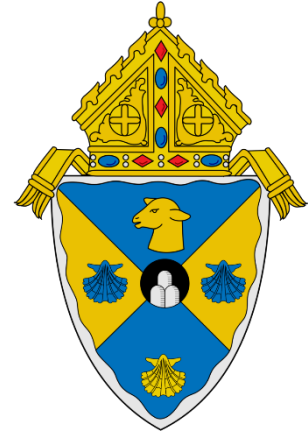


Diocese of Rockville Centre

SYNOD on SYNODALITY - REPORT

June 2022



DIOCESAN STRUCTURE

Local Synod Consultations

The diocesan Synod Consultation process in the Diocese of Rockville Centre, New York, was deeply pastoral and spiritual. The discernment process we had planned, led us to engage with small group consultation meetings rather than large group gatherings. The main targets were local parish communities and various pastoral groups actively serving Long Island, especially those connected with people in the peripheries.

Our starting point was diocesan clergy; priests, deacons as well as religious and lay ministers involved with numerous departments of our Diocesan Pastoral Center. Experiencing the Synodal consultations among themselves first, they then went on and became coordinators of their parish groups and ministries.

Then, the local process followed by reaching out to various Diocesan departments and agencies, including Catholic schools and colleges, our hospitals, nursing homes, and Catholic Charities of Long Island with other social ministry coordinators. The proceedings engaged mostly lay people under the leadership and guidance of clergy, women and men religious, representing various age groups, from elderly to teenagers as well as our ethnic clusters, especially Hispanics, signifying over 1/3 of the 1.5 million person Catholic population, among others, who demonstrate multicultural dimensions of the Church on Long Island. Most gatherings were in person, however, due to the ongoing pandemic situation many parishes and groups were able to maintain hybrid consultations, using parish social media and online connections. A Synod survey was also available on our diocesan website.

All sessions had similar agendas, starting with prayer and appropriate Scripture reading; they all invoked the Holy Spirit for guidance and inspiration. In each session there was room for silent reflection on the main themes of the Synod, namely “Journeying together in Communion and Participation as disciples on the Mission of Evangelization”. The lengthy discussions which followed can be described as lively, articulating by all participants a great deal of satisfaction in partaking.

All together we have received about 160 parish group and various organization reports as well as 190 responses to our online Synod survey. The results disclosed a great love and appreciation for the Church, but also some deep concerns. However, most importantly they expressed a vision for what the Church could be and should be according to our Christian dreams and desires. These will be summarized in the body of our report as follows:

JOURNEYING TOGETHER

How is journeying together happening in our lives?

- Most of the Synod consultation groups indicated that the parish faith communities, and participation in them, gives people a deep sense of journeying together. Active participation in the local parishes as well as in small faith groups gives all a strong sense of belonging to a larger community of the Church both locally and globally.
- The Hispanic ministry leaders see the strength of journeying together in promoting unity and sharing charism among different parish groups and ministry movements.
- Interestingly, some participants noted that here in our New York metro area, Catholics often do not identify themselves strongly with the larger Church but rather identify themselves on the local level. They suggested that this should be the focus in all our future strategic planning for the Church; not to create any kind of alienation with the global community, but rather to reinforce the sense of uniqueness.
- Most of our small listening sessions operated in a sense of deep awareness that we all are on our journey together as human beings created by God. We all, regardless of our existential paradigm, share in our common experiences of life's activities, at home and in the workplace. We all journey through the positive aspects of our existence, like joyful celebrations of life events, mixed with negative characteristics of sad life happenings. In all of them we journey together, this way or another, sharing our "human drama."
- Many participants expressed appreciation for strong foundations of belonging coming from basic experiences of family life. Observing together the importance of faith and Catholic values, by parents and extended family members, not only unites them intimately but also opens their minds and hearts to others.
- Great connection was recognized between the life of the parish and family life. Strong and spiritually active multigenerational families are constructive elements of dynamic parish communities. At the same time, parish activities and initiatives, targeting the involvement of families make most positive impact on keeping families together.
- Journeying together was acknowledged in a special and unique way among parish outreach coordinators and volunteers, namely people involved with helping those in need, especially the homeless, homebound, and underprivileged.
- Christian community's togetherness is most profoundly evident in their participation and celebration of Sacraments, especially the Sacrament of the Eucharist. People commented quite often that the common expression of beliefs gives us a profound sense of community.
- At the same time, Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, Holy Hours and celebrating the same cultural and faith traditions, including the Rosary prayers and various processions followed the list of common practices that unite us all together in our faith journey.
- Also, different forms and ways of giving communal witness to the Christian values, expressing our stand for religious beliefs in the public forum was mentioned as a source

of harmony and pride, following the Holy Father's call for missionary transformation of our parish communities.

