

Synod 21-23

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Diocesan Synthesis

For A Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission

Diocese of Pittsburgh
June 2022



CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF
PITTSBURGH

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August 8, 2022

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

At the invitation of our Holy Father, Pope Francis, on October 17, 2021, together with representatives from across our diocese, I celebrated a Mass of the Holy Spirit at Saint Paul Cathedral opening the diocesan phase of preparation for the 2023 Synod of Bishops—*For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission*. Since that time, we have worked diligently to help initiate Pope Francis' vision for a more synodal Church. Over the past months, all across our diocese synodal sessions were held in parishes, schools, healthcare institutions, religious houses, private living rooms, and more in order to provide opportunities for us to listen to each other's experiences of living our common faith.

This present document, the Diocesan Synthesis, is one of the fruits of those efforts. As the Holy Father asked, it has already been passed along to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, who will in turn synthesize it with the documents received from all over the country before sending a final synthesis for the entire United States to the Holy See. It gives me great pleasure to now present the Diocesan Synthesis to you, the faithful of the Diocese of Pittsburgh.

As you spend time reading and reflecting over these pages, please keep in mind what the document actually is, and what it is not. The synthesis is not a doctrinal document. It is not meant to reflect Church teaching or to propose changes that should take place. Instead, it is a chance to "listen" to what our fellow Catholics have to say about their experience as Catholics. The synthesis is not a call for action or a mandate for change; rather, it is an invitation for us to continue listening and discerning with those around us as we continue to journey together toward the Kingdom of God.

Some parts of the synthesis for me were difficult to read, and that might be your experience as well. But it is important always to listen very carefully and not wear blinders. This is a report that I, as Bishop of Pittsburgh, am proud to submit and pass up the chain. In a certain sense, this document represents the love which many who participated in the synodal process have for the Church.

It is critical to note that the completion of this synthesis does not mean that the work of building a more synodal Church has come to an end. Moving into the near future isn't going to be as "programmatic"—the diocese isn't going to call for another round of parish synodal sessions a few months from now. But you, my dear sisters and brothers, have shown yourselves to be more than capable of continuing the work of building a more synodal Church. After all, the synod isn't about producing documents. The heart of synodality, as we have been saying over and over again for these many months, is about fostering a Church where we as believers listen to each other, and to the Holy Spirit, more attentively. It will be imperative moving forward that we use current avenues like Parish Pastoral Councils and the Diocesan Pastoral



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Council, in addition to new opportunities, for addressing issues of interest from you, the faithful.

Therefore, I want to encourage you to keep listening to one another. See this synthesis as another chance to listen. After you've finished, go out and find more opportunities to listen. It is by the efforts of individual Catholics continuing to live the process of synodality that we will bear fruit for the future of our Church.

Grateful for our continued efforts together in being *On Mission for The Church Alive!*, and for our belief that "Nothing is Impossible with God," I am

Your brother in Christ,

+ *David A. Zubik*

Most Reverend David A. Zubik
Bishop of Pittsburgh

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Diocesan Synthesis

The Diocese of Pittsburgh encouraged and invited wide and broad participation in the synodal process called for by Pope Francis in preparation for the 2023 Synod of Bishops with the theme: *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission*. Based upon the Preparatory Document and *Vademecum* issued by the Holy See, the diocesan synod planning team prepared local guides for both synodal participants and organizers. Communication regarding the synod was meant to raise awareness and invite as many people as possible to take part in the synodal journey. The planning team utilized the diocesan website, social media, the *Pittsburgh Catholic* magazine, and parish announcements as the primary channels for communicating with the public about the synod process.

Bishop Zubik began the diocesan phase of the synod with an opening Mass celebrated at Saint Paul Cathedral on October 17, 2021. Priests were asked to preach about the synod at all Masses celebrated in the diocese that weekend. Synodal sessions were held throughout the diocese beginning in January and extending through early April 2022. The main purpose of these sessions was to allow for participants to encounter one another, to prayerfully and attentively listen to each other, and to foster an awareness of synodality in their own lives. In line with the guidance received from the Holy See, the submission of syntheses to the diocese, to be passed on to the hierarchy, was seen as a significant part of the process, but of secondary importance to the synodal encounter and experience on the local level.

The diocese received more than 150 syntheses from synodal conversations that took place around the diocese. Those 150 syntheses reflect an even greater number of discussions that took place, as some facilitators combined the experiences of multiple sessions into one synthesis. Approximately two-thirds of these synodal experiences were hosted by parishes and parish-based



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groups. Other experiences included advisory groups to the diocesan bishop, groups of religious men and women in the diocese, victims/survivors of abuse, LGBTQ+ Catholics, ecumenical leaders, lay groups, movements and ministries, pastoral care and social outreach ministries, universities, Catholic elementary, middle and high schools, clergy gatherings, diocesan and parish employees, and informal living room gatherings.

Demographically, the majority of parish sessions saw greatest participation from Caucasian adults, with more women than men in attendance, and an average age of 60 and over. The voice of younger people was heard more strongly through some parish sessions held specifically for young adults, and through university and Catholic school synodal sessions. Similarly, while some members of the faithful from ethnic minorities participated in general parish sessions, a stronger contingent of minority ethnicities and cultures were heard through a number of sessions specifically for Hispanic, African/African-American and Asian parish communities and ministries. Some of the ministries that participated in the process included groups providing food, housing or other forms of direct care to the elderly, poor, homeless, vulnerable women, and members of the community with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

The syntheses produced by the local sessions were submitted through an online tool and a draft diocesan synthesis was prepared by the co-chairs of the diocesan synodal planning team. On May 21, 2022, a pre-synodal gathering was held, consisting of a group of about 50 diverse individuals from across the diocese, to review the draft synthesis and offer insights on what topics had come up through the synod discussions. In general, participants affirmed that the draft synthesis accurately encapsulated the range of perspectives that were shared at the synodal discussions in parishes and other groups across the diocese. Participants were encouraging of the



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synodal process as a whole. They pointed, out, however, that most of the people the Church needs to reach did not participate in the process and it should be kept in mind that the majority of perspectives which were heard came from a similar group of people, that is, individuals who were over 60 years old and who frequently attend Church. The group raised questions regarding what happens next and whether there will be effective responses to the discussions held or whether, after hearing these things, the Church will continue on without change. One group at the gathering cautioned that while synodality is a good thing, large, diocesan synodal discussions shouldn't take place too often or they will become ineffective.

