



Diocese of Richmond Synodal Synthesis Document

communion | participation | mission



Bishop's Message

August 24, 2022

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Earlier this year, our clergy and faithful journeyed together as we listened, encountered and accompanied one another in answering Pope Francis' invitation to embark upon a synodal process. In June 2022, we finalized our diocesan phase of this synod process, and the following 12 page report provides the results of your participation in this consultative endeavor. It is my hope that you will take the time to read the diocesan report, as it is a fusion of the many voices of all who walked in communion on this shared journey.

I am grateful for the involvement of all who participated in our local synodal process from January to March 2022. During that time, gatherings took place within individual parishes, parish clusters, organizations, and various Catholic groups and diocesan councils to consider and discuss the synodal theme of "communion, participation and mission."

I'd also like to extend my gratitude to the ad hoc Diocesan Evangelization Commission for its work in compiling the extensive feedback into this document that was sent to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

I believe there is much we can take away from this experience within our local Church.

As I've discussed in *The Catholic Virginian* over the course of the year, this report provides input for next year's World Synod of Bishops in Rome. More importantly, your reflections during this process will help me as I discern and consider what the voices of our faith community had to say. Your "voice" will help us examine the common threads revealed in the consultation, which will guide us now and in the future as we prayerfully consider and act upon local priorities.

Through this feedback, I was encouraged to learn of the high percentage of our parishes providing input. I am immensely thankful that, in a diocese with more than 60 colleges and universities, we received participation from our young adults. I was heartened to read of the tremendous gratitude our laity expressed for the work of our priests — especially our international priests, whose ministry sustains our parishes in the rural areas of our diocese.

While this part of the process is complete, let us remember that synodality is not about one single person's discernment or the action that one might take as an individual to cooperate with God's will. Synodality is an ongoing, community process! As important and as necessary as personal discernment is for each of us, this is a process of communal discernment to respond to the voice of the Spirit we hear in our hearts.

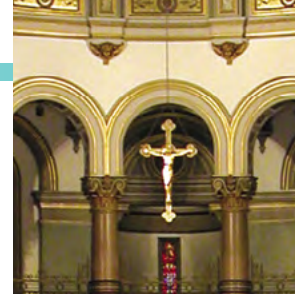
As disciples of Christ, please continue to pray with me that we recognize Christ in our midst. May our encounter with him strengthen our faith, and may our hearts continue to intensify our desire to listen, pray and discern God's will in furthering the mission of our local Church.

May the Holy Spirit continue to guide and renew God's people in the Diocese of Richmond.



Bishop Barry C. Knestout

Diocesan Introduction and Synodal Process



The Diocese of Richmond is diverse and geographically broad, stretching from the Atlantic Coast to the Appalachian Mountains and covering 36,000 square miles. While much of the Catholic population resides in urban centers such as Roanoke, Richmond, and Hampton Roads, many of our parishes and faithful are found in rural areas of the state.

