

Diocese of Altoona- Johnstown Synod on Synodality Report Summary

The word 'synod' is a term that dates back to the earliest days of the Church, but which has become foreign to many Christians today. It is a simple but powerful word, indicating how we are walking and journeying towards the path of Christ - how we are living and proclaiming the Gospel message. To be a 'synodal Church' means that we, the People of God, are actively walking together as a community to participate in the evangelizing mission of the Church. Led by the Holy Spirit, we are called to be this type of Church: a Church which has as its focus, with all of its members, the desire to live out the mission of Jesus and be joined to Him in all that we do. To be an authentically synodal Church, we must ask ourselves three fundamental questions:

1. What does this journeying together look like in our diocese?
2. How are we announcing the Good News of Jesus to those around us?
3. How is the Holy Spirit inviting us to grow and better walk this path?

In response to these questions, Pope Francis and the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown invited all of the faithful, regardless of their relationship with the Church, to participate in the Synod on Synodality by prayerfully discerning where we are on this path. The goal of this Synod is to reflect on where we are as a diocesan Church and to reorient ourselves to having a synodal attitude through communion, participation, and mission.

The resulting process involved multiple types of surveys, numerous small faith sharing groups and households, and thousands of individuals. Their responses came from every county and parish within the diocese, including some who live outside of our eight county region, but still call our diocese home. Those who participated span from almost every age range and come from diverse socioeconomic, educational, spiritual, and experiential backgrounds. Some no longer believe in Catholic teachings or go to Mass, while others go daily if they are able. All of them have a desire for us as a Church to be better and grow more in love with Christ. Therefore, no matter their backgrounds or sentiments, every survey was read and their ideas and opinions were taken into consideration.

Through questions which sought to understand the experiences, struggles, and joys of people in our diocese, much was shared and suggested as to how the Church has previously and can continue to live out the mission of Christ. Within those responses, five central thoughts or themes could be seen as to where the Holy Spirit is inviting us to further discern and examine. These areas are *education, vocations, outreach and engagement, liturgy, and vision and hope for the future.*

At the time when we are baptized and made members of the Church, we are anointed with oil so that we may live as Christ lived, as a Priest, Prophet, and King. Two of these offices, prophetic and kingly, direct us towards teaching our faith to others. Along with clergy and

religious, the laity are called to bring Christ to our families, towns, and society.¹ We are to teach others by living and speaking the truth of the Gospel in our everyday lives.² As such, as a Church we must focus on how we are educating and instructing all of our members in the faith, and not just a certain group or age.

Religious education and Sacramental preparation are areas of concern for a majority of our parishioners because they are seen as either supplemental to faith instruction within the home or, for many of our youth, the only foundational understanding of our faith they will receive. These programs, which are not themselves the issue, are therefore burdened with the impossible tasks of creating a solid spiritual life rooted within the Catholic tradition and effectively teaching the doctrines of the Catholic Church, while doing so within a constrained time frame with teachers who are of well-intentioned volunteers. Due to this, a great number of students do not feel like they are being taught adequately and have even had to teach themselves from outside sources. Some even said that they were confused about what the Church teaches because they had received conflicting information from their teachers or classes. These students desire to know the ‘whys’ of our teachings and want to be engaged and challenged so that they can decide for themselves. The fear is that without these types of efforts, we will continue to see the Sacrament of Confirmation looked at as a Sacrament of graduation from the Church, instead of being a Sacrament which more perfectly enriches the confirmed with the strength of the Holy Spirit to live out the faith each day.³

Solutions which children (as well as their parents and guardians) proposed are less classroom based and instead involve lived actions and encounters with Christ. By engaging in genuine conversations about the teachings of the faith, especially in areas of morality, participating in the Corporal Works of Mercy and social justice along with a diversity of liturgical and devotional celebrations, dynamic retreats and conferences, mission trips within our own communities, along with collaborating with other parishes in order to obtain qualified youth ministers and teachers, many feel that they would not only enjoy their learning, but be able to live the faith at the same time. These things however are not enough in themselves if students are not being encouraged at home. As many of them state, they do not talk about religion or the Church within their family. Involving parents and guardians and helping them understand their role in fostering growth in virtue and faith is paramount. As Pope Saint John Paul II teaches, “The Christian family, as the ‘domestic Church’ forms the original and fundamental school for training in the faith.”⁴ The spiritual life must therefore be lived and formed more often than a few hours per week. We must empower parents and adults to confidently teach and live the truth of Jesus within their parish and school communities.