Finally, the experience of the pre-synodal gathering was integrated into the draft synthesis, which was then reviewed by the diocesan synod planning team.

What follows below is a synthesis of all the information received by the diocese from local groups, individuals, and at the pre-synodal gathering. Reporting each individual comment and statement would be an impossible task. However, the synod planning team attempted to prayerfully discern common themes and elements that were present throughout many of the documents submitted. For the purposes of organization, those themes which were observed more frequently in the submissions are presented first, with the least frequent themes being presented last. Following this, there is a section presenting themes which stood out at the pre-synodal gathering. This document is not an endorsement of any of the comments listed below, nor is it to be understood as doctrinal or authoritative in nature; rather, it is simply a presentation of what has been heard during this journey. Finally, an appendix is attached with select quotations lifted directly from submitted syntheses or from the pre-synodal gathering that seemed to have significant resonance – these are presented without any particular order or arrangement, and in a manner that attempts to preserve anonymity of the participants.



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Liturgy

The most frequently mentioned topic in the responses received had to do with the Church's liturgy. Many individuals spoke of the importance of life-giving liturgies, engaging music, reverent celebration of the sacraments, the centrality of the Most Holy Eucharist and the grace of Eucharistic Adoration. Many responses reflected on the centrality of the Mass and the Holy Eucharist, while also lamenting the lack of belief or understanding of the meaning or significance of the Eucharist. If we are truly "Journeying Together," the journey needs to have the Eucharist both as its ultimate destination and as food for the journey. At the same time, it is apparent that different people find connection and meaning in different liturgical styles. For example, some mentioned finding the Holy Spirit in contemporary music, while others told of their joy in hearing the organ and classic hymns, and still others spoke of their love for the use of Latin. Many comments were received about the importance of preaching and the Sunday homily: it can powerfully draw people to the Lord when done well, but when subpar, it becomes an obstacle to faith. Viewed as a whole, there appears to be a sense that we need to work to make the liturgy an occasion of true beauty and reverence that goes beyond preferred "liturgical styles." Renewed effort, energy, and resources should be invested into the celebration of our liturgies.

Also mentioned was a need to create more opportunities for all age groups to participate in Mass and offer more alternative Mass times for those who work on weekends.

Welcoming and Inclusion

Many stories focused around the need to be a welcoming and inclusive Church, although understandings of what that means seem to differ. There is a perceived need to find better and



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more effective ways to welcome and include new members, and to welcome those who feel excluded for a variety of reasons. There is a sense that we need to ask ourselves if we acknowledge those who are marginalized or focus more on those who fall in line and conform. Many people feel judged for one aspect of their lives (for example being LGBTQ+, divorced, their race, ethnic origin, primary language, gender, etc.) and therefore excluded by the Church. There is also a strong feeling of sadness among participants regarding children and younger generations who no longer practice the faith or who have left the Church. Although less frequent, there were also stories from young adults who were saddened by their parents' lack of faith or the practice thereof. Some stated that the Church needs to listen with genuine openness to the needs of people and shift the focus from the buildings to helping those on the way. We should be aware and respectful of the fact that there are many different and unique ways that people arrive at the faith or journey through their own faith. We should leave space for this and allow for it in our communities.

It must be acknowledged that there is real tension between those who are genuinely concerned about “defending the faith and Church doctrine” on one hand, and those who are very concerned about the Church being too judgmental on the other.

Catechesis

Responses indicated a strong recognition of the need for catechesis; Catholics, in general, are perceived as not knowing or understanding their faith well enough to be able to share it with others. Participants clearly expressed a need for better catechesis for both adults and children, so that they can explain and answer questions about the faith. New models of catechesis should be explored, especially for children. There is a strong sense that the current methods are not



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working well: children tend to absorb little from traditional programs and fall away from the faith very quickly. This problem is compounded by the fact that many children in faith formation programs are not receiving reinforcement at home; thus there is an urgent need to rekindle the “domestic church.” This topic was echoed in a call for more ‘practical’ formation, i.e., teaching Catholics how to read the Bible and how to pray. Parishioners, and others, want to understand the “why” of our faith – not to be dictated to, or spoken to using terminology they don’t understand or can’t relate to.

Community

Many responses also centered around the importance of community. Between the Pennsylvania grand jury report, *On Mission* (a diocesan process of reorganization and parish planning), and the pandemic, many feel lost and confused. Healing is needed, celebration is needed, respect for other people’s views is needed. There is a real perceived need for feeling more like a community of believers. Many spoke of the wonderful sense of community they found in various parishes, ministries, small groups, etc., and how this experience has been the core of many individual experiences of the faith. Many also spoke of the lack of community around them, and their desire to find community. Across the board, there is a call for the fostering of an authentic sense of Catholic community life. People need to be encouraged to share their gifts. We are not tapping into, using or appreciating all the gifts and talents we have. There is a need to assess and respond to the needs of each stage of life so the Church can be a family for all. The Church often seems disconnected from the experience of regular families and doesn’t have the spiritual and corporal needs of its parishioners as a priority. In large parishes, many ministries and groups can be offered, but the size of the parish and number of people can



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make it difficult to feel connected and find community.

There is significant concern about political divisions within the Church and how they impact the community. Some perceive a danger of “Christian nationalism” within the Church, which manifests on both sides of the secular political divide as: “if you don’t vote for such-and-such political party, you aren’t Catholic.”

There is also a need to intentionally build communities for specific groups of the faithful. Those who are deaf really appreciate having a parish to go to where there are interpreters and the priest also understands sign language. This is significant for their ability to communicate, be included, and feel like they belong. There is great concern that young people who are deaf are not engaged in the faith community. Likewise, awareness of the community of those with intellectual and developmental disabilities here in Pittsburgh is growing through ministries like Brother Andre’s Café. There is a sense that the Church should do more things like that. Some who are ill and dying are bitter about the Church and feel like it doesn’t know how to help them. We need to find ways to help those who feel shunned/disconnected for different reasons to feel welcome; the parish bulletin and current channels of communication don’t work.

