

The Diocese of Winona- Rochester is incredibly pleased with the amount of participation we had for the listening sessions for Synod 2021-2023. In total, 51 parishes or groups contributed comments from their conversations. As a reference, we have 44 pastors in our diocese. While we attempted to hold gatherings for those on the peripheries, these were not very successful. Even so, we had one group of people with disabilities, two meetings of consecrated persons, two meetings of university students, and the rest took place in parishes. The most common response from our facilitators was how pleased they were at how the process went. One facilitator said: "People appreciated that the Synod was a 'grass roots' process where ordinary parishioners have the chance to express opinions, thoughts, concerns, and feelings. This was a 'bottom up' effort. We understand it is coming from Pope Francis. We very much applaud the Synod process and believe the Pope wants to address the overall health and long-term viability of the Church. Someone said perhaps we have too much of a 'good enough' attitude and should challenge ourselves to say 'It could be better if...'"

Our Bishop had set a precedent years ago by requesting that all meetings held in the diocese begin with a time of prayer. A two-hour meeting, for example, should be preceded by a half-hour of prayer by all the participants. The request then, for the listening sessions to begin with a time of prayer was common for many. Besides the fact that the experience was a pleasant one, the second most positive response in our collected summaries was that many people requested that these listening sessions would continue. The gathering of parishioners to pray, talk and listen was very well received and, because of the opportunity it afforded to strengthen community, many facilitators and participants discussed concrete ways in which these sessions could be continued in the future. Many of the respondents acknowledged the importance of giving room for the Holy Spirit to move hearts and minds. As a result, many learned things about individuals' faith from long-time parishioners they had not heard before. The Holy Spirit also allowed diverging opinions to arise with the result, not of discord, but deeper understanding.

There were many common deficiencies noted as well. Many of the summaries reported on the lack of youth and young adults among the participants. The lack of a younger audience at the listening sessions presented for many a challenge that has been ongoing in the parishes: attracting and maintaining the participation of the next generation in parish life. One of the responses pointed out: "There was an overwhelming feeling that we need to get our youth involved in our parishes and hear their thoughts, be more intentional with discussions with others, to ask more direct questions, and to share personal experiences of how communion and God have changed our lives." Another group that was clearly missing from the listening sessions were those "on the peripheries."

Overall, the listening sessions provided an opportunity for people to come together and recognize the common love that we have for the Church. Even if someone came to air their grievances with one thing or another, they did so because they want to see growth in the Church and because they want to see the Church as a credible witness in our world that is in such great need of Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. When the participants discussed the decreasing number of people attending Mass and living their faith, it seemed to come out of a desire for others to know what they know of the love of God.

*A synodal Church, in announcing the Gospel, "journeys together:" How is this "journeying together" happening today in your particular Church? What steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow in our "journeying together"?*

A great deal of those who attended the listening sessions felt a sense of belonging, but this was tempered by the fact that many of the participants were older. When they were faced with the

declining attendance numbers many agreed that we need to do a better job of inviting others. Some went so far as to acknowledge that those who took part in the synod shared a strong sense of belonging, but they were also the ones who are already very involved in ecclesial life. Several recommendations were made for this. A lot of those responses revolved around activities already part of parish life: dinners, social groups, improving faith formation. Yet others went outside the box to talk about evangelization. As was noted by one group, if we meet people in their place in life, that is what will lead to growth in the Church. One of the facilitators remarked: "Some attendees noted that they would expand their mission for the church but lack comfort in their knowledge or qualifications to do so."

Our diocese is quite rural in its makeup and so the sense of belonging comes natural to the older generation. The younger generation, for the most part, moves away from the rural areas and so that affects the average age of many of our rural parishes.

In terms of journeying together, the synod process was an eye-opening experience. Many people had a general idea that attendance was down and that the way things were done in the past can no longer sustain the way things are now, but they were able to hear from others about how that directly affects their parish.

One of the relatively new challenges that will direct the way our parishes journey together is the lack of priestly vocations. Gone is the day when more than one priest is available in the rectory. Now our priests are spread out over several parishes and our laity recognizes the need to work with our pastors so that the missionary work of spreading the Good News does not just get delegated to him.

There is a mix of parishes who are happy with their priests, and those who are frustrated. Those who are happy tended to note the difficulties for a parish that cycles through pastors quickly. There is a desire among participants to have priests who are transparent, good communicators and preachers, collaborators with laity, teachers of the faith, and men of prayer. There is also a strong desire for longer tenures for pastors. One facilitator summarized what was said in their listening session: "Regarding the effectiveness of communication within the church, members felt that communication from the top down was adequate but they felt a real void in communication from the parishioners to the upper levels of the church."

Several groups have recommended allowing priests to marry and to allow women to be ordained priests. One of the participants went so far as to say: "the hypocrisy of the Church is also a strong force keeping people away or driving them away from the practice of their religion. For example, women are the backbone of the church at the local level, but they are not at the table when decisions are made by Bishops and priests." Not going so far as women's ordination, the desire is clear: that women have more direct consultation with Church hierarchy and are included in decision-making at every level. Others recommend better training for lay staff and volunteers to share the load. Still others recommend a return to Latin Mass and hymns and celebrating Mass *ad orientam* as solutions to the priest shortage.