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 898-899.

² CCC, 905.

³ CCC, 1285.

⁴ Pope John Paul II, World Day for Missions, Vatican City, May 22, 1994.

Similar to the concern of our youths' education, many are concerned about the ongoing formation which our adults receive and are exposed to. Though the ongoing formation classes which have been provided by the diocese have been well received, depending on age, more formal and informal forms of education are desired more frequently. Examples of these would be formal education on Scripture and the Catechism, teaching Masses, and other programs, along with more informal pamphlets on Church teachings within churches, parish bible studies, and Catholic books being made available, to name only a few. This should also then be in unison with ongoing spiritual formation, making available to parishioners retreats, spiritual direction, and small faith sharing groups. Just as students want to know why we do what we do, so do adults, who may have never been taught the reasons for our faith. Through these efforts of creating a foundation of learning the basic truths of our faith, we must work to give people the opportunity to progress as they progress - not 'watering down' the teachings which our Church passes down, but instead through discernment and prudence, encouraging and challenging our people to encounter our Lord through intellectual pursuits.

When thinking of a vocation, Catholics naturally associate the word with priesthood, religious life, marriage, or single life. This tendency is good for us and points towards our main vocation, which is not just a state of life, but is instead our main goal of existence, to know God and participate in His divine nature.⁵ The Church therefore is called to be a beacon which assists us on the path towards Him, no matter our state of life.

Through the Sacrament of Holy Orders, those who are consecrated are called "to feed the Church by the word and grace of God."⁶ In recent decades, our diocese and the Church as a whole has seen a decline in vocations to the priesthood and religious and consecrated life. Many older generations still remember a time when most parishes had a school full of nuns, and at least two priests. The reality today is sadly much different. Priests, deacons, and sisters are being asked to do much more with much less, with a majority of our priests having multiple parishes under their care at an increasingly aging population. Two striking statistics from the surveys were that 9 in 10 young people ages 12-19 in our diocese have never considered a vocation no matter if they attend Catholic school or not, and well over half of those above the age of 35 have never encouraged a young person to pursue the life of a priest or religious. When asked to explain their answer, young people say they have never been asked or given the opportunity to explore their vocation, and many feel lost with little support trying to find what their vocation might be. Due to this, we must drastically expand our outreach to our young people not only to consider a vocation to this way of life, but to help them on their journey to understanding their own personal vocations. Not only can we see we need to support our young people into their vocations, but we must also support those who are currently ministering in our diocese. With

⁵ CCC, 1716-1727

⁶ *Lumen gentium* 11; par. 2.

more being asked of them, clergy members should not only be supported by the laity, but actively involve the laity in order to alleviate their burdens so that they can care for the pastoral needs of their parishes.

Just as our priests and religious need to be supported, so do those who are married and have families. This support can and should look widely different, but the issue is that many do not feel the resources are at their disposal. Parents of young children have commented of feeling embarrassed and unwelcome for having their children at Mass and not knowing other young people in their communities to reach out to or lean on. For some families who have older children, they desire for their families to be more closely connected to their parishes by having youth groups and parent socials. This support for families should also take into consideration the marriages and personal relationships within them. Do we have active support groups and functions for husbands and wives as well as for those who are divorced or separated, widowed, remarried, for those who are single, or grieving the loss of a child or loved one? These groups are especially important for those who regularly feel they do not have a place within the Church.

In keeping with our understanding of being a synodal Church, we must be a Church which is able to not only recognize who we need to reach out to and engage, but also how we are reaching out and spreading the Gospel. As Christians, Jesus has called us to go out and proclaim His life, death, and Resurrection, that all people may encounter Him and His love.⁷ We are called to proclaim this message not only to those who are not Christian or Catholic, but to those who are within our parish communities.