Personal Witness

The importance of personal witness in efforts of evangelization and creating a sense of a welcoming Catholic community was also readily apparent. Charity, boldness, and humility are needed to be authentically Catholic. Personal holiness is what will make a true difference in the world. Many spoke of the need to share personal experiences of the faith with others in order to bring them to know and love Christ, as well as the importance of extending a personal invitation to participate in the life of the Church. Being authentic in relationships with others is what will



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draw hearts and minds to Christ. On the other hand, several responses also spoke of a fear of evangelization – of being afraid to speak about personal faith or to invite others to come to Mass or other parish events. These fears are often rooted in a sense of inadequacy in being able to explain the faith, in a sense of shame related to scandals in the Church, or in a sense of stigma attached to identifying as a Catholic. Some related that we would be better if everyone focused more on their personal conversion than on what they like, or dislike, about the Church.

Young People

There is a general perception that more needs to be done in support of young people, young families, and newly married couples. There should be concerted efforts at reaching out to them, listening to their needs, and building an atmosphere specifically aimed at welcoming and receiving them into parish life. Some stories were shared by parents of young children and the difficulties that come with family life. There is a special need to welcome young families, provide ways for them to be involved, and to be compassionate and understanding when children are not perfectly behaved at Mass. There is also a generalized sense of sadness or dismay in the older generations at seeing so many younger Catholics, especially those within their own families, leave the practice of the faith. How to effectively reach young people is seen as a significant challenge of the present moment. The future of the Church is at serious risk unless we establish effective, direct programs that reach out to and engage young adults. There is also recognition that if we want to engage and retain young people, we need to give them real responsibility. The youth care more about what attitudes and experiences they run into through the parish and local community than what is said regarding Church teaching by the diocese or higher-level Church authorities. Many participants felt disappointed that those at their sessions



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did not include any young people.

LGBTQ+

Several stories were shared by individuals identifying as homosexual or LGBTQ+. Many responses related a sense that they felt hurt or rejected by the Church because of this one aspect of their identity. One story of particular resonance mentioned that it felt like as soon as their opinion was shared, it was automatically dismissed because of their sexual orientation. There were many remarks about the need for compassion and inclusivity for those who identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community.

Scandals and Victim Survivors

Many people also shared experiences of sadness, hurt, and loss regarding the sexual abuse scandal in the Church. Some noted that the scandals have caused them or people they know to leave the Church. Others, however, while expressing hurt because of the scandals, spoke of their desire to stay – that there is dysfunction in the Church, but that it's no reason to leave the Body of Christ. There is distrust of Church leadership – both within the diocese and at higher levels of the Church. The past scandals still need to be addressed honestly, and new leadership is needed for real healing. This distrust is very widespread and is having an impact on who shows up and how much people are willing to engage and participate. On a related point, the experiences of victims/survivors of sexual abuse, especially when perpetrated by clergy, was heard during the synodal process. Individuals expressed feelings of pain, isolation, and a need to keep their experiences secret as a result of what they had suffered. Suffering sexual abuse often distorts the image of God and makes living a life of faith very difficult. There is a real sense of wanting to be



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heard, listened to, and recognized within the Church.

Truth

Many participants in synodal sessions expressed their concerns that the truth of the faith and the Church's teachings must be preserved in the face of an increasingly secularized and morally relative world. There is a real desire from many that the Church's leaders would teach with clarity and recognize the difference between good and evil. Some participants expressed concern about the willingness of Church leaders, including the pope and bishops, to teach true, authentic doctrine. The Church must stand out as being different from the rest of the world. Some expressed that there seems to be a fear of speaking the authentic truth of the faith.

Fallen-Away Catholics

Many of the responses received through this process spoke about the need to engage those who have fallen away from the practice of the faith. Special emphasis was given to the problems created by the COVID-19 pandemic, and how many people who stopped going to church at the outset still have not returned. There is concern about how the suspension of Mass and the celebration of the sacraments has made many question their relevance or true impact in their lives. Some noted that we should listen more to disgruntled Catholics and those who have left to better understand why that happens and how to invite them back. When people come for Christmas and Easter, we need to do more to welcome them, include them, gather together with them.



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Small Groups and Ministry Groups

Many expressed the importance of finding an experience of the faith in smaller groups, i.e., parish ministry groups, bible studies, faith sharing groups, evangelization teams, university/college Catholic Centers, etc. These individuals expressed stories of how their faith was bolstered by sharing the experience of living the faith with a small, close-knit group of people. Likewise, many spoke of finding the Lord in living the faith through charitable works – helping the poor, the marginalized, and those faced with disadvantages and disabilities. These individuals told stories of not only finding Christ in their acts of service, but also meeting Christ in the people they served. The important aspect seems to be the personal experience of sharing the faith – whether in a setting of prayer, study, or ministry of charity – in direct, personal ways. Groups that serve the needy and share from the heart are seen by some as keeping people connected to the Church; other groups that are seen as focusing too much on the institution or lacking compassion cause people to disconnect.

Listening/Synodality

Many responses focused on the idea of synodality itself and the importance of listening. Many groups reflected that holding occasional synodal experiences and finding ways to integrate similar experiences into pre-existing church structures would be a welcome development. In general, the importance of being “heard” was expressed by many participants. Many people do not feel heard and, therefore, feel alone. It is hard to truly listen, but we need to let others speak without interruption or confrontation – not listening leads people to fear speaking out and marginalizes them. Listening brings new life. At the same time, some participants expressed skepticism or mistrust of the synodal process. Some found hope in that the Church was seeking



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to hear their experiences but remained doubtful that their voices would make any sort of difference. Others expressed fear that the synodal process would be commandeered by higher levels of the hierarchy in order to promote preconceived agendas. For this process to be effective, some felt that after these discussions are held, pastors need to sit down with their staff and formulate ways to incorporate some of the suggestions into parish life.