- In general, all participants spoke about the communal time of prayer and Church celebrations as a unifying force, which can be easily seen as our expression of journeying together. "Prayer helps guide us, it can bring us closer together and closer to God"- someone beautifully said.
- Young people, college-aged, involved with Catholic campus ministries in secular colleges, often talked about their main connection with the Church, giving them a sense of belonging in journeying together, coming through adult witnesses in their lives, especially their parents, teachers, clergy and neighbors, basically, people who helped them to see the beauty of the truth of the Gospel seen in their lives.
- All participants experienced real distress during the time of the pandemic and with it, the loss of the opportunity to gather for worship and celebrate the Eucharist. This has made for them the need for coming together more imperative and deeply felt. The recollection of these challenging times gave all a deep appreciation for the availability of religious media platforms, especially religious programs offered through Catholic Faith Network, EWTN, FORMED and other available podcasts, in which people were able to nourish their faith and feel connected.

What are the challenges and obstacles to journeying?

- While there was a great deal of love and appreciation for the mission of the Church, there were also major areas of concern, evident during all Synod consultation meetings. Much of that stemmed from the idea of a Church community journeying together where some people were seen as more important while others were treated in a way that excluded them from important positions, or even the sacraments. There were voices of parishioners very disappointed for not being heard or paid attention to, which leads people to have a fear of participation. "The Church can live out the Gospel more fully by not excluding people that do not fit the stereotypes and by not listening to the people's needs" – someone profoundly said.
- Quite often it was pointed out that the continuing attack on Catholicism happens anywhere, mostly as unwanted behavior whether at work, school, or play and it can lead to isolation and separation. In some cases, in the corporate world and in the media, Catholicism is mocked and ridiculed which discourages people from admitting their religion.
- Feedback points to "people's divisive political opinions" as challenging, even affecting the parish life and its integrity. Our society is polarized more than ever, not only on political matters but also social issues. Participants suggest that some Church teachings, such as gender issues and the role of women in leadership positions, are sources of division and ongoing discussions.
- Every group, participating in Synod consultations, has something to say about the disengagement of the youth from faith and parish life. Parents shared stories of their children who no longer attend Mass because they do not find the message of the Church

to be inclusive and welcome. They also mention challenges of their grown children – especially those divorced – who do not feel welcomed in the Church. They claim that they hear judgment instead of compassion.

- Significant comments of disappointment were made regarding the way the hierarchy of the Church handled the sex abuse scandals. Someone pointed out that perhaps not coincidentally, due to many people’s discontent and exodus from the practice of faith, the Church also experiences loss of priestly and religious vocations which has resulted in church and school closings.
- Young people of college age shared their stories of feeling “discriminated against” for practicing their faith in Jesus and discouraged from getting involved with Campus Ministry. Some students reported that the overall environment of the schools (college campuses) does not support them in their expressions of faith, but rather is neutral or even discouraging to them, making it more difficult to practice their faith or get involved.
- According to many voices, faith journey seems to be splitting in two directions: those who believe and practice the Faith, and those who are raised with it, but do not practice it. For some, faith has become one of a mix of cultural traditions. Consequently, there is little theological depth to the practice of Sacraments which leads to “lukewarmness” and disconnection.
- Comments were made about time constraints, which often become an obstacle in sharing common faith: many families have so many different obligations that if they do not keep religion prioritized, they do not have the time to participate.
- Also, since people have access to so many different resources these days, if the hour they spend at Mass does not impact them, they turn to homilies they can find on the Internet, or to televised Mass, since they “feel better fed by what they encounter there.”
- While most participants shared generalized comments regarding the reasons for lack of togetherness in journeying, some especially mid-age generation did take particular issue with the Church’s teachings on sexuality, on contraception in particular. The younger contributors pointed out more contention with abortion and LGBT matters. Faith communities are polarized over their views.
- The large number of participants in our parish Synod consultations, took issue with the way the Church handled the most recent scandal of abuse. Together with questions regarding the bankruptcy, these issues were seen as obstacles and challenges to journeying together. There was a general sense of the importance of openness in communication and general transparency from all levels of Church leadership. For people who felt particularly scandalized by any of these issues, especially bankruptcy, parish appeals for funding various church projects, asking for money, were seen as negative.
- In many parishes it was noted that there is a lack of Synodal communication between English and Spanish members of the community. There have been examples of ethnic groups being marginalized when it comes to decision making. Offering separate liturgies and prayer groups further separates parishioners.
- There were significant number of comments and polarized opinions on the subject of a proper knowledge and understanding of Church teaching, especially regarding married priests and female deacons. However, at the same time, many indicated that the reason

for these comments came from a lack of a deeper understanding of the sources of the Church's teaching.