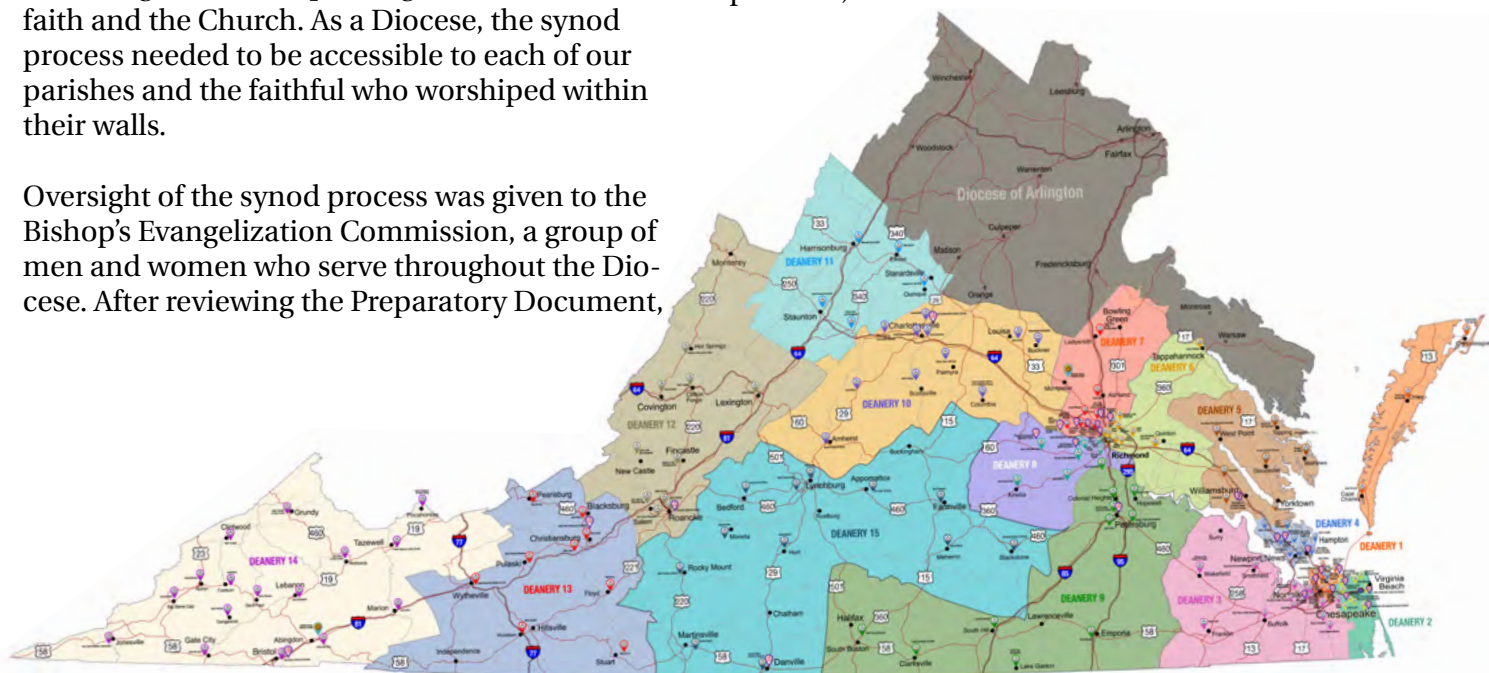
There are over 220,000 Catholics who worship at our 138 parishes and 6 missions. With large military bases throughout our Eastern Vicariate, many of our families in this area are connected to the military and may only spend a few years in our diocese. With 68 colleges and universities within the diocesan boundaries, there is also a large group of Catholic young adults who are in the diocese for a brief time.

There is also a rich ethnic diversity as our parishes are enriched by having members who are Hispanic, Filipino, African-American, African, Korean, and Vietnamese, among others. The different geographic and demographic elements of our diocese lead to a wealth of experiences and in the course of the synod process presented a wide range of voices speaking to their Catholic faith and the Church. As a Diocese, the synod process needed to be accessible to each of our parishes and the faithful who worshiped within their walls.

Oversight of the synod process was given to the Bishop's Evangelization Commission, a group of men and women who serve throughout the Diocese. After reviewing the Preparatory Document,

the commission sought to streamline and group the various questions found in the ten thematic nuclei. Three themes were identified: Communion, Discussion and Dialogue, and Participation and Mission. Each theme pulled from several of the thematic nuclei and were presented in a way that parishes could teach and center their conversations around them. The Commission provided a proposed synodal process made up of prayer and small group conversation that parishes were able to adapt to their varied needs. Responses were then submitted through an online form which asked for feedback about the three themes, the fundamental question and participatory information. The majority of our responses came from the local level, from parishes and other Catholic organizations, while other responses were collected from Diocesan advisory bodies.

Utilizing the information provided through the online submission process, it was evident that there was wide-spread participation throughout the Diocese. At the conclusion of our collection period, 123 responses were collected with a total of 89% of parishes providing feedback either individually or as a cluster of parishes. In addition to parishes, other Catholic entities also assembled



Diocese of Richmond Parishes by Deanery

to reflect on synodal themes, like individuals served by Catholic Charities and a support group for victims of sexual abuse by clergy. The reported numbers showed that 8,380 people participated in the synodal process. Out of the parishes that provided specific demographic information, it was reported that 200 youth participated, 60% of participants were women and the majority of participants were between the ages of 50 and 80 years old. Some parishes reported the participation of people and communities that are Hispanic, African-American and Filipino. It should be noted that parishes desired to include those on the margins but struggled to reach those groups or to actually get them to participate.