Divorce

Sentiments were expressed by some participants that divorced Catholics often feel disenfranchised. There is a real perceived need for compassionate ministry to the divorced and finding ways to include them in the life of the Church. In the same vein, the Church's teaching and process of annulments should be more widely publicized, especially the fact that it is free of charge in the Diocese of Pittsburgh. There is still a stigma attached to being a divorced Catholic in the Church as well as to getting an annulment. There should be no shame in moving through the declaration of nullity process as it often is a source of healing for those who have gone through divorce.

Social Teachings

Many participants spoke about the importance of the social doctrines and ministries of the Church. The Church's social teachings were described as our "best kept secret." Others related that the Church is at her best when our ministries of charity are strong and well-functioning. The Church has a real need to minister to the marginalized and to provide services for the underprivileged that is central to the faith. Christianity becomes empty and void without social ministry. Some people expressed that the only reason they remained in the Church was



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due to social ministries. At the same time, it can be difficult for those who passionately care about the social teachings of the Church to journey alongside those who do not. Many people, especially those who have distanced themselves due to the abuse scandals and distrust of Church authority, are much more willing to support and participate in activities associated with Catholic ministries and non-profit mission organizations that are not directly associated with the parish/diocese. It must be remembered that faith and good works need to go hand-in-hand in Christian life. There aren't enough homilies on Catholic social teachings.

Mergers

Of particular relevance to the Diocese of Pittsburgh were the many comments received regarding parish and school mergers as well as church closures. This forms a real and visceral aspect of faith for many people. For some, there appears to be much frustration in the pews regarding the *On Mission* process. Many people have stopped coming to Church because of the mergers and closures. There was mention made of the difficulty of “fitting in” within the parish when their church building has been closed. There was a feeling of being told that they were welcome in the new parish, but only if they did things the way they were done at the churches that remained opened. Many parishioners from closed church buildings feel as if they are outsiders “visiting” the remaining churches. These concerns were echoed in stories about parish groups or ministries being too closed off and “cliquish.” There is a need to be not only open to new members but also open to new ideas, opinions, and doing things in new ways. Some expressed that the experience of merging shows the need for greater responsibility to be given to the parish community. The inconsistency in style, expectations, etc., of pastors, who change frequently, hurts the parish community and causes people to leave, particularly when the



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incoming pastor is perceived as lacking respect, doesn't collaborate well, doesn't listen, etc. There is a need to move from a pastor-centered Church to a community-centered Church. Other stories were shared wherein the experience of parish mergers brought about the realization that the common experience of praying for one another was so very important, and extended beyond traditional parish boundaries. Some related that merging of parishes created opportunities for blessings and new growth.

Leadership

Many experiences were related about the pastoral leadership, particularly of parishes. Both positive and negative comments were made about the clergy serving the parishes, most focusing on the role of pastors. Of particular note, it was apparent that the pastor should engage the people and empower them to take ownership of the community and the ministry that results. Good pastors empower the faithful to take on self-guided ministries. On a similar note, stories were also shared about the importance of good preaching, which at the same time recognizes that many "people in the pews" are coming from vastly different experiences and places in life. Too many of the clergy are perceived as expressing arrogance, lack of listening, or not caring. The distance between the clergy and the laity, with the clergy still seen as removed/above, is an issue for many. It is exacerbated by lack of genuine friendships between clergy and laity and how frequently the clergy are moved around. Likewise, some participants mentioned the need for priests to have fewer administrative duties. Many also expressed the point that some priests are often over-worked and need support from the laity; there is a need to recognize that priests are fallible human beings who are not capable of being perfect in every situation or in every area of ministry.



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At the same time, many participants called for more lay leadership in the Church. People want to be involved in the Church on all levels and to be heard in a meaningful way. Lay parish leaders also need to be open to sharing their ministries with new people and new ways of doing things. “We’ve always done things this way” is an attitude that stifles parish life. Clericalism is seen by many as a problem within the Church – both as an attitude of entitlement or privilege held by some members of the clergy, as well as a belief in many of the lay faithful that in order to be a leader in the Church one must be ordained. There is need for genuine co-responsibility on the part of the laity – that’s part of the call of baptism. Both clergy and laity need to work toward establishing mutual trust in each other’s ability to care for the life of the Church. Lack of an expansive role for the laity in parish decision-making and leadership leads to and frustration over transparency and accountability. The “pray-pay-obey” model doesn’t work today. The Conference of Bishops does not seem to be effective at communication regarding issues of importance to our nation and world – violence, justice/injustice, despair, peace, etc. The conference needs to speak courageously and powerfully and be a voice for the poor, refugees, immigrants, etc. There is a real sense that the episcopacy is divisive and polarized. For many, a pastoral stance is needed more than a doctrinal one, but for others, the opposite is apparent. Also, Church leadership needs to be courageous, although different perspectives were offered regarding which messages and ideas should be courageously expressed. At the same time, there were a considerable number of participants who stated that Church leadership was often too political and should stay away from political issues, especially in preaching. Many participants expressed distrust of Church leadership, both within the diocese and at the Vatican.

A greater sense of subsidiarity is needed with respect to decision-making in the Church. Too many decisions are perceived to be made in a top-down manner, whether on the diocesan



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Some participants related that the clergy should take a stronger role in leading the Church – they felt that the clergy need to define and determine why we should be Catholic, or why we should choose the Catholic faith over others.

Some participants expressed the feeling that women are still not equal partners in a male-dominated Church. There is a sense in some that the hierarchy is too patriarchal, or that the very idea of hierarchy itself is anti-woman. There were also a few participants who called for the ordination of women to the diaconate, as well as to the priesthood and the episcopacy. One participant shared that as women, she and her daughters always felt like outsiders. There were other comments about the need for the Church to be less patriarchal and to have more women in leadership roles. Some expressed concerns about the perception that women do much of the “work” of the Church, but are not duly recognized or appreciated.

