

Synod 2021 – 2023 | FINAL REPORT | Diocesan Phase

For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation & Mission

SECTION I. REVIEWING THE SYNODAL EXPERIENCE

On October 17, 2021, Bishop David M. O’Connell, C.M., released a pastoral letter and issued a decree as he opened the Diocesan phase of the Synod with Mass at the Cathedral of St. Mary of the Assumption. He selected two Co-Chairpersons, Mary Liz Ivins and Deacon Patrick Brannigan, who, working collaboratively with the Chancellor and Executive Director of Pastoral Life and Mission Terry Ginther, would lead a small team of people to guide the process.

A pivotal first decision was made to base Synod work within parishes to involve the greatest number of people. The decision also included choosing the Jesuit “Spiritual Conversation Method” as the process that would best suit the work to be done.

The Diocese conducted two in-person and one online orientation sessions to brief all pastors and parish leaders on the Synod purpose and process. Seventy percent of parishes participated in these orientations. The Diocese contracted with Dr. Robert Choiniere of Fordham University to provide five online sessions to train approximately 400 facilitators and notetakers during December 2021 and January 2022.

Use of the “Spiritual Conversation Method” proved to be an excellent choice. It allowed a wide net to be cast with many facilitators in a short period of time. This process encouraged people to listen, to express themselves and to be vulnerable. It seemed to be an exercise of bringing Christ into the human situation. Like the woman at the well, the Trenton Church listened.

After carefully reviewing the Vademecum published by the Vatican General Secretariat for the Synod of Bishops, the following questions were used for all sessions:

What have been the joys and the obstacles in your journeying together with the Church? Share a brief story that illustrates your experience.

What moved, touched or resonated with you as you were listening?

Reflecting on our conversation, how might the Holy Spirit be calling on you and all of us to improve how we are journeying together?

From January through April, the Diocese conducted more than 800 group listening sessions involving nearly 4,500 people. Groups ranged from 6 to 8 participants to smaller gatherings of 2 or 3. In addition, 83 people participated in individual interview sessions and 216 surveys were submitted. Most of these sessions were held in person. Some were conducted as “Zoom” sessions. There are no records delineating exactly how many participated in person and how many sessions were held virtually. These sessions were arranged by individual facilitators, and by parish teams. The Diocesan Synod team hosted one online and two in-person sessions under the heading “Have You Been Heard?” specifically for those who had not been reached by parish sessions.

Several additional strategies for reaching those on the margins were discussed and attempted, but these efforts had limited success. Some attempts were rejected outright; others simply failed to respond. Facilitators were successful at hearing from 365 Spanish-speaking Catholics (reached by training Spanish speaking facilitators), LGBTQ+ Church members (reached through parish-based prayer groups), and about 500 teens (reached through Catholic Schools, Youth Groups and Religious Education Programs). Facilitators also conducted 83 individual interviews that listened to those who have left the Church, those who have been hurt, or simply those who did not feel comfortable in a group setting. While there was some success in reaching people on the periphery, much work remains to be done. Facilitators did interview a few individuals who no longer believe in God. One of those said, *“I just do not believe there is a God. However, I do believe that mankind has had a need for a God, and it spans time and culture and level of civilization. I am respectful of people who are believers.”*

GOING FORWARD

The Synod Team suggests that all Diocesan communication channels be utilized to share Bishop O’Connell’s Diocesan Report to USCCB with the public. In addition, the Diocese may want to create a Synod video featuring Bishop O’Connell for use in parishes and on social media.

Some parishes kept and reflected on the notes from their parish sessions. A variety of responses are being crafted by local parishes and schools including the scheduling of additional listening sessions, a conference on women’s leadership in the Church, and new adult faith formation opportunities. There is a sincere hope that the “Spiritual Conversation Method” will continue to be valuable in future work in the parishes of the Diocese.

Additional observations on the process:

- Participants were very moved by the experience of participating in the listening sessions. They consistently talked about how touched they had been by the experiences of others in their groups. This reaction of participants was more intense than expected by the Synod team. Some expressed how they had experienced healing in the listening sessions. They perceived the time spent in the small group sessions as sacred and the working of the Holy Spirit. It wasn't often about rules but about heartache. The listening sessions provided a place for participants to talk about pain they had experienced.

- The Synod Team focused on providing lay people an opportunity to express themselves without concern for any consequences because of what they might say. We asked clergy to encourage and facilitate participation in their parishes. Sixty-four parishes, 70 priests and 156 deacons actively participated in the Synod. Comments made in the orientation attempted to cast all clergy as equal listening participants in conversations rather than leaders. Some clergy may have been hesitant to participate because they felt that they would stifle honest sharing.