As a result, most of the feedback comes from the members of the Church who are already the most vocal and active and the perspective of marginalized peoples comes from them rather than from the marginalized, or those perceived to be marginalized, themselves. Many parishes reported robust conversations among pastoral councils, Bible study groups and other existing gatherings, or among groups convened specifically to review synodal themes. Some parishes supplemented these gatherings by soliciting feedback through online surveys.

By centering on the three themes that the Diocese organized around for the synodal process, this document will present the feedback from the consultations that took place throughout our parishes over the course of the last six months. Within each theme, trends will be identified that show both the variety and similarity of responses.



Bishop Knestout celebrates the Mass for a Synod at the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart, Oct. 17, 2021.



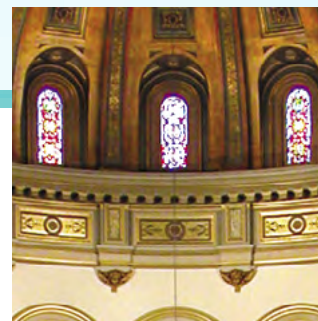
Parishioners at the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart listen to Bishop Knestout's homily during the celebration of Mass for the opening of the Synod of Bishops, Sunday, Oct. 17, 2021.

Communion

This first theme asked participants to examine the idea of Communion in a particular way. The questions aimed to draw individuals into discussion on what it means to journey together, listen to each other and celebrate together. They were prompted to examine who is on the margins and who feels that they have the opportunity to speak and to be heard. Additionally, the celebration of Mass was discussed as a communal experience

and participants were instructed to spend time in dialogue about their experiences in their individual communities.

When asked who the Church listens to, participants agreed that “in general, the Church listens to those who are the most vocal.” In sum, those who are the most present and involved have the greatest influence: “persons who are more assertive or



active in parish ministry tend to be heard.” Among those whose voices are most prominent, participants identified clergy, elderly/retired parishioners, council members, those of Caucasian descent and longtime parishioners.

When asked who is marginalized, participants provided a vast array of responses. Those mentioned included conservatives, liberals, the homeless, those living with drug addictions, the unemployed, families with children, teenagers, single Catholics, those lacking transportation, those lacking technology, those affected by abortion, inactive Catholics, college students, those with emotional or mental disabilities, singles, non-Catholics, non-Caucasian Catholics, those who do not speak English, those unable to receive sacraments, those pursuing annulments and the elderly and/or homebound. One particularly large parish, noting that everybody involved perceived themselves to be isolated in some way, concluded that “all of our parishioners are in some way on the margin.” The three most common responses were women, divorced people and those who identify as LGBTQ+.

■ It was observed that women lack leadership roles and authority in Church structures. Some participants objected that the numerous gifts which women bring to the faith are not acknowledged or celebrated. This was exacerbated in the pandemic, as roles for laity in the liturgy were restricted or eliminated, and ministries coordinated by women were often suspended. (At the same time, it was also observed that many parts of Catholic life are dominated by women, and in some places an effort is needed to get men more involved in the Church.) In some cases, participants endorsed ongoing dialogue on the possibility of the ordination of women. The prospect of ordination of women to the diaconate was suggested more often than ordination to the priesthood.

■ Numerous parish reports noted the increase of parishioners experiencing same-sex attraction or evolving gender identification, and an even greater increase in parishioners struggling to know how to respond to friends or relatives with such experiences. In some cases, participants called for doctrinal or dogmatic changes, but in most cases, participants begged for guidance regarding how to respond with love and charity within. Participants at one Central Vicariate parish expressed an urgent need for guidance as they begged, “We believe we are approaching a real crisis in how to minister to the LGBTQ community, some of whom are members of our own families. We need help, support and

clarity.” Participants at one Eastern Vicariate parish recommended the incorporation of the Theology of the Body into faith formation.

■ In those reports which explained the sense of marginalization among divorced Catholics, participants recommended the streamlining of the annulment process. Responses also highlighted issues of access of divorced Catholics to the sacraments, and messages of marriage and family life which can leave single or divorced Catholics feeling excluded.