Many participants pointed out the need to live and show joy in our lives. The mission of evangelization and winning souls to Christ is dependent upon inviting others to join in our joy. No one wants to be part of a bitter, miserable Church. There is a real need for individual Christians to choose to live joyful lives in the world and to share the source of their joy with others. Relatedly, the Church is in need of new and innovative models of evangelization. We



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have a need to move beyond the programmatic and what is familiar and comfortable. The old models are not working in today's world and need to be reevaluated. Loving our neighbors and overcoming divisions to form unity in charity should form the basis of our efforts. Some participants called for greater use of social media in evangelization efforts, while still maintaining legacy media for the benefit of older generations. There were some stories of experiences that the faithful can be very quick to judge and point out sinfulness but fail to recognize repentance and mercy. There is a need to reach out to the marginalized, to love the sinner, and to recognize that every person is in desperate need of God and His mercy. Stories were shared about the need to move away from seeing the practice of the faith as an obligation, and instead to recognize and live the joy of worship, of faith in Christ, and of being redeemed by His Blood.

Ecumenism/Inter-Religious Dialogue

Many participants saw value in current and expanded outreach and partnering with non-Catholics and non-Christians. We align with our Christian brethren on many social doctrines and can work together to better our common society. Likewise, growing to better understand the teachings and beliefs of non-Catholics helps to build up a more peaceful society. At the same time, many participants expressed a lack of understanding, or a lack of concern about the teachings that divide Catholics from non-Catholics. Some saw no real difference between the Catholic Church and other Christian communities. A few participants called for inviting non-Catholics and even non-Christians to participate in the sacramental life of the Church. There is also a sense among some that many Catholics are leaving the Church for other Christian communities that are more “entertaining.” Some related that Catholics look down on other faith



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traditions and vice-versa.

Conversion Experiences

Many individuals shared moving stories about their experience of conversion to the Catholic faith. Conversion stories can provide a powerful witness of faith and should be shared more often. A convert to Catholicism described how a Protestant pastor noted to them that when those in his congregation became more serious about their faith they became Catholic, and when Catholics became less serious about their faith they became Protestants. The participants were surprised at this admission.

Religious Life

Some participants spoke of the great value that professed religious women and men had in their lives and their desire to visibly see more religious at work in parishes and in the Church. Some participants spoke of their great appreciation for women religious. There is need for promotion of vocations to religious life, especially women's religious life in the diocese. Some expressed that women religious have been marginalized, but they are models of discernment, dialogue, community to be appreciated. It was expressed that many Catholics today never get the chance to see or interact with women religious – they see and know their priests, but they rarely come across women religious. Some recalled the benefit of having women religious involved in their lives at a young age, and that this is something that the Church needs to recapture – for example, we don't need women religious serving as school principals, we need them teaching second grade directly with the children.



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Mass According to the 1962 Roman Missal

Some participants spoke of the value that they found in the experience of the older liturgy for the celebration of the Mass and the other sacraments. A few mentioned that many young people and young families in particular were attracted to the 1962 ritual. Some stated that they were attracted by the greater sense of reverence portrayed in the older form of worship.

Other Clergy Concerns

Other, less-frequent concerns regarding the clergy included calls for married priests. A few mentioned that priests can be standoffish and uninvolved in the life of the parish. There is also concern about the decreasing number of clergy and about the quality of clergy formation. There were also a couple of remarks that priests should have fewer administrative duties.

Others

Other comments that were less frequently mentioned but that were reported included topics such as: the need for sharing resources; political divides becoming problematic in parish life; the need for “change” in general; success found in interfaith marriages; the need for Pro-Life causes to extend beyond the topic of abortion; the experience of nostalgia for the past and the need to allow it to drive us to building a better future; experiences of being committed to the faith but uncomfortable with inviting others to join; the need for greater financial transparency; one participant shared an experience of witnessing a Eucharistic miracle as a teenager, and how that has continued to impact their daily life; there was mention that the experience of Mass in Latin as a child was very difficult and that the use of the vernacular has been a great blessing; the benefits of spiritual direction; a story of being able to see the universality of the faith while



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traveling internationally; the realization that the Catholic faith doesn't have a "one size fits all approach" but that we can live and experience the faith in different ways; that with shrinking demographics and Mass attendance, we need to realize that having a smaller Church is okay; stories were shared of how the Church was there for individuals when they needed it most; some spoke of being rejected by family and friends because of their commitment to the Catholic faith; the importance of having a variety of Mass times available on Sundays, including Sunday evening was mentioned; the importance of personal and communal prayer; some expressed suspicion about pastoral and finance councils in parishes and not knowing who served in those capacities; a need to support anti-racist causes; expressions of the benefits found in youth groups; how helpful Bible studies are to the development of personal faith; the need for better communication and the damage that can be caused by rumors in the community; a perception that the Church has "too many rules"; some doctrines of the faith need to be changed; the perception that the faithful are quick to point out sins but fail to recognize repentance and mercy; the perception that the Church is elitist and only exists for the "holy"; forgiveness needs greater emphasis; we need to have more openness to new experiences; God is no longer a priority for many people; the busyness of life and time constraints take people away from God and the Church; spiritual guidance and growth should be the "face" of the Church; a greater focus on the action of the Holy Spirit in individual lives; a greater focus of Christian identity; more focus on the role of the Blessed Virgin Mary; care for the environment and creation; the difficulty of finding a parish that is a "good fit"; the need to see the big, universal picture, not just the needs of the parish or the small group; a sense of urgency for reform; a further reformation of sacramental rites; that clergy do not preach often enough about abortion and the sanctity of life; the fact that church buildings are important in the local community; the dignity of every person;



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that speaking up doesn't need to be confrontational; that parish councils should be given real authority apart from the pastor; the centrality of sacrifice in Catholic spirituality; we need to celebrate our successes more often; the Church is too accommodating of the world; that lay people need to take the lead in evangelizing; that the Pennsylvania Grand Jury Report was unjust and did not provide due process for the clergy who were listed; that the separation between Church and State is being blurred in the United States; that we all need to be more considerate of church workers; there need to be more retreat opportunities for young men and women, especially discernment retreats; the great value that can be found in bereavement ministry; that sacred images can be off-putting for some; that the Church lacks role models; that men's spirituality needs to be emphasized more; that the synod should have happened sooner; that we need to be reminded of the obligations of the faith more often; that there is a need to admonish sinners; that too many different groups are asking for donations; that the Church is neglecting other cultures, particularly non-western cultures; that the pendulum has swung too far away from discussing hellfire for those disobedient to Jesus; that canon law should be revised with regard to how it is written and applied - for example, an abortion brings automatic excommunication, while serial homicide does not; that the Church needs to start a new national Catholic TV station to inform and explain the faith in an understandable way and correct misconceptions; that the young generation needs to be taught stewardship; that we should use Advent and Lent as times for increased social opportunities and volunteering; that the church needs to be more sensitive and compassionate toward people who commit suicide and their families; and that, for some, Mass simply isn't important.