- There also were a lot of concerns about the ways the Church addresses issues of morality, particularly abortion and same-sex marriage. They want to see Church leaders be more vocal in teaching and leading on these important topics.

What are new opportunities?

- Most of the participants agreed that we should be listening first and foremost to Jesus Christ before anyone else. Faithfulness to the Gospel is the key to renewal and feeling the togetherness in our journey – people strongly say. Our leadership should not be marked by conveniences but rather founded on the guidance of the Holy Spirit.
- Synodal journey and the following Eucharistic Revival are seen as antidotes to the isolation of three years of the pandemic.
- Parish group discussions recognized the fact that many people have fallen away from the “Church” because of negative events that took place in our diocese and its institutions. There is a need for transparency and opportunity for better communication by sincere efforts to update the parishioners with information on what the diocese is doing to provide support and to renew confidence.
- Available retreats (especially group reflection and sharing), need of prayer, available therapy and authentic participation in the liturgy were among most mentioned opportunities to grow and move on to reform the Church. To attract people to our parishes, we need to be more welcoming and more visible in the community by “performing” acts of charity. There should be more opportunities for hospitality and fellowship in the parish life.
- We also need more adult catechesis. This can help us understand and appreciate the mystery of God in the Holy Trinity, as well as the doctrine of the Church, its sacramental mysteries and social justice teachings. Bible study and Apologetics courses, for large and small faith sharing groups, should be encouraged in all pastoral gatherings. People want to be more challenged in their faith, but many expressed more of a desire for the Church to be a place of peace without feeling judged.
- All efforts should be made to offer programs geared toward adult and family faith formation, where parents can be engaged with their children and encouraged to participate together in expressing their faith. Some examples include Pre and Post Cana programs, post-sacramental days of renewal for the newly married. Adult catechesis should be extended for the families of the newly baptized, families of the first communion children, etc.
- Many participants articulated a need to persevere amidst the trials facing society and the Church in today's world. They spoke of continuing to maintain hope and getting to know Jesus Christ better through the Eucharist and personal prayer. The Eucharistic Revival and the possibility for more Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament are most welcomed.

- It was suggested that the advances in technology should be considered as a way of reaching out to individuals who may not be sitting in the pews to educate and engage them further in our ministry and in our Faith.
- Talking about and advertising vocations, not only to religious life but also the dignity of other vocations, including marriage and single life, would serve to raise awareness and hopefully increase the number of religious vocations.
- More importantly, people say, our priests, deacons and faith formation leaders should always be focused on making things more understandable and practical so that people can then express their faith in words as they continue to live their faith each day. Use homilies in a more connecting way; less lecturing and academic presentations, and more homilies that connect the Scriptures to the everyday lives of the laity and dispel myths and misconceptions of the Church and the Faith.
- Participants agree that the Church should embrace various cultures and ethnic groups during the liturgical celebration and make all liturgical celebration especially multicultural. We should celebrate diversity as a gift and not as a difference in our parishes.
- Temporal realities of the parish should be delegated to lay people who have more expertise and knowledge in administering such things. Priests should be spiritual leaders and not business managers.

COMMUNION

What inspires communion?

- We are created to be communal. Group discussions pointed out that shared expressions of faith can and do touch the core of who we are in relation to the Holy Trinity. In our parish communities, an engagement with ministries and participation in parish events, formal or informal, binds parishioners to each other and strengthens community. Also, good leadership of parish priests and staff, their warmth and personal interest in parishioners, is greatly valued. This however, as it was accentuated, requires humility and ability to listen to others.
- Good preaching, reflecting our communal heritage, bible studies, catechetical programs, and active participation in Mass all contribute to our communal existence.
- People desire that the Church needs members in the hierarchy, priesthood, religious life, deacons, and lay parish ministers to be more authentic. They also wish that “Catholic celebrities” be courageous witnesses to their faith and role models who lead others into the Church.
- All voices agreed that as Catholics journeying together, we need to make the Mass celebration more inviting and joyful to draw more people to the Eucharist, especially those who find the liturgies “boring.” People appreciate shorter homilies, and more so those with themes tied more closely people’s daily lives.
- Well-advertised and creatively executed parish events and outreach programs, giving witness to the life of the Gospel, have the power to attract people to become part of it.