Furthermore, some parishes felt that the most faithful Catholics—those striving to live and express the faith in an orthodox way—were increasingly marginalized. Several parishes cited recent limitations placed on the celebration of the Traditional Latin Mass. They felt that undue attention is given to those who dissent from magisterial teachings.

Parishes find themselves to be divided in many ways. Various cliques or silos are apt to form, giving a sense of separation. In some parishes, distinct communities are delineated by which Mass folks choose to attend. Two prominent sources of division became apparent:

■ Those in parishes with bilingual or multicultural communities noted the inevitable separation which comes with distinct liturgies, classes or activities based on language barriers. In general, respondents celebrated the multicultural nature of their parishes, while observing that much more must be done to build unity. For example, one parish with a large Hispanic community noted, “Overall our community here is active, and there is a lot of good will between the English-speaking and Spanish-speaking communities, and a desire to be even more united.”

■ A consistent theme in reports was a sharp divide between those who identify as conservative/traditional Catholics and liberal/progressive Catholics. In some cases, they expressed views on the same topics, but in drastically different ways. Some reports called for updates to Church teachings, and others called for the Church to stand her ground against a hostile world—and, in several cases, these were expressed in the same report. This ideological divide was often reflected in the synodal experience. One parish in the Eastern Vicariate submitted two separate sets of answers, described as the “traditional perspective” and the “non-traditional perspective,” and a parish in the Western Vicariate described tense discussions among those with diverging views.

One of the easiest trends to identify was the percep-

tion of parishes that they are warm and welcoming. This phrase, or a variation thereof, was repeated by nearly every parish followed by features that made the parish distinct: diversity, youth, age, rural, traditional, contemporary, etc. This self-identification frequently led to parishes also identifying that they struggled at outreach. One parish expressed clearly what was an evident reality for many others: “We are welcoming, inclusive and uniquely diverse in terms of race, culture, income and ages – to those that arrive on their own. We do not, however, reach out to those ‘on the margins’ and there is no plan to identify the missing or to reach them.” Parishes recognized this struggle and in a particular way feel the need to reach out to lapsed Catholics. One parish noted a response from inactive Catholics that they are not personally greeted when arriving at church, and that it can be incredibly unclear how to join a parish. Some of the parishes in the Western Vicariate did note that their outreach opportunities allow them to be involved in their communities. One mission community in the Western Vicariate reported that they “often reach beyond the scope of our four walls to join with other small churches.”

Regarding the celebration of Mass, many responses indicated that parishioners are active participants and that the liturgy is centered on Eucharistic worship. Music was accepted and identified as an element of the liturgy that would strongly influence the perception of Mass for better or worse and a variety of styles were reported. Parishes reported that individuals and families have a preferred style of liturgy, and that they are willing to attend parishes outside of their geographic boundaries in order to find a style or community that fits their desires. There was a reported desire for more access to the Sacraments, adoration and prayer. However, many parishes reported a lost reverence for the Eucharist and a need for more teaching about both the Eucharist and Mass. Participants at a parish in the Western Vicariate said, “We found that the single most effective way to be on mission for Christ is to be holy.” This was a thought echoed by other parishes.

Stemming from the feedback on Mass, many reports expressed tremendous gratitude to the priests of the Diocese. In particular, many of our smaller, rural parishes, served by international priests, expressed their thanks for the presence of their pastors and the understanding that without their priestly ministry, their parish would likely close.

Stemming from the feedback on Mass, many reports expressed tremendous gratitude to the priests of the Diocese. In particular, many of our smaller, rural parishes, served by international priests, expressed their thanks for the presence of their pastors and the understanding that without their priestly ministry, their parish would likely close. Many parishes commented on the Sunday homily when referencing their parish priest and Mass. It was noted that homilies are a crucial source of encouragement, direction, empowerment and hope for people to bring into their daily lives. Good homiletic skills keep people in a parish, while poor homiletic skills, or divisive topics, drive people away. A parish in the Western Vicariate reported, “The availability to access homilies online is a powerful tool of evangelization.” Another parish in the Eastern Vicariate stressed that to the faithful, “Good preaching is a consolation.”