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Topics Emphasized at the Pre-Synodal Gathering

The majority of comments at the pre-synodal gathering echoed perspectives already expressed in the draft synthesis. Perspectives that were further strongly affirmed and emphasized included the significance and centrality of the Eucharist; the danger of the current trend to politicize the faith and how damaging this has become to Catholic unity and community; the need to continue addressing the abuse scandal and the credibility crisis it has caused; the growing tension between those dedicated to defending Church teaching and those who feel a strong need for the Church to be more inclusive of groups perceived to be at odds with certain doctrines (specifically, the LGBTQ+ and the divorced/remarried); the belief that witness, participation, and engagement, with an emphasis on the community of the Church and the “why” of faith, will go further in attracting the next generation to the faith than focus on doctrine alone. Some other particular topics which were heard at the pre-synodal gathering included:

- Some spoke of the possibility that the faithful are looking for leadership and doctrine to address divisions and differences – issues that might be best addressed by the community through ministry and accompaniment.
- With regard to renewing leadership, some expressed that it isn’t enough for new individuals to be appointed as pastors/bishops, etc., there needs to be discussion regarding how the approach to leadership needs to change.
- Great appreciation was expressed for the role of women religious, both in the past with regard to their role in passing on the faith and in the present with regard to their genuine understanding of discernment and collaboration.
- The notion of truth came up a number of times – namely, discussions and questions over what we mean when we say we have “the truth,” the importance of remembering that



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God exceeds all understanding and there is no perfect group of people that owns the truth, even within the Catholic faith. At the same time, there is beauty in remembering that the truth does not change and that restating the “old truth” can be powerful. It was also suggested that the Church needs to do more integration of scientific knowledge/teachings with its teachings of the faith.

- There was discussion of the challenging dynamics of the parish-priest relationship that has developed as a combination of the frequent transfer of priests, changes in parish culture that can take place often or unexpectedly when pastors change, and the complexity of developing a relationship with the pastor when there are only a few priests ministering at many different locations. Practical solutions need to be developed and discussed; the problem has already been defined multiple times.
- Topics some table groups believe should be emphasized more included the possibility of married priests, the value of reaching out to other denominations and faith communities, and the ongoing significance of the abuse scandal on trust and credibility in the Church.

It is important to note that this is not an exhaustive list of what was shared at the pre-synodal gathering, but many other meaningful comments that were shared were already similar to what is already included in the synthesis or reflected through the quotations in the appendix.



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Appendix

While it would be impossible to report each individual story and comment that was shared in the local synodal sessions and subsequently reported to the diocese, the following excerpts, quoted directly from the local syntheses, and altered only to preserve anonymity and to clarify grammar, seemed to be particularly resonant:

- [A non-Catholic] said her experiences with Catholics at camp have always been one of trying to catch them up in their faith. They invite any Christians to come and help, and she has noticed they their kids at camp always have to teach the Catholics the content before they are able to teach.
- One story told of a church assigning a "buddy" [to new members] for introduction into the community, making the new member feel "wanted." Stories of simple welcomes being very important.
- A story about a mother at wits-end with her fallen-away-from-the-Church adult child who finally told the child, "I do not want to spend eternity without you!" This resonated with the group, especially those who have adult children not practicing the faith, but also with others because of its dramatic emphasis on the seriousness of not practicing the faith.
- When a parishioner would bring an idea to the pastor, he would encourage them to pursue it. This parish, because they were empowered and given authority by the leader, had over 50 different ministries organized by the people of the parish. When a new pastor is assigned, things can suddenly change. Priests should be trained to value the ownership of the people, thus avoiding rapid and ill-considered changes.
- Many attendees were very sensitive and emotional about the closing of schools. When one person would share their story, almost every member of the group contributed to the sadness.



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- One told of how she was from one of the closed buildings and is struggling to “fit in” with the organizations that she has been a part of for years. She stated, “they say I am welcome, but only if I do things the way that they do things. There is no desire to hear anything about how we did things.” Those from closed buildings were very open about how they still feel that they are the outsiders “visiting” the remaining churches.
- One person identified as gay and felt like as soon as her opinions were shared that she was dismissed because of her sexuality. She is a faithful person and attends Mass weekly; however, she feels like her voice will never be taken seriously.
- A story was told of a person who was transitioning from male to female. She was dressed as a woman and still had the appearance of a man. A priest asked her not to return to his church for Mass.
- A convert to Catholicism described how a Protestant pastor noted that when those in his congregation became more serious about their faith they became Catholic, and when Catholics became less serious about their faith they became Protestants. The participants were surprised at this admission.
- As a woman I always felt like an outsider. That's why none of my daughters are still in the Church.
- The goal is to get to heaven, bringing as many people with you as you can.
- The Church will always be mother, but it is a dysfunctional mother now. Nonetheless, I will never leave the Church.
- A parishioner noted that her former church was unreceptive to new ideas about forming new programs, which hindered her from speaking up.
- We are “desperate” for the Holy Spirit - the Spirit speaks; we desperately seek It.