- Participants often commented that they felt honored and called by the Pope's invitation to participate in this "Synod on Synodality."

- Among English speaking, people aged 65+ were 42% of all respondents. This reflects the demographic of people in the pews.

- Note that Georgian Court University participated through the Association for Catholic Colleges and Universities. New Ways Ministries engaged some participants from within the Diocese of Trenton. Both shared their summary observations with the Synod Committee. The Trenton Chapter of the National Pastoral Musicians (NPM) also hosted listening sessions which were submitted to USCCB through their organization.

- As the team read the notetaker reports, it became apparent that there was some confusion, at times, between what people themselves wanted to see happen and what the Holy Spirit might be asking. It was observed that in some cases people introduced their own agendas at the end of the conversation.

SYNOD – BY THE NUMBERS:

GROUP LISTENING SESSIONS, INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS AND SURVEYS

884 group responses were received – (804 English/80 Spanish)

83 people were interviewed individually

216 people completed the last chance "Have You Been Heard" Survey

Nearly 4500 individuals participated in one of the above interactions

4093 respondents participated in English / 370 respondents – Spanish (8%)

60% of respondents were women / 40% men

537 or 12% were under 18

196 or 4% were age 18 – 29

1886 or 42% were age 30 – 64

1876 or 42% were age 65+

Roughly 400 people participated in the Diocesan virtual training sessions on how to facilitate the "Spiritual Conversation Method." Five such training sessions were offered in Spanish during December 2021 and January 1, 2022.

PARISH AND SCHOOL PARTICIPATION

- Two thirds or 66% of all parishes hosted group listening sessions of some kind from January to April 2022. Thirty-three parishes did not host sessions or provide group responses of any kind (1/3 or 34%).

- Some did encourage parishioners to participate in diocesan sessions or the survey, or parishioners found neighboring parish's sessions to join.

- Notes and calls submitted after the period closed April 11 express disappointment that their parish did not provide any opportunity to participate.

- Also one Catholic Campus Ministry, four Catholic high schools and three Catholic grammar schools held group sessions.

	English Groups	Spanish Groups	Single Interview	Survey			
# of Priests	60	4	4	2			70
Deacons*	148	2	1	5			156
Vowed	56	5	0	5			66

Religious							
Lay Persons	3141	291	76	202			3710

*Two listening sessions for deacons were held. One was led by Bishop O’Connell at the annual convocation for deacons and one hosted by the Catholic Community of Hopewell Valley

SECTION II. CONTENT SYNTHESIS – HOW ARE WE JOURNEYING TOGETHER IN THIS LOCAL CHURCH?

JOYS OF JOURNEYING WITH THE CHURCH

This first part of Section II lists things that people said were important to them on their journey with the Church. People expressed joys, consolations, and ways in which they thought the Church was doing well journeying together as Church. From the participants’ comments, the Synod Team saw that these elements build up communion with the Lord and one another, support participation in the Church and cultivate a commitment to and sense of mission among the members of the Church. Each issue will have a statement, a brief explanation and - where appropriate – a few quotes to help convey the sense of what was heard during the listening sessions, interviews and surveys.

1. Serving and being involved in parish ministries

Many participants shared how participating in parish ministries gives meaning and purpose to their lives. Being involved gives them a strong sense of connection to community. They find meaning in being able to help others and to share their faith. The invitation from the parish to get involved was pivotal.

- ◆ *“I have always loved serving in the church. I was a religious education teacher for nine years. I have started and led multiple Bible studies. I love my Church. The greatest joy I’ve had is in outreaches that created small faith communities. . . . Renew 2000 being one such experience. Participation in small faith communities has brought the joy of the gospel to others. One person in my group who DREADED coming, became a daily mass communicant.”*
- ◆ *“Meeting Christ in the poor.”*
- ◆ *“Ministry has taken me to unexpected places.”*

2. Mass and the Eucharist

Many participants shared how important Holy Communion is in their lives and mentioned with awe the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. Some attended daily Mass and spoke lovingly of that experience. Some spoke of how grateful they are to have the Mass available in their native language. Others shared their relief to return to in-person Mass and devotions following the pandemic.

- ◆ *“Eucharist – The joys are moments of grace in my own spiritual life as well as in interacting with others on the same journey to Christ and the church.”*
- ◆ *“The sacraments feed my daily life. We need the Church to help us get through life.”*
- ◆ *“Attending (Mass) with my spouse supports our marriage, leads to better harmony between us.”*
- ◆ *“Always having Jesus present.”*

3. Sacraments and rituals, prayers and devotion

Participants shared stories about the sacramental milestones they celebrated with children and family. These stories were associated most closely with the sense of journeying with the Church throughout their lives. They recalled times when these experiences have taught them to pray, helped them to open up to God, and find a safe space to become their authentic selves.