Whether it be material assistance, mental, physical, emotional, or especially spiritual, the Church should resemble “a field hospital that takes in the weakest people: the infirm. The sick hold a privileged role in the Church and in the priestly heart of all the faithful.”⁸ All of us as humans have deep wounds and are in need of this hospital, but some people need to be tended to more than others. These people include our youth and young adults, those suffering from abuse, those who have been divorced, widows, widowers, and others who have lost loved ones, those in poverty, the incarcerated, those who are mentally and physically disabled, people of color and non-white ethnical groups, and those in the LGBTQ+ community. Without judgment or pride, efforts to reach these people through love, compassion, and mercy should be encouraged and expanded through humble and prudent hearts.

Our diocese has many formal and informal groups and ministries which look to engage and assist those in our region. These include Catholic Charities, Knights of Columbus, Catholic Daughters, Legion of Mary, Saint Vincent de Paul Society, Prison Ministry, as well as the

⁷ Matthew 28:16-19

⁸ Pope Francis, General Audience, Vatican City, August 28, 2019.

Diocesan Family Life Office, RCIA, and more. These groups, along with other parish-based outreach such as soup kitchens, ladies and men's groups, and material and financial drives, should be commended for their efforts in supporting not only our parishes, but our communities as a whole. Though newer groups and efforts are needed to effectively support our communities, we are blessed to have an infrastructure which supports volunteer efforts. Therefore, we should actively encourage all of these groups through our stewardship to continue their missions, expand their outreach, more intently listen to those they minister to, and be more open to bringing in new volunteers and members, especially young people. The work and outreach by these groups is often thankless and done out of love and devotion for our Lord. Those they encounter and assist, even in the smallest of ways, have benefited not only materially, but spiritually. Some have started going back to church, or have even gone through RCIA and become Catholic.

Though they have done countless amounts of good for us and the Church, communication of their efforts continues to be an area of needed improvement. Some within their own parishes do not know what outreach is available or the good works which are being done. The diocese, our parishes, and other groups must expand the outlets of effective communication for their members and those they minister to in order for them to know what is happening. By utilizing new technological efforts such as Proclaim!, Flocknote, social media, YouTube, and parish websites, we can more easily engage with our communities. If we are utilizing these efforts, we must also examine if they are being used effectively and consistently so that people know they are being used. These forms of communication should be seen as a means to encourage a personal encounter with Christ through prayer, His Sacraments, and His Church. These communications should also encourage more engagement and activities, forming parish communities which are active every day of the week for all ages, and not just on Sundays.

Being sharers through Baptism in Christ's offices of prophet and king, we have seen our call to educate and proclaim. Christ's third office, the priestly office, calls us to liturgy, or worship.⁹ We exercise this office through the worship of God at all of our liturgical celebrations, but especially when we enter into the Eucharistic liturgy.¹⁰ Though they may approach it in different ways, an overwhelming majority of the people within our diocese see the special place which the Eucharist holds in the life of the Church. People of all ages, but especially younger adults, have a yearning desire for the Eucharist. They desire liturgy which is reverent and brings honor to Christ fully present, Body, Soul, and Divinity in the Eucharist.

This desire for the Eucharist has been expressed in many ways, ranging from contemporary to traditional. Some wish to worship through charismatic praise and worship, with more upbeat music and instruments, which evoke tremendous joy and love. Others want less

⁹ CCC, 1066-1070

¹⁰ CCC, 1070-1075

music and to just be silent with our Lord so that they can rest in His love. Then others wish to follow the rich traditions of the Church and celebrate the Eucharist in Latin with angelic Gregorian chant. Many are concerned that these conflicts over how to worship are creating divisions and weakening our Church, but instead of looking at this diversity as a weakness, it should be seen as a strength. This healthy diversity only proclaims the universality of our faith and should be used as another tool in our toolbox to build our Church. As long as our motive is to encounter our Lord and worship Him in union with all of the Catholic Church, this diversity in liturgy and worship can be our strength, and should be respected.