- Hispanic Ministry leaders in our parishes often commented on the need to share our communion in the spirit openness and respect among the movements and parish groups.
- Finally, participation in these Synod consultations already made a powerful impact, and it should be continued as participants indicated they did not want to “wait for the outcome of the synod” to put into practice some of the ideas they heard discussed in this conversation.

Who is alienated/on the periphery?

- Given time for reflection on this topic in each consultation made participants identify carefully those alienated in our society and faith communities. Their conclusion acknowledged people who have been through hardships; material (financial), emotional and spiritual, those still anxious about their safety due to COVID, those who are overwhelmed, those who have lost a loved one, those who are not married in the Church, those with children outside of wedlock, those who have made poor moral decisions, those with physical limitations. There are many layers of felt alienation with members of other faith communities noted in conversation.
- Unfortunately, considered on the periphery are many who see no need for Mass, or participation in parish life, mostly because of their disagreements with the teachings and practices of the Catholic Church. Quite often the reason for their disengagement is due to lack of continued faith formation, the lack of knowledge of the Church’s teachings (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*), or because of their personal choice to be disconnected because of mistakes and misconduct of the Church’s leaders.

How do we reach those on the periphery?

- Preach forgiveness in the way Jesus did and advertise an invitation to celebrate God’s Mercy, was on the top of all suggestions expressed during consultation meetings. In preaching and teaching, use real life and personal examples. More creative opportunities for prayer and understanding Scripture in relation to service to the poor could be beneficial – people said.
- Other suggestions indicated outreach to the homebound and those in need beyond the sacraments – doing mini-retreats with them, some sort of days of reflection, or organize community outreach by parishioner’s visitation.
- Many of the participants felt strongly about truly becoming a Church where “All are Welcome!” They felt as if the Church needs to become more inclusive and promote fellowship among diverse communities.
- Celebrate liturgies and celebrate them well. There is still so much meaning in the mysteries we celebrate to be discovered by offering liturgical catechesis.
- Find the way to show that the Church is not just about once-a-week Mass attendance. That we have more to offer as a community, to have them participate and take ownership

of what it means to “be” and “do” church. It is important to have active participation - not just “be there” but to “take part in”.

- We need to be more visible in the community by “performing” charitable acts, which benefit the “surrounding and global community” and not just our “parish community”.

PARTICIPATION

Best signs of parish participation.

- Young people find real examples of authentic participation by living a life of witness to their faith in Jesus Christ, even in times of uncertainties and life struggles.
- Almost all the comments under this heading referred to the Eucharist. For the parishioners who took part in the consultation, going to Mass weekly is the preeminent way for them as Catholics to participate.
- Surprisingly, there were not too many voices acknowledging the need of participation in the life of community beyond Mass celebration. Only “old-timers” and “daily Mass goers”, and they are not many, do understand that participation means sharing in the life of Christ and His Church, starting with Mass as “summit and source” and moving forward. Out of that, they said, comes a participation in apostolates and parish ministries. For most of them, their involvement was of a long-standing nature, and interruptions were only due to health and family issues.
- Adults’ participation is key in passing along the faith to children and grandchildren. The fact that there has been a marked loss of participation on the part of most Catholics today means, of course, that the Church’s witness in the public square gets weaker and weaker all the time.
- Family-based catechesis and parish events seem to be most desirable.
- Most participants acknowledged the need for continuing financial support of our parishes, especially in these challenging times of decreased Mass attendance due to pandemic and abuse allegations crisis.

What would make participation in the Eucharist more meaningful?

- A good number of people noticed how you could get so many other things that are connected to the Church from the world, but the Eucharist is entrusted to the Church alone and it is there that people meet the tangible thing that serves as the center for their communion. The young people of high school and college age saw the “Eucharist as the center point for the Church” around which all other communion in the Church gravitates.
- Surprisingly, according to some people, Mass is very one-sided in respect to the prayers offered by celebrating priest, they would like to see all liturgies more participatory.

- All agree that catechesis is needed to understand the meaning of the Sacraments in the light of Lord's Paschal Mystery, especially Reconciliation and Anointing. Media and available programs were suggested as effective means.
- People find liturgies dedicated to healing past hurts very meaningful. They also see the opportunities for evangelization in liturgies marking life events, like baptisms, weddings, and funerals.