- ◆ *“The Church has been there for me and my family to share in our joys, Baptism, Confirmation, Matrimony, Anointing of the Sick, Penance and without doubt and in all circumstances, The Eucharist, the Source and Summit of our faith! If these things are taken out of my life, I have no life within me.”*
- ◆ *“Church is the heart of our family.”*
- ◆ *“Powerful confession experience has stayed with me for years.”*
- ◆ *“Confession after a long time away.”*
- ◆ *“Love the sacramental life, the liturgical seasons and how it mirrors the seasons of life.”*

4. Importance of Fellowship, beyond Mass, social and spiritual

Participants often spoke of their parish having a sense of belonging, a sense of family and “home”. They told stories of friendships, memorable events, common experiences in which the people of the parish came together with a sense of common purpose.

- ◆ *“The secret at this parish is that you know God loves you.”*
- ◆ *“I was welcomed as a newcomer after relocation.”*

5. Opportunities to grow in faith with small group settings, Bible studies, retreats, RCIA process

Many participants shared stories about different ways they have grown in faith during their journey with the Church. All reflected with a sense of gratitude for these experiences and were enthusiastic about inviting others to participate in similar blessings. The value of small groups was mentioned frequently.

- ◆ *“One convert through the RCIA process said that “faith came alive.”*
- ◆ *“Franciscan Parish Mission brought me back to the Church.”*
- ◆ *“Love the Bible in a Year podcast.”*
- ◆ *“Seeing the Spirit of God bring healing.”*
- ◆ *“Seeing the Work of God in my husband and in our marriage.”*

6. Comfort and support during times of illness, struggle, loss, grief, infertility and adoption:

This sense of having been accompanied through some time of trial was often shared in the stories that people told. These stories were all personal and involved a leader or some members of the Church walking along with a person or family during a difficult time. In some cases, the impact these experiences had was transformative.

- ◆ *“I needed surgery and was in quite a state, not knowing if I would live or die. Father W. gave me the Anointing of the Sick and said, ‘You are strong. Keep up the good work.’ I felt peace, comfort, and refuge.”*
- ◆ *“I walked away from the church once in the past.” She went on to say now she’s “back home” – like a “second home” and she’s glad to be back.*
- ◆ *“One student participant said he had a tough time when his grandparents died. But when he saw how important God and the Church were to his mother during this period of grief – it was possible to see God’s presence in that difficult moment.”*
- ◆ *“Strong respect for life sustained my family while my son was in a coma after a tragic accident.”*
- ◆ *“A meal was on my doorstep every day during my illness.”*
- ◆ *“Support during the death of my parents.”*

7. Found good role models for living a Christian life; (priest, sister, teacher, etc.) really influenced my life:

- ◆ *“A twelve year Catholic education enabled me to live a productive life in a very secular society.”*
- ◆ *“My parents were good role models.”*

8. Preachers with the ability to connect the Gospel to daily lives in relevant ways have been key in people’s journeys.

9. Many found strength in being a part of Catholic organizations, such as the Knights of Columbus. Many were proud of the good works of Catholic institutions such as colleges, hospitals, rehabilitation centers, and senior living centers.

OBSTACLES / CHALLENGES / NOT JOURNEYING WELL

This second part of Section II lists the experiences that people found to be obstacles, disappointments, or challenges in their journey with the Church. They were expressed as concerns, frustrations, and areas that people hope can be improved in our journeying together as Church. From the participants’ comments, we can see that these elements are experienced as divisive, barriers to participation in the Church, and reasons given for why people have disengaged – the opposite of communion, participation and mission. Each issue will have a statement, brief explanation and where appropriate, a few quotes to help convey the sense of what was heard during the listening sessions, interviews and surveys.

1. Sadness and disappointment that their adult children and grandchildren do not practice the faith

This was clearly the most prominent concern mentioned by participants. There is a dismay that the Church doesn’t know what to do to attract and keep young people. People are sincerely worried about the future of the Church.