We teach that “the whole liturgical life of the Church revolves around the Eucharist and the Sacraments.”¹¹ Naturally then as Catholic Christians, people want to participate in this life to the fullest. Accessibility to the Sacraments of the Eucharist and Penance, to devotionals, especially Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament which many desire to have more of, and to other sacramentals and traditions has become not only a concern, but a reason some no longer actively practice their faith. We must ask, are there opportunities within our parish communities for people to participate in the liturgy such as altar serving, choirs, ushers, and more? Are there ample amounts of time for people to sit in silence with our Lord and receive His love and mercy? Are our parish’s lively communities of celebration outside of the Sunday obligation and the Holy sacrifice of the Mass? Due to many legitimate reasons, some simply cannot attend Mass or Penance, any day of the week. Whether it be due to work, health issues, or a lack of transportation, these people yearn to be involved in the life of the Church but are unable. Are we looking for them and trying to involve them in our communities through staggering Mass times, offering transportation, and other opportunities to be involved? These are things which are important to our people; to encounter our Lord more than just on Sunday, and to be a part of a community which helps them in their needs.

For Christians, the virtue of hope is where we place our trust in Christ’s promises of eternal life.¹² Hope is our strength and “steadfast anchor of the soul.”¹³ This is because even as this world tries to bring us down towards darkness, we know we are made for far greater things in heaven. With unity in Christ as our focus, we as a Church need a roadmap, or vision, on how we are to get there. Our Lord has given us the Sacraments to spiritually nourish and replenish us on our journey, as well as the Church, which is the instrument of salvation.¹⁴

Unfortunately due to the chaos and sinfulness of our world, many believe we have lost all hope, with no direction for the future. That division and vice has entrenched themselves in our Church at every level, which has deeply wounded the People of God. We must be honest as a

¹¹ CCC, 1113; *Sacrosanctum concilium*, par 6

¹² CCC, 1817

¹³ Hebrews 6:19-20

¹⁴ CCC, 1131; 776

Church and see this as true. For some, the Church has been a lifelong gift which has not only nurtured and sustained them spiritually, but also socially, emotionally, and mentally. However, there are far too many who have felt the opposite. The Church, whether it be the institution herself, clergy, or ordinary everyday parishioners, has left people hurting. Through this failure of upholding the mission of Christ, the Church and her teachings has been a source of confusion, anger, loneliness, and disappointment. The wounds of these failures are still fresh, no matter how much time has passed. The pain of the sexual abuse crisis, the darkness of the Covid-19 pandemic, a lack of transparency of financial resources, moral hypocrisy, and other shameful mistreatments of the People of God have torn apart the spiritual well-being of our communities, and we must continue to work to communicate our efforts to heal our fallings.

These faults, which call us towards sacrifice and atonement, should not turn us towards hopelessness, but instead stir our hearts for love of Christ, to put in the work to build the kingdom of God on earth. But the Church needs to help us do that. With one unified voice, under the leadership of the bishop and clergy, and giving the faithful a plan for the future, many people would not struggle and wonder where our diocese and churches will be in 10 years. By being transparent with our financial resources, empowering the laity to be more active and vibrant through bottom up efforts, expanding engagement with our youth and young adults, and collaborating and cooperating with one another, these anxieties and fears can be settled. Though we must be realistic about the state of the Church and make sacrifices for her to flourish, she is never a lost cause. Instead she is inviting us to know our Lord more deeply and profoundly than ever before. This is our hope.

This synodal process has given us time to reflect on where we are in our efforts to be an authentically synodal Church. This time of discernment and prayer has shown us the areas in which we are weak, as well as where we are strong. We have explored the themes which the Holy Spirit is prompting us and offered some, but not all, suggestions and ideas to move forward in faith. This exploration does not give us a magic formula to bring people back, or a way to become more relevant in the eyes of the world. Instead it should call us to action. To actively listen and orient ourselves to our people and continue with a synodal attitude. But even more so it calls us in action to expand our efforts to give people what they are yearning for, Jesus Christ. The Spirit of God is renewing hearts and minds in our diocese and in our churches. As people are in crisis and despair, we are being prompted to be the hands and feet of our Lord. By being open to the Holy Spirit and through our actions of love to those around us, we are moving from what is beautiful towards what is more beautiful, journeying towards our Lord each and every day until we are all united in Him.