With that in mind, people recognized the good work of the many organizations in our diocese: Knights of Columbus, Catholic Daughters, St. Vincent De Paul, just to name a few. These organizations assist in caring for the needs of others and they also help to build up a stronger community in our parishes. They also are the ones responsible most often for the homebound visits when communion is brought to the sick and elderly. Many of the events that take place in our parishes are because of these organizations of men and women who dedicate their service to the needs of others.

As a consequence of the lack of priests and decreased attendance, some of our parishes have had to close and many of them have been “clustered”. This can be a struggle for parishes who are proud of the traditions that are particular to them. Some would like to see their parish reopen. Several people who have experienced parish mergers thought that the process of merger (“closure”) was cold and unhelpful in the process of healing and growing in faith in another parish community.

In many cases, these parishes have already learned the synodal way because they have had to listen to one another and decide how to work together and how to exist while having shared resources. These clusters learn what it means to journey together and they learn to be grateful for the gifts that they have. Although it is always difficult to see a parish close, many people recognize that the circumstances in our rural areas have caused this. They also recognize the need for more priests.

In terms of the needs of the parishes in the diocese, many people were very pleased with the way their parish was already going. Those who expressed areas in need of improvement spoke primarily of the need to reach out to those on the margins and young families. Our parishes all feel that they do well in serving those who already attend the church, but most people admitted the need to reach out and to welcome in those who either have fallen away or those who have never been in a Catholic Church. Several suggested that a key to growing the Church is rooted in the charity we extend to others after we leave Mass. This charity is not necessarily meant to result in converts, but it is to be the fruit of the Eucharist we have received. If we become who we are meant to be, and all the baptized accept and grow in their proper roles, the desired growth will happen.

A frequently seen need that was uncovered in this process is a more efficient way to pass on the truth of the faith. Faith Formation is seen as a great need because many people believe that younger people would stay connected to the Church if they better understood the beauty and the truth of the Church’s teaching. Very often young people recognize that the average church-goer is unable to explain the reason for their faith. This lack of proper catechesis often leads people to arrive at a variety of conclusions. One of our participants said it well: “What are the core values/edicts/precepts of the Church? What is the balance between being too rigid or too lax? Multiple interpretations out there of what is acceptable/not acceptable.” It is a real sadness of many participants that so many youth are never seen in Church after Confirmation. Many adults expressed the desire to grow in their understanding of the faith as well.

The need for stronger prayer lives was mentioned several times. Participants recognized the need for a strong prayer life and were grateful for opportunities to pray during times of Adoration and during the Mass. The Liturgy was pointed to as being a great draw to converts, but it goes hand in hand with having a solid catechesis. The more we stick to the will of Christ by sticking to the Gospel message, the more appealing our witness will be.

Several mentioned the importance of the Eucharist. A desire was expressed that a greater emphasis be placed on the Eucharist. Eucharistic processions, adoration and a more extensive catechesis around it were all called for. Respondents’ desires around the Eucharist were particularly varied. Hopes were expressed by participants that we welcome all at the Eucharistic table, that Communion be made available to all-or more inclusive-and that the celebration of the Latin Mass, *ad orientam*, become more common in our diocese (again, the desires were quite varied).

Finally, people attending expressed a wide variety of desired emphases or changes that they felt would help us better journey better together: A greater hospitality towards people with same sex attraction and the LGBTQ community (some would like to see a fuller acceptance of these individuals as they are, while others feel like nothing is being done to minister to them or help them understand their path in the Church), the opportunity for married priests or women priests or deacons, a greater involvement of women in leadership in the Church, a Church that would be more involved in social justice initiatives, an easier route for divorced and re-married to receive Communion, the return to old traditions such as Latin Mass and Communion rails, an increase of Marian devotion both private and public. One of our participants pointed out what was on her mind: "Spending so much money on buildings, and not much on community outreach. Are we being true to Christ's teachings?"

The pre-synodal diocesan synthesis included a lively discussion about the need for our pastors and our laity to work together in building up the Church. It was clear that they recognized the need for their pastors to have more assistance in their duties, but it was also clear that this idea of being co-responsible for the Lord's vineyard was new and that the rules of collaboration were not clear. The listening sessions helped people to realize that the priests and the laity are not working together as well as they should be. Parish councils have mixed results and, depending on the priest, they may be heard or they may seem to be ignored. Parish Councils are an appropriate and likely vehicle for the continuation of the synodal process in our parishes and diocese. Many people desired greater clarity as to how we could be co-responsible and co-workers. Again, there was great appreciation for the synod listening sessions. It was said more than once: "This is a good start, and we need to do more of this open dialog and take action to improve."

For a diocese that has just received a new Bishop, we recognize that this will affect the timing of how we utilize the results of the Diocesan Synod. We do expect to share this with Bishop Barron as a way of introduction to the diocese. The Holy Spirit is clearly calling our diocese to make more Missionary Disciples and it is a blessing to know that we have so many who are already disciples of Christ. We pray that the results of this Synod process will help us to recognize the gifts that we have and to know how best to utilize these gifts to further the Kingdom of God.