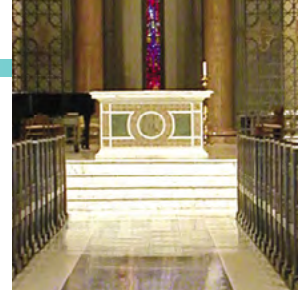
One final trend connected to Communion was that the long emergence from the pandemic has left parishes struggling to reconnect with individuals and to establish community. There is a feeling that people have not returned to Mass or other parish events or gatherings. Most parishes report that attendance remains lower than it was before the pandemic began. Parishes are

approaching the idea of livestreaming Mass differently, with some continuing the practice and others ending it altogether. Either choice leaves some parishioners unhappy and feeling marginalized.



Priests attend Chrism Mass, 2021

Discussion and Dialogue



While the whole synodal process was focused on participatory opportunities for discussion and dialogue, this theme examined how we accomplish these ideas on a regular basis. The faithful are encouraged to be rooted in the Holy Spirit and guided by courage and a boldness to speak out to those they encounter, whether in the pews or distant from their faith. The Church and society find themselves facing division and conflict on a regular basis. Participants were reminded that our ability to share about ourselves and enter into dialogue with others will help to determine how effective we are at spreading the Gospel message.



Livestreaming of Mass at Cathedral of the Sacred Heart

Participants overwhelmingly agreed that media, and social media in particular, is helpful, but also presents many challenges. Numerous parishes appreciated the capacity for technology to help maintain connections at the height of the pandemic. Most respondents felt that the Church (variously expressed as parish, diocese or Universal Church) had a good social media presence, but could still improve.

Numerous parish reports noted the great variety of outstanding Catholic media and digital resources, but they also lamented the challenge of identifying responsible Catholic media. Among the concerns expressed with media, it was observed that the most prominent perspectives are often the most

divisive or sensationalist. Media is likely to report on hot-button issues, not the consistent ministry regularly provided by Catholic parishes and organizations. Our use of media increasingly serves to reinforce our preconceived notions or preferred ideology.

Reliance on technology can disenfranchise the elderly or those living in rural areas, and parents sometimes struggle to help their children navigate it. Respondents consistently indicated that technology can not, and should not, replace in-person contact and encounters. Specifically, parishes are wondering if live-streaming Mass is positive because it helps the homebound to remain connected to their own parishes, or negative because it enables access to Mass without in-person participation. Respondents at a parish in the Central Vicariate, which has overwhelmingly African-American membership, noted that Black Catholics are seldom portrayed in any form of media.

Respondents generally agreed on the importance of ecumenical outreach, and parish reports frequently listed ways parishes engage with their Christian neighbors. These collaborative enterprises almost always involved charitable outreach or implementation of principles of social justice. However, participants overwhelmingly agreed that more ecumenical outreach can and should be a priority.

In a few cases, participants called for the Church to consider access for non-Catholics to the Eucharist. When Hispanic parishioners were asked about ecumenism, the discussion tended towards the importance of Catholics understanding and being able to articulate the faith: “Ecumenism in Latin America has a different focus: because other Christian groups constantly attack the Church, Catholic engagement is mostly apologetic, which can be strengthened, too.”

When asked about conflict in the church, many participants expressed disappointment in public disagreements among prominent clergy, which leads to a great loss of credibility. Participants at one parish wondered, “If bishops and priests are not in

communion with one another, how can we expect Catholic faithful to be in communion with one another?” The most frequently cited example was the lack of clarity surrounding access to communion for pro-abortion Catholic politicians.

Members of an advisory council described the decision of some German bishops to bless same-sex unions as another confusing and divisive step. Several parish reports decried how easily political divisiveness seeps into the Church, and colors nearly any conversation about moral teachings, parish priorities or pandemic/vaccine responses. Some participants expressed a concern that the Church’s opposition to abortion has been overemphasized at the expense of attention to other issues. They highlighted a host of other issues, especially related to Catholic social teaching, of which Catholics and non-Catholics alike are often unaware.