What are the main reasons for lack of participation?

- It was discussed that new members of faith communities may not always feel welcomed or may feel out of place since they do not have the experience that older members have.
- Many times, people mentioned judgmental attitudes hindering participation, as well as people who use the Faith to categorize and criticize others.
- In celebration liturgies, for some, good liturgy was enough to overlook personal issues. For others, a negative experience of liturgy contributed to their issues and make them disconnected.
- Almost universal in those that commented on the liturgy or leadership was a desire for more affability among the priests with well-thought out and relatable homilies that speak to present-day events and unpack the Scripture readings in a way that helps people understand better and draw connections.
- The need for good preaching and approachable priests were the most frequently mentioned across all comments.
- People acknowledge the richness of our religious traditions. Unfortunately, the lack of offered parish-based programs is partially blamed for evident ignorance in many.

MISSION

What steps is the Holy Spirit leading us to take? What are our hopes?

- The Holy Spirit is saying to the Church today that we should all strive for togetherness even though we may have differences. We should create opportunities that enable us to foster more of a sense of togetherness by encouraging parishioners to proactively join parish ministries and groups so that they can learn more about God and each other's backgrounds, culture, and talents.
- We must ask ourselves – people concluded - how we can better leverage our gifts (time, talent, treasures) in order to advance the mission of the Church that Jesus has entrusted us with. We must let the Spirit guide us in our work by remaining in our actions and decisions. We must be listeners and maintain the spirit of welcome, especially regarding different ecclesiastical movements.
- Participants seem to recognize an inherent value in the Church as a force for good in the larger human community. The Church needs to be more responsive to present-day needs of people to remain relevant in their lives.

- Providing and continuing adult faith formation is envisioned as needed as well as parish retreats and missions. We must continue to learn how to listen and be in dialogue with the world and cultures. To be effective missionary disciples of Jesus Christ, we must accompany the people who feel the Church has dismissed them or who have been hurt. While the Church may not be able to accommodate everyone, helping people to come to a better understanding and not feel innately excluded is important. This will hopefully go a long way to making the Church look more authentic and naturally attractive to younger people.
- Media technology is important in our times. The Church needs to make more effective use of it and social media and various platforms of communication to stay engaged with young Catholic families and all of humanity.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The whole process was a grace-filled, amazing experience, people noted. They all complemented the Holy Father's initiative inviting the entire Church to reflect on a theme that is decisive for its life and mission. There is a refreshed and strong sense of belief that, "It is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium."

Those participating in the Synod consultation are convinced of the prophetic voice of Pope Francis. "This journey of awakening is both a gift and a task: by journeying together and reflecting together on the journey that has been made, the Church will be able to learn through Her experience which processes can help Her to live communion, to achieve participation, to open Herself to mission." All consultation meetings have proven "the Church's capability of communion and fraternity, of participation and subsidiarity, ability to be faithful to what she proclaims, namely able to stand beside the poor and the least".

We are aware of the fact that the process is not finished, we still have ahead of us many things to improve and return to. To "journey together," we need to convert and let ourselves be educated by the Spirit to be transformed to a truly synodal mentality. By mutual dialogue, respectful speaking and listening, we will become the community of respect and discernment, in which each person can participate and contribute. Within this context, with the synodal way as our "*modus vivendi and operandi*," we will be empowered to imagine a different future for the Church and the rest of humanity.

The appreciation for the work of the local Church and the community that gathered in the name of Jesus is a strong point that has come out of the responses of our "Journey Together." This appreciation demonstrates the value of the Church as a "pearl of great price," but does not mask that there are important aspects of it that could be strengthened and changed.

The statements of high school students, participating in this initial phase of the Synodal process, summarize, in our opinion, the outcome in the most profound way. One of them said, "This is the first time in my life that the Church has displayed an opportunity for us to voice our concerns and listen to the people." Another student commented, "I have had a very positive experience with the synod. As a group facilitator, I feel like I can not only live my school mission of inclusive love but that I, even at such a young age, can have a say in the Church. The synod has helped me grow in my faith as well, with a greater appreciation of how the Church runs and

values the clergy, I have found it easier to truly give my whole heart to God. The synod has not only impacted me spiritually but socially as well. I value hearing my peer's opinions and their explanation as to why they believe such. The intriguing questions led to great, in-depth conversations about reforms that we someday might be able to lead."