- ◆ *“I don’t know how to talk with my kids who are questioning their faith.” She feels we as a Church lack the material to offer families who have some family members who are floundering or doubting their faith.*
- ◆ *“I felt like raising my four children during the pre-teen and teen years there could have been a stronger support network from the church. Young people want to have a purpose and feel engaged and how powerful that would have been if those entities were coming from our Church. Now as a widow listening to other individuals from different faiths talk about **the support network within their Church, I feel we are lacking in that area.**”*

2. Sexual abuse by priests

The sexual abuse scandal continues to be a source of pain for many, not only for victims and their families, but also for average lay Catholics and priests. Participants mentioned – in some way – the scandal in most listening sessions.

- ◆ *This scandal remains an “open wound.”*
- ◆ *Many described the scandal as a “betrayal of trust:” both the abuse and how the Church handled the scandal. Participants spoke of being angry and saddened by “what it has done to the Church.”*
- ◆ *Concern was expressed for priests accused but not “proven guilty.”*
- ◆ *A few people shared stories of being abused by clergy and feeling “re-victimized” in their experience of the reporting process.*

3. Crisis of credibility and authority due to the abuse crisis, instances of financial mismanagement, and lack of transparency in financial matters

Participants expressed a lack of confidence in the way the Church is being led. This was echoed in many comments about rules, hypocrisy, incompetence. Synod participants were candid about the general disregard for Church teaching when the teaching seems out of step with their experience in the secular world.

- ◆ *“As a result of the sex abuse scandal and moving priests around, the Church has relinquished its moral authority to lead. The Church did not protect our children.”*
- ◆ *“There are two churches – the parishes and the hierarchy. They are different.”*

4. Sense of loss from parish church and school closings

There were some participants that shared how difficult the closure of their parish church or school has been for them personally. Others were concerned that fewer people would be served, or that so many closures send the wrong message about what is important.

- ◆ *“Parish merger affected me greatly and I felt like no one cared.”*
- ◆ *“Disappointment in the expense and unavailability of Catholic schools.”*

5. Individuals and groups that do not fit the “mold” are not welcome

Participants shared many instances in which they or those they know were made to feel unwelcome, uncomfortable, marginalized, ridiculed. Among these were single Catholics, families of children with autism, single parents, LGBTQ+, divorced Catholics and immigrants. They spoke of the behavior of some Catholics “in the pews” toward them; and in some cases, this judgmental or prejudicial behavior was tolerated by the pastor, even deemed laudable.

- ◆ *“We need to balance between mercy and justice.”*
- ◆ *“Don’t be like the Pharisees, who squabbled over the 613 rules and prohibitions, thus missing the ‘big picture’ of faith, mercy, and salvation.”*
- ◆ *“Over the years, many things have come up that I felt bothered about. Non-Catholics condemned to hell, gay people condemned, divorced people condemned, etc. Sometimes there seems that there is no forgiveness, no sympathy, everything is cut and dry. There needs to be more understanding and compassion.”*
- ◆ *“People criticize other people inside the Church.”*
- ◆ *“As a single woman, I volunteered but it didn’t feel like community. I felt pitied.”*

6. LGBTQ+ individuals feel alienated/experience rejection for who they are

The ability of the Church to journey with LGBTQ+ persons is, at best, limited. Our brothers and sisters find our teaching language of “intrinsically disordered” hurtful. LGBTQ+ persons worry about being fired from Church jobs or volunteer roles. Their families and others who care for them cannot reconcile continued participation in Church when their loved one feels rejected. This single issue contributes greatly to disaffiliation among youth.

- ◆ *“Heterosexual members of the Church (who may be behaving sinfully) are not ‘rejected’ in the same way as homosexual members of the church. Are heterosexuals who have sex outside of marriage told that they are not able to be fully participating? This is perceived as being part of the hypocritical pastoral theology that causes many to leave the Catholic Community – or at least feel the need to live in a ‘don’t ask – don’t tell’ membership.”*
- ◆ *“Assuming that all homosexual experience is sinful is not looking at the whole person, but as only one aspect of their humanity.”*
- ◆ *“If the priest couldn’t accept my gay son, then I couldn’t accept the Church.”*
- ◆ *“How could anyone not be welcome in God’s house?”*
- ◆ *“My gay son is born in the image and likeness of God, but he doesn’t feel welcome in Church.”*
- ◆ *“It’s my Church too.”*
- ◆ *“I’m accepted as a transgender Catholic at local level but not in larger Church.”*

7. Divorced persons and those who’ve been divorced and remarried

Catholics who have divorced feel abandoned in their struggle by the Church community. Many believe they cannot receive Communion, even though divorce alone is not an impediment. One of the most frequent obstacles to journeying with the Church

mentioned was from individuals who were divorced and remarried without an annulment and unable to receive Communion. They shared their feelings of being judged by the Church. The cost of the annulment process was also raised.

