presenting." Proclaiming the Gospel by the example of one's love of God and one's life are paramount.

Children, youth, young adults and adults learn in various ways. It has been said that when teaching the faith, it would be beneficial to understand how our students and listeners learn and present the Gospel message in multiple ways that engage each person. Jesus told stories that illuminated the Way, the Truth and the Life. Retelling age-appropriate stories about Jesus, his ministries of healing, teaching and forgiveness will resonate with both young and old alike. One parish commented, "Our children, as well as our Youth Group, need instruction in the Mass." They noted, "There does not seem to be any particular year of CCD that teaches step-by-step information on the glory of the Mass." There are many Mass readings that lend themselves beautifully to an illuminating homily that can touch on this glory.

Some have expressed concern that "catechists may not be sufficiently familiar with the curriculum" and that parents are not reinforcing the faith at home nor bringing their children to church. Exposure to, and education about the beauty of the liturgy, was noted to be critical as all people are attracted to the Triune God. Much like a homily that expands the scripture and allows the assembly to make Godly choices of their own free will, so too, teaching our children, via the liturgy with a focus on Scripture and the Eucharist are invaluable.

When asked why they come to Mass, some children said, "I come to Mass to pray and learn about Jesus." Some parishes have the children leave the congregation for an age-appropriate liturgy of the word that teaches and engages the children while allowing the parents to be free to be inspired by the Word of God and the adult-oriented homily. Many said that having children take active roles in the Mass leads them closer to God.

Some respondents to the Synod are concerned that the eternal truths of our Catholic faith may be “diluted.” Since catechetical ministry to the youth is a calling from God, which entails a solid theological background and teaching skills, communal prayer for the Holy Spirit to call forth disciples in this ministry is paramount.

Others reported the need to invest more resources for the youth – financial programs, resources, retreats, teen retreats . . .” It was suggested that we need to teach youth in ways that they are receptive, e.g., via more adoption of technology in Religious Education.

The closing of many Catholic schools is a disappointment for many of the parishes. It was said, “As Catholic parochial schools close, we lose a strong starting point for parish unity and family identification with being Catholic.” Those parishes with vibrant Catholic education have a better integration of youth and families in the faith life of the parish. They pray together more and receive the sacraments together.

Several participants have expressed that immersive, communal experiences such as parish missions, smaller groups services and Cursillo weekend retreats have been very effective in deepening one’s faith. In the past, Emmaus Weekends, Life-Teen, and other youth retreats and ministries were extraordinary means of educating and evangelizing our young adults in multi-intelligent and multi-media ways that include personal witness, scripture, music, art, the Sacrament of Reconciliation and the celebration of the liturgy. Many have suggested that greater participation in World Youth Day and parish mission trips are extraordinary Catholic experiences that light the fire of faith in our young adults.

Many adults have expressed that they have been taught and evangelized by the example of others. Some indicated that being brought up in the faith was the foundation of their continued thirst for God. A Pew research study indicates that mothers are very instrumental to the faith life of children and the family, not to the exclusion of fathers, family members or friends. One parish commented: “We find that it is not children that bring people into the Church, but fathers.”

Bible study groups for men and women have been said to have increased the knowledge and faith of many parishioners and can enhance the faith life of the family.

Some have also said, “Another ‘magnet’, if you will, seems to be Bishop Robert Barron’s Word on Fire social media outlet along with a daily devotional book from LivingFaith.com that have allowed my growth in my relationship with God to grow deeper. Others have enjoyed Bishop Frank’s podcasts as a source of sound Catholic education. Flocknotes, Dynamic Catholic and Catechism in a Year, as endorsed by the Vatican, were noted to be a good learning tools. Some comments mentioned that the parish bulletins can be expanded to provide more educational content both for youth and adults.

Inviting guest speakers, musicians, authors, etc. was mentioned as a means of both educating both parish members, and the broader community on topics of interest. Interfaith panel discussions can serve to “inspire people, stimulate trust, weave relationships, and allow us to learn from one another.” One parish was very grateful to the U.S. Jesuit Ignatian spirituality centers, where experienced spiritual directors guide those seeking to develop a relationship with God. This is a powerful way to accompany young people.”

One parish commented that “education is lacking; there needs to be an effort to dispel the untruths.” They added, “Overall, the Church is doing a poor job of teaching the faithful.” It appears that a Diocesan-wide calendar of all the adult educational opportunities in the Bridgeport Diocese would be beneficial. Parish book and bible study meetings, education seminars at our local Catholic Universities, guest speaker sessions, panel discussions on pertinent topics about our faith culture and more video and remote tutorials can be disseminated to every parish in the Diocese. Every parish can add adult educational opportunities to the calendar which should be managed and promoted on the Diocesan level.

