

## **Synod on Synodality Lent 2024 listening sessions**

### **Diocese of Sioux City (Iowa)**

The Diocese of Sioux City, under the leadership of Bishop Walker Nickless, held two regional listening sessions in March 2024. In addition to offering comments and reflection orally at the sessions, participants also submitted written feedback. Those who could not attend in person could submit their responses in English, Spanish or Vietnamese via the diocesan website. There were approximately 40 responses submitted either electronically or written. Several respondents that attended and spoke at in-person sessions also submitted similar written comments, creating duplication. A few participants submitted more than one written response.

The first meeting was held March 7 at Holy Trinity Parish in Fort Dodge, in the eastern half of the diocese. The second meeting was held at the Cathedral of the Epiphany in Sioux City, in the western half of the diocese. The bishop attended both sessions. Approximately 110 people attended the two in-person listening sessions.

All responses were synthesized into this report.

#### **Listening session agenda**

After a period of adoration and prayer in the church with an opportunity for participating in the sacrament of reconciliation, attendees were provided with a light meal before the listening session. The diocesan director of faith formation moderated the discussion, Spanish/English interpreters were available at each session but were not utilized. Sessions were held in English.

The diocesan communications office, Lumen Media, covered both sessions in two different editions of the diocesan newspaper. Photos were also posted to diocesan social media accounts.

Participants were asked to provide comments and reflections that were based upon the two guiding questions provided by the Vatican.

#### **Pastoral planning and vocations**

A considerable number of comments from the faithful were in regard to pastoral planning, decreasing numbers of active priests and parish mergers. This has resulted in some churches reducing the number of Masses and others losing their weekend Masses through a change in status to “church building.”

Those making oral and written comments generally offered criticism of the pastoral planning process and the effects upon their parishes. Several indicated they didn’t feel they were involved or informed in the process and declared a “lack of transparency.” The pastoral planning criticisms came from participants from a variety of locations around the diocese.

“We lost a lot of church-going people since we were combined and our church closed. It was very distressing. It was just harsh and people are still having a hard time rebounding,” said one woman whose parish now has church building status.

“There is a dictatorship in our diocese from the bishop and his chancery office,” one session participant offered in a written format.

Some participants attending the March 7 meeting offered positive reflections on the parish mergers they experienced.

“I was distressed when our beloved Sacred Heart (Parish) closed. Then I looked around at Mass and it was fun. It was amazing – they came from different churches...When we did merge it was sad – I get that. It’s hard to give up what you’ve always known,” she said. “The next thing I know it was the best thing to ever happen. Ideas were merged with this parish, a remarkably active parish.”

Others noted the combining of talents and gifts of members of the individual parishes created a parish described as hopeful, alive and active.

Dovetailed with the parish merger discussions was the concern for an increase in priestly vocations. Both laity and clergy offered their reflections. Some laity said they felt that girls should not be altar servers as it should be a ministry to encourage boys to consider the priesthood. Clergy offered comments that the faith example set by their families and parishioners inspired them in their priestly ministries.

Some mentioned that the influence and encouragement of parents and grandparents to consider vocations is the most effective environment for a young man to seriously consider the priesthood. There were suggestions for increased prayer for vocations and praying in adoration for vocations.

### **Tradition**

Returning to the church’s traditions of the past, as well as lost reverence in the church was presented by numerous participants. Many said that offering adoration with the Blessed Sacrament and perpetual adoration was transformational for parishes and the faithful.

“We had a renewed emphasis on adoration,” one man offered. “For example, we had religious education classes last night and parents were invited for adoration. What a great way to set an example for our children.”

One priest ordained for 12 years said he has seen “an authentic revival” in his large parish including increased numbers of couples participating in marriage preparation and baptism preparation.

“I see so much vibrancy happening on a local level,” he said. “I 100% attribute that to perpetual adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. I am convinced he wants us to do that throughout the church.”

Some feedback indicated an appreciation for the traditional Latin Mass and the connection to the church’s past. There were some that indicated a desire for an increase in the availability of a traditional Latin Mass around the diocese.

Other traditions mentioned included praying the rosary, first Fridays and Saturdays, Stations of the Cross, receiving the Eucharist on the tongue and renewed emphasis on Catholic teachings. There were several responses indicating that a return to long-standing traditions in the Catholic

Church would be attractive to younger Catholics and young Catholic families, thereby increasing Mass attendance overall.

### **Gender roles**

Participants in the March 21 session spent much time discussing gender roles in the church.

One woman stated that women were not valued in the church, clarifying that she was not advocating for ordaining women to the priesthood. She noted that women were relegated to low-skill functions both as employees and as parish members, despite their education or expertise.

Some women in attendance countered that they didn't feel that women were not valued in the church. There was some emphasis in the discussion on a woman's responsibility in the home to her family, as well as any work outside the home by participants.

Some indicated the need for people to follow traditional gender roles in life. One man stressed that he and his wife take traditional roles in their house and that he was troubled by the "women trying to be like men and men trying to be like women. It's a mess."

### **Lay involvement**

Participants provided feedback in the involvement of laity in the life of the church and in evangelization. One participant voiced that she was concerned about the power struggle in the church, the diocese and her parish. She noted there was no evidence of lay participation in church management, despite availability of skilled and willing parishioners.

Some indicated a desire to be more involved in their parish programs but were not invited to participate or were not "trusted" to participate in ministry at their parish.

Others said that they are active in various ways at their parish. One woman noted that the laity don't need permission from their parish leadership to be involved in service. The faithful can gather and volunteer to assist in needed areas of their communities such as picking up trash, volunteering at a soup kitchen, sponsoring an RCIA candidate, sitting with someone at Mass so they are not alone.

"Just be a presence and loving to people is what would really bring people to Christ," she said.

### **The synod**

Some of the responses were critical of the synod process itself. Some responded to the recent news article that outlined the Holy Father's 10 synod study groups. A few were concerned that the church would decide to ordain women to the diaconate. Several indicated a concern that the study groups would result in moving away from the teachings of the Catholic Church. One man said he felt that "the synod has been designed with a predetermined outcome."

A few responses pointed out concern that the church's teachings are absent from synod documents and materials. Several indicated concern that the church teaching would be changed by the synod study groups regarding the transgender trend and same-sex couples.

Several respondents offered their thanks for the opportunity “to be heard,” both orally and in writing as part of the synod process.

A few respondents indicated a desire to see the final diocesan synod report distributed back to the people upon completion. (The report will be posted in English, Spanish and Vietnamese after submitting to the USCCB.)

### **COVID-19**

Two respondents indicated their extreme dismay that churches were closed and Masses canceled during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.