- ◆ *"I was divorced, remarried and denied annulment. I felt exiled from my Church with 5 children."*
- ◆ *"Murderers are forgiven, but a divorced abused woman cannot receive the Sacraments."*
- ◆ *"Annulment is a painful process."*
- ◆ *"Rules are more important than people, especially with divorce. I felt like a second-class citizen."*
- ◆ *A divorced/remarried couple married in Lutheran Church and baptized baby Lutheran but would like to raise him Catholic as they were both raised. This means they cannot participate in Holy Communion with their son.*
- ◆ *The shaming of one divorced and remarried mother sent the whole family away from Church; that pain passed onto the next generation and the next.*

8. Exclusion of women from leadership roles and decision-making in the Church

Almost every small group listening session included a call for an enlarged leadership role for women in the Church. The issue of women deacons and the ordination of women as priests was frequently mentioned by participants, with little or no resistance raised by others to the notion.

- ◆ *Women in their 20s and 30s have a sense of "disenfranchisement" from leadership and decision-making by the "patriarchal Church."*
- ◆ *One father expressed sadness that the Church lost a wonderful leader when his daughter left the Catholic Church to answer the call to become an Episcopal priest.*
- ◆ *"Without women in the Church, you lose their children & the next generation of potential Catholics."*

9. Shortage of clergy and demands on their time

Some participants were frustrated that priests are not accessible to people and cannot be available to accompany people through difficulties. Others note that priests seem overwhelmed by administrative tasks and financial concerns. Priests do not get to know parishioners; both volunteerism and pastoral care suffer as a result.

- ◆ *"They don't have time to talk to me."*
- ◆ *"The diocesan priest needs to be made more connected and accountable to each other. They are trained in pastoral ministry and then asked to do property management and human resources and business development. These are not skills they are trained in during formation."*
- ◆ *"I no longer contribute to the parish because the pastor is always on 'day off' and he forgot to show up for wake service for my dad."*
- ◆ *"Priest had no time, showed no compassion for my father and me when my mother passed away."*
- ◆ *"The Hierarchy of the Church is too rigid. Priests are more concerned with donations and less with the fellowship in the community. Covid taught us all that we need to love one another, yet the Parish Priest refused to visit the sick. They do not have the time to minister to their flock. We should have married and female priests."*
- ◆ *"Often children have no regular interaction with priests or nuns; families not supportive of their children considering a religious vocation."*

10. "The way things are" does not make it easy to participate

There was much sharing about poor service at the parish office, calls not met with generosity of spirit, responses differing from place to place, no flexibility, lack of communication, or lack of convenient office hours/Mass times for people who are working. Many participants said there are cliques, or that the same people in the parish do everything and make it difficult for others to get involved.

- ◆ *"I think that the Church has become too institutional and has lost the intimacy and compassion it should provide to people on their spiritual/faith journey."*
- ◆ *A Church staff member related her experience of seeing people coming in from other parishes hurt, frustrated, and unwelcomed by policies and non-policies. She wishes they all had the same experience she had. "Being a good Church is so simple – why can't parishes just meet people's needs; good, bad or ugly?"*
- ◆ *"Also, a death in my family and the need to give a donation to one parish to be released so that the Funeral could be celebrated in the parish, in which I belonged to their Youth Group."*
- ◆ *"We as a Church are inconsistent in our approach to controversial topics. Example: A pastor refused to marry a couple living together unless they maintained separate residences prior to the ceremony. The couple went to another pastor who welcomed them with open arms."*
- ◆ *There is inconsistency about rules from one parish or diocese to the next. (i.e. eulogies)."*
- ◆ *A person "left ritual to find relationship" when he left the Church.*

11. Polarization in the Church

One obstacle to communion is the sense of polarization in the Church mirroring the division in society between conservatives and liberals. Perhaps the most evident such polarization in synod listening involved those who are advocating for the Latin Mass and those who do not. The feelings ran deep. Both sides expressed their views with emotion.