Several parishes noted that the universal Church’s diplomatic efforts to promote peace bring her credibility, and others noted that the Church should be more actively engaged against racism. However, some parish reports affirmed the emphasis on combatting abortion, or expressed an interest in doing more to combat abortion.

Several reports condemned ongoing clericalism as a source of division. Parishes often articulated the principle of clericalism in different ways. For example, respondents at a Central Vicariate parish felt that “the biggest stumbling block is clericalism, priests and deacons who consider themselves better than the laity and do not listen to lay concerns.” A group composed of victims of sexual abuse by clergy insisted that “people are looking to priests for helping with spirituality, enriching lives, not playing politics for self-promotion,” and recalled that “Pope Francis (2013) said that priest should be ‘shepherds with the smell of sheep.’ Therefore, we should all be in this together—there should be no separation from priests.”

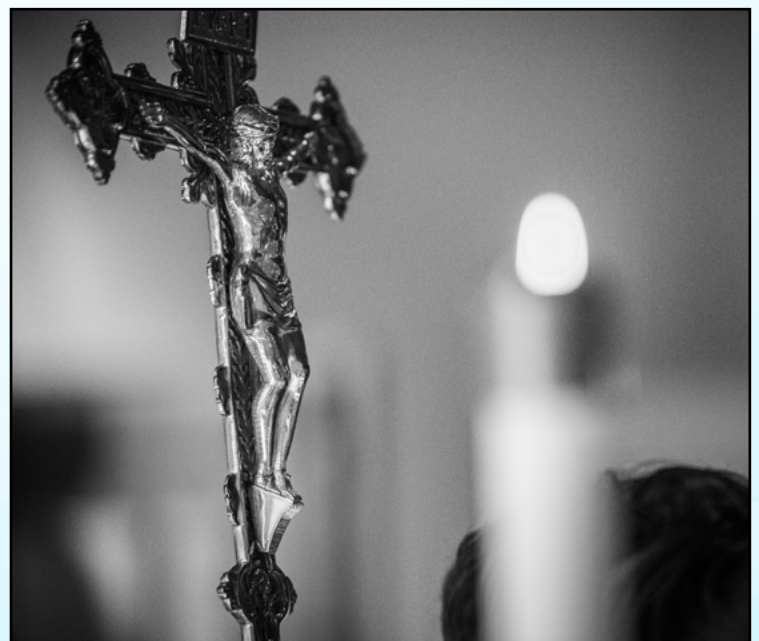
In a few cases, reports called for structural changes to have more lay involvement in decision-making processes. It was also suggested that the definition of clericalism could extend to parish staff members,

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who might use their authority to press their own agendas.

A frequent refrain regarding dialogue was widespread appreciation for the synodal process. Several reports indicated an eagerness for more synodal encounters, either as parish initiatives, or on behalf of the universal Church. However, participants also described, in some cases, a reluctance to participate, because of fear of being judged by others for their perspectives, or because of a sense of pointlessness.

This feeling of futility likely explains why some Catholics (active or otherwise) declined any participation in the synodal process. As expressed in one report, “Our parish identified this synod as a hopeful, forward-looking opportunity, but many expressed skepticism that anything will ‘really change.’ Many parishes are doing essentially nothing for the synod, and the bishop does not appear to have made it a priority with the priests. One group concluded, ‘This synod process is a good step forward, but if nothing happens as a result, it will become a big step backward!’” However, some felt that the principle of synodality was misguided: the Church, with her teaching authority granted by Christ, is the one who should be listened to, not the one who should be doing the listening.



Participation and Mission



The third and final theme recognized that all members of the Church are called to participate in the Church's salvific mission and prompted participants to examine how the parish prepares them for this endeavor. This was done by examining elements of formation and the ability for individuals to become involved in ministry opportunities at the parish.