### **Family Life and Engagement of Youth**

One parish posed the question: “How can we empower parents to make their homes a Domestic Church?” The first response stated: “We must teach and encourage them to pray together.” Other responses included, “We must show them that we as a parish family truly love them.” Having parishioners lovingly and enthusiastically greet families before and after Mass and taking the time to get to know them is crucial.

“There needs to be a family focus.” “There should be a family or children’s Mass every week and a separate Liturgy of the Word for young children.” “The parish needs a children’s choir,” noted one parish. It was recommended that the reactivation of ministries that were closed during the pandemic should be started which will allow more roles for family and youth to include greeters, readers, ushers, altar servers, youth groups and women’s guilds.

It was noted, “Social events should be geared toward families.” Other faith communities find ways to embrace families via an integration of worship services that immediately integrate with social activities, music, movies, and service activities in which entire families can participate and contribute. In many communities in our Diocese, the children and parents seek volunteer and charitable projects, and the parishes that afford families with these service opportunities tend to be better able to integrate both the youth and parents into spiritual practices. Corporal works of mercy and worshipping together allow for deeper formation for families.

It was noted that young families have unique challenges, and it would be beneficial to survey our parish families and see what they need, and desire, to help get them engaged. An incredible opportunity to start this process is at baptisms. Inviting some, or all parishioners

to baptisms to share the joy, welcome the families, and offer to help them, begins integrating the young family into the parish family. Multi-generational activities such as celebrating grandparents, foster parents, and single parents, etc. can lead to an awareness of the eternal love of God “from age to age,” and deepen family ties through sacraments. Many respondents referred to the “strong heritage of their faith and the importance of their parents and grandparents in the development of their faith.”

It has been said by several participants that “parents’ attendance at Mass is critical to keeping our youth involved.” Also, “the family needs to worship together and have discussions around readings, homilies, etc. in order to understand and grow their faith.” Some of the youth that responded to a survey said:

“The Church makes me feel a part of a community.” “The Church motivates me and makes me feel good; it enlightens me.” “The Church is really not important in my life, never had a connection with it.” “Church is hard to put into our schedule.” One parish noted that using religious education programs even more “as a means to connect families and cultivate within them a greater enthusiasm for the faith will help create a culture centered on Christ within the home.”

Some participants thought defending life from conception to natural death was paramount to family life. The need to “protect life after birth” and the lack of messages from the Church about adoption were also mentioned. Others felt the Church was out of touch regarding birth control, and natural family planning was not reliable. Some participants stated, “Parents need help in how to handle current issues with their children that didn’t come up in past generations. “It was noted that the teaching of the Catechism of the Catholic Church establishes a foundation from which family life catechesis can grow, as the Holy Spirit will help guide us in wisdom and right judgement. “

**Other Considerations:** Several people noted their displeasure with always being asked for money. More sensitivity is needed in the manner that funds are requested and the purpose of the appeal. Other respondents indicated that “financial foundations of churches must change from being parish-based to being Diocesan-based” so “No one is penalized to worship in deteriorating conditions just because one lives in, or is born in, an economically challenged community.”

It was also noted non-pastoral times such as business management, facilities maintenance and other areas of parish operations should be assigned to the laity to allow pastors and priests to focus on liturgical, sacramental, and pastoral services. It was also suggested that laity who are running programs in the church should be appropriately compensated.



## **Service**

As noted, "Service and volunteerism are integral part of a Church community." Our Diocese has a servant's heart as evidenced by the numerous acts of charity to the larger community. Mother Teresa said, "The fruit of silence is prayer; the fruit of prayer is faith; the fruit of faith is love; the fruit of love is service; the fruit of service is peace."

Vibrant parishes afford many opportunities for community service where relationships are built, prayers are shared, and the fruits of the Holy Spirit are realized in each of us. It was said, "Service is an inroad to Youth." It is also a source of unity. In Philippians, we read, "Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interest of others. Have this in mind among yourselves, which was in Christ Jesus who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant . . ."

## **Conclusion**

The Holy Spirit inspired candid comments and reflections from the hearts of our Diocese's participants. Sadness, struggle, and frustration were expressed, as were love, hope and joy. Many suggestions were made in the hope that the Holy Spirit will nourish the seeds of new life for our Church, the beloved bride of our savior, Jesus Christ, who desires that all may be one.

Saint Anthony of Padua parishioners and delegates beautifully summarized their experience: "The synod delegates cannot emphasize enough how often people spoke with pride about being Catholic: 'All my experiences, from Catholic school all the way through, have been positive – good pastors and confessors, women of faith who are inspiring, all wonderful.'"