- ◆ *“Over the past 9 years, the hostile takeover by the Latins has been the biggest obstacle. The continued attempts to indoctrinate us is very offensive and un-Catholic. We are condemned for having obeyed every Pope (including 3 Saints), Bishop and Priest since 1962. They are intentionally driving Parishioners away so they can have their own conclaves. In fact, if it weren’t for The Monitor, we wouldn’t know about the Synod. The Latins do not recognize the Bishop or Pope Francis. If you came to our Parish on a regular basis, you would think that Benedict is still Pope and that there is no Bishop or Diocese.”*
- ◆ *“I was an Altar Server from 1962-1971. I served the Latin Mass and during the Vatican II transition. I used to love the Latin Mass, but I cannot accept the sanctimonious and condescending attitudes, nor the self-appointed moral superiority the current cult exhibits.”*
- ◆ *Mass in the vernacular lacks the “reverence of the Latin Mass.”*
- ◆ *“The Latin Mass has been our tradition and the origin of the faith while the Novus Ordo is a failed experiment.”*
- ◆ *A few people noted that contemporary music contributes to the “Protestantization” of the liturgy.*

12. Change of pastor has a big impact on a parish for good or not for good

Many comments about obstacles to participation were related to the change of a pastor – some dreaded a change; others were hoping for one. The stories shared mostly indicate disappointment that the role of pastor carries such power and influence that a new pastor can radically change a parish. Some were asking if the voice or charism of the parish community over time/generation after generation means anything?

- ◆ *“Change of pastors changes everything.”*
- ◆ *“I feel uncomfortable at my church. I feel it’s cliquish and I find Father intimidating and not often friendly. I went to [another] Catholic Church not long ago and I was shocked by the difference. People were so warm and friendly. And the priest made a point of saying hello to me and welcome. Soooo nice. When Father leaves maybe the Church will change too if we get a warm and caring priest in.”*
- ◆ *“A person spoke about “many silent departures” because of a change in pastor.”*
- ◆ *“My many joys of being Catholic for over 50 years have now been turned into sadness as I see my lifelong vibrant parish (name given) slowly dying from the obstacles imposed by the harmful and ineffective ministry of the new pastor.”*
- ◆ *Expressed frustration that parishioners have no input during pastor changes*

13. Clericalism and abuse of power by priests

There were quite a few experiences shared of priests belittling and humiliating people, anti-women or anti-laity attitudes, shaming and intimidation, imprudent comments, even frightening experiences of confession.

- ◆ *“Young priests frequently demonstrate a sense of entitlement, that they are “above” the faithful, and they know more about practicing the faith than the layperson. This clericalism and emphasis on hierarchy is driving discouragement and abandonment.”*
- ◆ *“At the seminary level, insist on seminarians reading How to Win Friends and Influence People, then apply the principles in this well-known book in their subsequent assignments.”*
- ◆ *“While our priest loves Pope Francis, he described an upsetting conversation with a former pastor who said, ‘Obama is a racist pig.’ I felt there was no place for me in church anymore.”*
- ◆ *“Priests should be trained to be more welcoming, positive and understanding. Meet the person where they are and then try to bring them to the church.”*
- ◆ *“There is a hostility among clergy to new initiatives that involve lay people.”*
- ◆ *“At a funeral for a Catholic suicide victim that suffered from depression, he (the priest) told the deceased’s 4- and 5-year-old children that their father had gone straight to hell because of how he died . . .”*

14. Difficulties related to our lack of receiving Holy Communion with Christians of other churches

There were a handful of comments about the difficulty of receiving Holy Communion at funerals, weddings, when not all members are Catholic. Also, some participants expressed a desire for their Catholic parish to improve efforts to work together with other Christian churches in their area.

- ◆ *“Communion is not an open table for all who believe in Christ.”*
- ◆ *“Not allowing Christians of other denominations to participate in Eucharist was hurtful for my family after I became Catholic through RCIA.”*
- ◆ *“I feel called to be a minister of unity and reconciliation among Christians.”*

SECTION III. CONCLUSIONS – HOW THE HOLY SPIRIT MAY BE PROMPTING US TO IMPROVE THE WAY WE JOURNEY TOGETHER?

People participated in Synod Listening Sessions, Individual Interviews, or Surveys each for their own reason. Most – even those who were hurt, angry or disenchanted – expressed a deep affection and love for the Church, her teachings, and traditions; especially those around the Eucharist, other sacraments, and prayer. Some recounted episodes throughout their lives when the Church had provided solace and guidance at important moments. For this constancy, there was a profound sense of gratitude expressed.

For many, involvement in parish ministry is a rich source of blessing. Some expressed how, no matter where they travel, they have felt at home in a Catholic Church. Many observed that the older they get, the more the Church means to them; it's like an extended family. Many indicated that they love the Church even with the flaws of its individual members.

Trenton Catholics clearly cherish the Mass, receiving the Eucharist, and the ability to serve in ministry. These practices are of central importance. They should be given careful time and attention. The Church can build on them. The contributions of lay ministers must also be validated.