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- People who had young families felt like there was no room for them because it was difficult for them to be involved.
- One participant shared that a priest's homily is a big part of causing her to feel like she doesn't belong in a particular church. Priests need to stop and think about the diversity of the people and what might be going on in each person's life rather than thinking that everyone is the same. Often the words we choose seem harmless to our own ears but are very painful and dividing to others.
- A young person felt the Catholic Church looks down on other denominations and felt personally unwelcome because of it. Not being able to receive Communion even when faithfully attending church services.
- A parishioner shared that a family member had died during the pandemic and had belonged to one of the churches in her grouping. When this parishioner went to another church in the grouping for Mass, the name of their family member was mentioned in the prayers of the faithful. It dawned on this person that their family member was being prayed for by the entire parish - all eight churches - and this gave her great comfort.
- Succeeding in my marriage to a non-Catholic was a blessing that helped me overcome the stigma that painfully haunted my parents' inter-faith marriage.
- The Catholic Deaf Community in our diocese has had to move from location to location over the course of 50 years due to church closures, mergers, or the loss of a priest or pastoral worker who could sign. He felt that they were like the ancient Hebrews "looking for the Promised Land."
- Oftentimes people spoke with a nostalgic attachment to the past and the successes that the local church was able to bring about. These reflections on the past enkindled in them a



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renewed desire to avoid decline in the future.

- Many questions were raised, like will this synod make any difference? Will anything change? Will there just be more of the same old, tired, top-down thinking from the hierarchy?
- We, as parents, CAN influence our children and they in turn, CAN positively influence others.
- One participant shared how while serving Mass as a young teenager he witnessed blood on the host. This continues to strengthen his faith journey to this day.
- Other participants talked about their experiences of having attended Mass around the world, in other languages, which makes us appreciate the universality of our faith.
- One participant shared his experience as a reminder that people have different ways of participating in our journey. While they may seem on the margin, some may pray at churches with relics, read about their faith, or study the saints. We should be mindful of multiple ways to engage people in the Church.
- We were reminded of Pope Emeritus Benedict who wrote that the church will become a smaller "remnant church." This was significant to the participants because it reminds us that changes are coming, and the Church needs to recognize this.
- A person under 18 shared their desire for their father to participate in church more often.
- Participants expressed the importance of the Sunday liturgical celebration of the Eucharist as an opportunity for the community to gather together to receive Jesus Christ, offer a sacrifice with the priest, receive a word through the liturgical preaching and share an experience of prayer with others. Many participants reflected how the Sunday assembly is an important part of the lifeblood of the parish and that it is the place where



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many of the faithful are nourished and strengthened in their faith.

- As the center of our faith, all parts of the Mass need to be done well. Good music, liturgy, homilies and active participation by the congregation is an important part of Mass as Jesus is met there in Word and the Eucharist.
- Several participants shared that many Catholics do not understand the Mass or why we do what we do. Some expressed concern that we do not hear often what we should be doing as Catholics, such as, going to Confession and worshipping together as a family. A great difficulty discussed was that when Bible studies and other faith formation opportunities are offered, they are poorly attended, and those that do come are usually the same people.
- Young adults expressed the need for a "safe place to get real life answers" to questions about the faith.
- Participants across all groups expressed a greater need for education and deeper understanding of our faith. In order to actively live out our faith, we first need to understand it. Obstacles arise from misconceptions about Catholicism and poor/lack of knowledge on our part. The decrease in formal Catholic education has hindered our knowledge. Many issues regarding Church teaching have confused our people. The Church needs to be more clear about the authority of our beliefs, especially in moral teachings.
- Living in a faith community demands a great deal of vulnerability and trust, and the risk of being "wounded" by others. We are called to affirm those who are vulnerable. Community starts with one who risks talking to the community about his or her vulnerability.



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- The epitome of our journey together would be to act as family. Families disagree; families are not perfect; families are not pretty. Families have all kinds of beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors, but are rooted in love. We need to love one another, walk together, and work together, despite our differences.
- People want challenges, responsibilities, and purpose and need to see that one can have a brilliant, scientific, and philosophical mind like Pascal or Aquinas and still believe in God.
- Younger participants felt the need to sustain fellowship with other Catholics during the week – to draw strength and energy through the week.
- There are so many opportunities to bring people back. Listen to these people to understand, not to give response.
- LGBTQ+ relationship with the Church. Many feel that a greater understanding and acceptance exists at the local parish level than at higher levels of the Church. All participants have positive relationships with LGBTQ+ family and friends. Many have seen some positive outreach to the LGBTQ+ community, and encourage more openness. The general consensus is that more positive and inclusive relationship need to be encouraged within the Church.
- Participants responded well to an evangelization idea proposed by the parish leadership to divide the parish boundaries into twelve subsidiary communities for further parochial engagement and to encourage relationships between neighboring parishioners. This evangelization model would allow each congregant to be a part of a local parish group in addition to the wider parish community.



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- We all have a part to play, it is not just for the priests and religious, but for all of the children of God to spread the love of God.
- The responsibility of evangelization belongs to all, not just priests. That said, how each participates should be in accord with one's gifts and calling.
- Having all the authority of the Church within a clerical and patriarchal structure puts the power and responsibility in few hands, missing major voices within the church: especially those of women and the youth. People are past the point of following because they are told to follow. There is a great distrust for the Church and the teachings of the Magisterium because of the Church's complicity with and covering up of sin.
- There was a solid consensus that our churches should not have closed during COVID, and Masses should not have ceased. To some, it seemed like we were caving to the hysterical fears and ways of the world.
- The role of women in the Church needs to expand. Not necessarily priestly ordination of women, but more decision making and leadership roles. Some are unsure of their positions on women ordination.
- Another theme which resonated across the groups was the need for women to be in more prominent positions of leadership and influence in the church. It is felt that women's gifts can be ignored; half of the population is being under-utilized by the Church. Lydia and Phoebe from the New Testament were mentioned as examples of women in Church leadership. It was mentioned that rules created by men a long time ago often get in the way and inhibit diverse participation.
- Too many in the Church hierarchy lack backbone, seem to prefer a watered-down Catholicism. The Church needs more "concrete" leadership. We need more fidelity, not less fidelity.