Appendices:

The following quotes are from those who participated in the synodal process in our diocese. Through the perspectives of these people, from many walks of life, we as a Church can better learn and understand where we are and how we can become a more synodal Church.

“[On Sacramental preparation] It doesn’t feel like I was prepared for the Sacrament, because it felt like more of a burden than something I wanted to do when it came to the process. They are more willing to get the process done and have more numbers in the catholic faith than actually wanting to grow your connection.” – age 12-19, Somerset

“My biggest struggle is that my Church does not have others getting involved, therefore it is hard to celebrate my faith and live it out.” – age 12-19, Altoona

“The Eucharist must become the center of Catholic life again in America...My hope is this re-focus on the Blessed Sacrament made present at every liturgy will help reel in the people gone astray looking for reverence and help lead people back home proclaiming teachings contrary to Church doctrine. Trying to just address one side or the other as the problem will just lead to more division. Instead, I humbly propose we unite within the communion of the Holy Eucharist. If we can do this, we can be One and fully according to the Whole with all the Angels and Saints as one Body and One Universal Faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.” - age 20-25, Lock Haven

“The concerns I have are about the direction of the Church as a whole. It seems everyone knows that something is wrong with the Church today, but there seems to be a lack of understanding of the issue or wanting to fix it. The solutions that I do hear are just trying to advance certain interests even though that's not going to fix our problems. We need to stop fighting meaningless fights and get back to loving God and our neighbors.” – age 26-35, Johnstown

[On those who have left] “Many aren’t having the experience where they feel a sense of community or understand/have any relationship with Christ”- age 26-35, Glasgow

“The more involved you are, the easier it is to live the faith. Other than Mass, what daily/weekly activities are available to keep us active? Have things that parishioners will want to be involved in-not just things that we are obligated to do. “- age 36-54, Blanchard

“More experience than homework. Don't be afraid of technology, but don't rely on it exclusively either. Provide childcare and even "elder care" or activity. Flexible scheduling.” – age 36-54, Johnstown

“I guess - and it pains me to say this - that I truly believe that I will have taken the time to write this and that either no one will read it, or nothing will change. It hurts my heart to feel so cynical about the church I grew up in. The first step is admitting you have a problem and the Catholic Church has a lot of them. Until they decide to get real about our challenges, nothing will positively change.” – age 36-54, State College

“Come to those who can't come to the Church. Show that you care and love me as a brother, believer, and member of the Church.” – age 36-54, SCI- Benner

“Our church and the diocese needs to focus more on parish life and bringing younger people to be involved on a regular basis and focus less on formal faith formation. It is turning younger Catholics away, thus the average age of parishioners and Catholics in this country is rising.”- age 55-65, Johnstown

“Our monthly holy hour has meant so much to me. I feel even closer to Jesus since we have that on a regular basis.” – no age group given, Meyersdale

“We need leaders to be there for the people at all levels - having a meal, being a helping hand or just listening. The Catholic Church seems to be cold and distant and uncaring for simple people.” – no age group given, Lilly

We think the Holy Spirit is inspiring the Church to become more accountable to the people of the Church. The Church is not the hierarchy, but all the people in the Church. We support the Church and deserve to know what is going on. Many people have left the Church because of the lack of accountability. We also need to be taught about forgiveness. How do we forgive ourselves and others? - Small group, Altoona

We feel a need to re-indoctrinate the parishioners in the Catholic customs, beliefs, and sacred vessels, etc. (used at Masses and devotions) are necessary as many people are not taught about this sufficiently even in our Catholic schools. An insert in our Sunday Marian is a welcome addition to the weekly parish schedule as it often is a teaching device. Priests could also find an appropriate place in the Saturday/Sunday liturgy where information could be presented. Maybe a children/youth Mass would be appropriate for instruction on Church Doctrine, vessels, and sacramentals used in our liturgies and other religious ceremonies. - Small group, Port Matilda

“[The Holy Spirit] is giving us a chance to take a look to be honest and transparent on who we are, what we believe, and how we live. The Church is a place of healing... Perhaps the Holy

Spirit is inspiring us to show ourselves more in the community where we live to be an example of Christ for others.” - Small group, Hollidaysburg