It is abundantly clear: most participated in the Synod from a place of hope; a hope that the Holy Spirit would guide the Church to become better at journeying together. This is well-expressed by someone who said:

◆ *“Those of us who love the Church and our faith can continue to partake of the sacraments to strengthen us to continue to reach out. My life verse has become ‘always be prepared to give a reason for the hope that is within you.’” I can continue to reach out, continue to invite others into groups that strengthen our faith, continue to study scripture and the CCC, continue to be a joyful witness to others of the hope that is within me, pray, pray, pray.”*

It is in that spirit of hope that the following conclusions are offered. Please note that quotes from participants are shared to help elucidate the observations.



The Church must address issues of leadership

Including: the shortage of priests and the availability of pastors to “pastor”

■ Maybe the administrative model needs to change to give priests more time to talk with their people, know their needs and care for them.

- Utilize the gifts of the laity wherever possible.
- Consider married priests.
- Re-open discussion about women serving as deacons, and priests.
- We need continued healing for the damage done by clericalism and abuse of power.

■ We need to continue to increase respect for women and their role in the Universal Church. The Trenton Diocese is a shining example not only with Terry Ginther as Chancellor but also with a number of other women in key leadership positions. The participant comments indicated that they were not aware of the significant role women are actually playing in the Trenton Diocese under Bishop O’Connell.



Implement a renewal of evangelizing catechesis and adult faith formation that would lead to a maturing in the faith; help adult Catholics develop a deeper understanding of Catholic teachings

■ Across the board there was a discernible hunger to be closer to God, to be part of a community, and to know/learn/understand more about the faith.

- Flip the approach – instead of starting from rules, prohibitions and rejection, lead with the invitation “to come and see.”
- “The Holy Spirit is prompting me to keep the name of Jesus alive by sharing him with others.”
- “RCIA makes the best Catholics – what about an RCIA-like program for cradle Catholics?”

■ “I think it’s important to have an adult formation class available for young adults, parents, because spiritual growth is a journey and it doesn’t end after Confirmation, or like graduating college, we need to encourage and make available the need to be spiritually feeding our souls and intellect.



Engage teens and young people

■ Devote adequate resources to form catechists, teachers, youth ministers so that they can engage youth differently and understand what’s happening in their lives.

- Utilize contemporary music and focus on relevant preaching.
- Offer teens more support, recognition, and opportunities to be included.

■ “Youth ministry and religious education are not given enough resources and attention. This is the feeder of the future church and where vocation would come from. Vocation and religious education in collaboration with the youth ministry could help jump start a new group of active and faithful Catholics.”

■ I am a volunteer catechist and find the youth are interested when the material is relatable. I think a Family Mass with youth friendly scripture and homilies would be MOST helpful.

■ “Get onto social media to show church being fun.”



Do something to promote healing and restore trust

■ People are still suffering, angry about the impacts of the clergy sexual abuse crisis, not only victims, but all of us (clergy and laity). We need ways to heal; to listen to this hurt/pain, share our wounds.

■ Hold an Annual Day of Prayer for victims of abuse (Universal Church);

■ Address the lack of transparency about payments.

■ Address the unfairness of process toward clergy who are accused but cannot clear their names.

■ Restore trust by creating a mechanism for recourse when people are having a hard time in a parish.

■ “We need to reconnect with each other with humility – clergy & the people should not hesitate to say we are sorry – especially in how we go about healing the wounds caused by the sex abuse scandal.”



Continue the process of listening begun in the Synod and discerning our direction using the “Spiritual Conversation Method” we have learned

■ Parishes should each have a Pastoral Council attentive to this process.

■ More opportunities to pray outside of Mass, adoration before Blessed Sacrament, guided meditation to help to discern the call of the Holy Spirit on an ongoing basis.

■ Commit to having opportunities just for listening, be attentive to healing hurts and disappointments.



Focus attention on growing participation

■ Many people spoke of a faith journey in which they left the Church and later came back. Be intentional about ways to help 30–64-year-olds find their way back.

■ Be more sensitive to the time/hour we offer everything; not all people can come when we want them to come.

■ More effective communication to all parishioners, not only those attending Mass, including social media. Go deeper than on the surface because perceptions are not always in line with realities.

■ Create a plan of action to help more people to be involved.

■ Get beyond the cliques.

■ Parishes are missing the opportunities to make a difference in people’s lives. People participate in things that matter to them. Pay special attention to the “moments of return” and make the most of these.



Church needs to be welcoming to all, not only in words, but in action

Articulate a “theology of welcome” that is shared among Catholics that focuses on the whole person rather than the way they are different from the “norm.”

The Church accompanies people in time of tragedy, illness, grief (we can put aside all judgments and just be with them). Find ways to do the same and walk with those who are different in their sexual orientation, mental capacity, marital status, etc.