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- We show we are Christians by our love, joy, generosity, and caring for the needy. This attracts others to explore the Catholic faith, to gain what they see in us-- the light of Christ. We must be sensitive to where each person is in their faith journey.
- Body (heart), mind and spirit are all different aspects (gifts) of the Church and are needed and equally important and does not negate any else's gifts.
- I will always be catholic (small "c") even if I have to find another way to express it.
- Some homilies are arrogant and offensive. I feel talked-at or talked-down-to.
- Many people mentioned that they were dissatisfied with homilies that are "preaching to the choir", negative and long. They wanted to hear a homily based on the Mass readings and something that moves them beyond where they are.
- Participants mentioned that disciples of Christ should have joy! Our faith should be evident in the joy we exhibit when serving during the liturgy or in everyday life. After Mass, we should smile and reach out to those we do not know to introduce ourselves and start a conversation. (As an aside, during an RCIA session, our catechumens explicitly mentioned that it was the joy and peace they witnessed in faith-filled people they knew which drew them to the Catholic faith.)
- The beauty of the ministry we run here. It is something that most people have never witnessed before. People come here intentionally now for the good coffee, of course, but mainly for the atmosphere in the cafe. There is a sense of joy and family here that you would not find anywhere else.



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- How much the homeless in our city do not notice how God is blessing and protecting them, but when we point it out, they start realizing what goodness they are surrounded by. It hit them hard to have it shown that they are a beloved and cherished child of God. The constant reminders from the attentive staff and the volunteers is starting to change the hearts of the people who need God's love the most. And now they know it.
- Pastors have enormous influence on the spiritual health and vitality of parishes. Leadership matters.
- People may be ashamed of their faith; Church teachings are counter-cultural; you can be labeled a bigot or accused of hate by challenging current political ideology. However, the Church is the force that can push back against the culture and society.
- Communication is an absolute necessity. Many of the issues occurring within the community occur because of rumors and lack of communication. They want to keep announcements coming at Mass, more Flocknotes, more info in the bulletin. "Share what is going on with us!" Social media!
- That we once regarded our priests with respect and honor, not so much anymore.
- I'm struck by how displaced we all feel, hearing "I feel homeless," disappointed, lack of leadership; not feeling wanted or welcome.
- "I had previously thought of [the Church] as a blighted area that should best be cleared. This process is making me think it might be worth saving."
- There is a distaste for how the Catholic Church is portrayed by the world, an elite/superior group for the holy, not the sinner. Many people both inside and outside the Catholic Church feel like Catholics act as if they are better than other people.



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- The stigma of being a divorced woman in the church was resonated by many. They feel that they are excluded and judged. The annulment process must be promoted and implemented without the shame factor.
- We need to move past the way things used to be, be flexible and attend Mass at whatever buildings may be used.
- When my old parish closed, I felt unwelcome and judged at the new parish.
- People genuinely love God and their Catholic faith and desire to obtain heaven. Many have felt the presence of God in their lives and the power of prayer. The Holy Spirit has been inspirational in guiding their lives. The Holy Spirit is an advocate, who gives strength and guidance in their lives. People are learning to recognize the gifts of the Holy Spirit and using their talents, charisms in their lives. Parishioners feel that the Holy Spirit helps them when they are fearful, anxious or need to feel a sense of peace and self-control, when temptation is at the strongest, the Holy Spirit is more powerful.
- The life of a Christian requires sacrificial love, day by day. The Christian life is one of freedom. The Church needs to evangelize, again by actions more than words. The life of faith requires much humility and courage. Humility is hard.
- Confession needs a new theology. People are afraid of being judged when they go to confession. And saying 10 Hail Marys doesn't do anything ---they would like more consultation from priest to help them.
- Priests are filled with fear because of their loyalty to bishops. Dismantle the hierarchy, have a citizen's oversight board of bishops.
- Radical changes need to occur within the church so that victims [of sexual abuse] are heard and never forgotten.



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- Broaden what our seminarians, priests and deacons are exposed to. They all need to listen to victims [of sexual abuse] and to understand the lifelong struggles with disassociation, addictions, relationship issues, trust, self-harm and more.
- The subject of married priests was discussed. While they respect and honor the tradition of celibate clergy, others feel that possibilities of married priests needs to be explored.
- Many mentioned that Catholics don't celebrate success and outreach programs. And want to know why we don't publicize the good that Catholics do such as missionaries, building schools, hospitals, local outreach, global service projects, and mission trips for teens.
- There also appears to be a tendency to provide a "cafeteria" approach to our faith. We are becoming an "accommodating" church so that we might be perceived to be more inclusive. At times it appears we are bending the Truth.
- Lay people have the best position to evangelize, and they need to be equipped to do so effectively. We need to learn how to both listen and speak out with our peers. Our faith needs to permeate every aspect of our lives so that we can become saints and evangelize.
- How do we go about the accepting of those who are living lifestyles that directly oppose Catholic teaching? We are all called to holiness and we all desire to spend our eternal life with Jesus Christ in Heaven. How do we lovingly teach the truth to those who will likely leave our churches if they feel they are not accepted or welcome in them? This is so difficult because we are to love everyone as Jesus loves them, and we believe by teaching God's Truth, that is TRULY loving them and desiring the best for them as brothers & sisters in Christ. However, the truth, spoken in love, is not often what people want to hear.



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- Unexpected was the suspicion around the pastoral and finance council. One attendee stated "the pastoral council is made up of 10 people we do not know who are determining the future of parish life."
- Not only is it difficult for parishioners to connect with their priests; it is equally difficult for our priests to connect to their people.
- Women are not provided with the same resources for vocational discernment as men; the vocation director for the diocese usually cannot help women.
- A participant raised the need to be "more considerate and supportive of Church workers and the difficult job they have."
- People in the Church being an enclosed group, not allowing others to take on responsibilities. The same people doing the same things all of the time.
- Trust of clerics can be restored if they would just be willing to listen, invite, offer prayers for, and try to develop relationships with victims [of sexual abuse].



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Resources

1. For the Diocese of Pittsburgh Synodal Summary and a guide as to how we can continue in synodality visit: <https://diopitt.org/journeying-together>.
2. For resources from the Vatican, visit: <https://www.synod.va/en/resources.html>.
3. For resources from the USCCB, visit: <https://www.usccb.org/synod>.