In all things our movement needs to be from excluding to including.

◆ *“We do more to push people away than pull them in.”*

◆ *“We need to love like Jesus and meet people where they are. Offer Holy Communion to the divorced, accept there are same sex couples/families & welcome everyone.”*

◆ *“God loves diversity. Look at all the flowers.”*

◆ *“The Church needs to be more personal. There’s often an in-group. I can say that from experience with the ladies and many people feel they can’t break in and find a place. Eventually they feel so uncomfortable, and they leave. It has nothing to do about God and everything to do about the nature of people.”*



Find different ways to accompany the divorced

■ Support those who are trying to keep a family together and those who separate.

- Pray publicly for those going through divorce.
- Support custody arrangements and co-parenting.
- Walk with an accurate understanding of Canon Law with those who are seeking annulment.
- Support the divorced and remarried as they are part of the family. Encourage their practice of the faith at home and support the efforts of blended families.



Be attentive to the prompting of the Holy Spirit toward unity...not uniformity, but unity. The divisions in the church are harmful to communion.

- ◆ *“The Church should let liberal and traditional elements coexist to bring people closer to Christ.”*
- ◆ *“The Holy Spirit will provide the way if you are open to possibilities in your own life and work cohesively with other people. You need to pray and trust in the Holy Spirit. Always have the courage to stand up for your beliefs and reach out to other people and lend a helping hand.”*

The formal part of the Diocesan Phase of the Synod concluded at the Chrism Mass on Monday of Holy Week, April 11, 2022.

SECTION IV. BRIEF REFLECTIONS OF BISHOP

When the Synod of Bishops 2021-20223 was first announced in April 2021 as a “Synod on Synodality,” I was not sure what to expect. I carefully read all the documents coming from the Holy See and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) and began to think about what “the Synod” would mean to, in and for the Diocese of Trenton. In many subsequent discussions with clergy and faithful of the Diocese, I wondered how best to engage the local Church. I appointed two individuals as co-chairs, an accomplished lay woman and an experienced deacon, to work along with the Diocesan Chancellor to develop a systematic, welcoming approach to clergy and faithful of the Diocese for use in the Synod process. They did an outstanding job, including the preparation of this report.

The notion of “journeying” together as a local Church was not difficult to conceptualize, understand and present within the Diocese. In general, people responded well. The emphasis on simply “listening,” however, was a bit harder, at least for me. Having spent my entire priestly career in works of Catholic education, I found the temptation to “teach” rather than to “listen” a strong one, especially when I encountered misperceptions or inaccurate ideas about what the Church actually believes and teaches. Fortunately, that temptation eased with time but never completely.

I was not surprised by any of the results of the Synod discussions in terms of content. Positive experiences of “journeying” with and in the local Church were affirming, especially the participants’ love for the Holy Eucharist and willingness to serve in various ministries. Similarly, challenges and obstacles to effective “journeying” mentioned by participants were not surprising. The clergy sexual abuse scandal loomed large among peoples’ “hurts” along with feelings of alienation by and among LGBTQ+ Catholics and Catholics who were divorced and remarried without an annulment. The preceding Report identifies the more problematic issues felt by “people in the pews.”

The challenge remains for the Diocese to build upon the strengths and good experiences expressed by participants and to determine ways to address and minimize the hurts felt by people. Follow-up efforts are already being planned for the Fall 2022. This Report will be shared with the entire Diocese through appropriate Diocesan media outlets.

I was pleased by the extent to which clergy and faithful participated in the Synod as an expression of hope in the future. I was disappointed that 1/3 of the Diocese’s 97 parishes did not participate in any meaningful way, despite a substantial push by the Diocese and those directly involved with leading the Synod efforts. That fact contributed significantly to the understanding and credibility of many of the negative comments by those who did participate about their experience of Church in their parishes. As Bishop, I often feel at a loss in knowing how to motivate a better response from the parishes.

The “takeaways?” The Diocesan Synod was worth the time and effort expended by those in the Diocese who participated and took it seriously. We have much to be grateful for. When the local Church “works” and the clergy and faithful have a real sense of “journeying” together, the local Church works well. When the local Church is ineffective and unwelcoming, it fails in its fundamental mission. A number of the curious responses of the faithful reveal a need for much better catechesis throughout the Diocese among all age groups. Although the formal part of the Diocesan Synod has ended, its spirit work must continue. The Holy Spirit has opened the door for us to continue the “journey.”

Most Reverend David M. O’Connell, C.M., J.C.D.

Bishop of Trenton