A recurring theme from parish feedback was that the majority of parishioners are not aware of the Church's mission and don't feel equipped to live it out in their daily lives. Frequently cited in the reports was a clear need for better catechesis and evangelization training for the lay faithful. Over forty parishes reported that people lack confidence and a general knowledge of the faith. Additionally, they are at a loss as to how to evangelize and they hesitate to share the Gospel in their daily lives. Participants in three parishes noted that people are comfortable living the Gospel but not proclaiming it. As a group, we are conflict adverse and are reluctant to speak up in the world for fear of being shunned or persecuted by others. Still, considering all of this, there is a desire and knowledge that our faith should be better communicated to the world. According to the report from a parish in the Central Vicariate, "Synod participants expressed a desire to hear the truth preached and an authentic concept of Catholic social justice instead of confusing mixed messages and cultural and political concepts." Parishes try to respond to this need for catechesis, formation and evangelization training with the creation of programs, but there is a broad frustration with programs not going well or being poorly attended. This leads to the question of whether our programs are what people actually need and whether we are assessing the best way to engage with our parishioners.

Parishes identify that it is hard to get young adults or young families involved in the parish, but some recognize that many times they are not actually being invited in to participate or being challenged to do so.

As parishes shared their evangelization and mission-oriented feedback, it frequently came up that throughout the diocese, social outreach is an

integral part of our evangelization efforts. By participating in social ministry opportunities, the lay faithful are able to live out the Gospel call and to serve as witnesses of Christ's love in the community. Serving the poor leaves people feeling good and wanting to engage in more social justice. As respondents from the Central Vicariate put it, "Many participants believe that we are fed by the Eucharist to go forth in mission, both religious education and social justice, all tied back to our love for Jesus."

A widespread, deep concern is that youth and young adults are leaving the Church. Parishes readily acknowledge that the Church needs to provide greater support to these demographics. Many parishes expressed a need to



Diocesan Youth Conference 2022

provide greater, more personal support for young families in order to hand on the faith to the next generation. After teenagers receive the sacrament

of confirmation in tenth grade, there is no clear idea of how to keep them connected to faith formation or parish life. Participants at a parish in the Central Vicariate urged that we need to “nurture the young plants to stay connected to the vine grower.” Meanwhile, respondents from a Western Vicariate parish insisted that, “Faith formation of children needs to go past basic education into a deeper level of discipleship and formation.” This is compounded by the fact that it is harder to engage families in the catechesis of their own children. One Eastern Vicariate parish identified the problem as such: “The breakdown of the family at home makes it hard to partner with parents in handing down the faith to youth.” Parishes identify that it is hard to get young adults or young families involved in the parish, but some recognize that many times they are not actually being invited in to participate or being challenged to do so. Some parishes are reporting a high number of active, engaged young families and note that many of these families share that they are attending and participating due to the parish’s traditional style.

When parishes considered participation within the church and the ability of individuals to get involved as leaders and volunteers, they frequently noted the challenge of recruiting new volunteers and helping them to lead as laypeople. An inner circle of volunteers frequently dominates the parish’s key ministries which leads to the discouragement of newcomers or those looking to get involved. At the same time, this inner group of volunteers lament that they cannot find new volunteers and many people are experiencing burnout in their ministry. There is a request for training opportunities to help retain volunteers. Several parishes recognized that the best way to get people involved was through

personal invitation. Our smaller parishes shared that they do not have professional staff but are run by volunteers and that due to their size nearly everyone has a role in the community. Parishioners at a parish in the Western Vicariate shared, “We are small in numbers but have a great record of participation from our parish community. Only a small portion of our community come to Mass without being involved on another level.”

Connected to the empowerment of lay faithful to lead the parish was an understanding that the pastor has final decision-making authority. Many parishes recognized that this is the proper order of things within the hierarchy of the Church and noted that we needed to abide by this structure for order and communion. A parish in the Western Vicariate affirmed that “the priest is the ‘father of the parish’ and therefore the prime decision-maker.” While this was widely recognized, it was also frequently shared that there is a desire for more transparency and communication about decisions made by the pastor, his staff and his advisory groups.

The final trend is that of a profound loss of trust in the hierarchy of the Catholic Church due to the sexual abuse crisis. It has deeply hindered the ability of the Church to provide a convincing witness to the rest of the world. Out of this loss of trust there is a desire for the leadership of the Church to speak up in defense of the Church and our faith and for a greater level of transparency. One parish shared that the actions of others have negatively affected not only our parishioners, but also how others in the community perceive Catholics. Another said that in the face of lost credibility there is an ongoing need for acknowledgement, apology, confession and reform.

Next Steps

Numerous reports indicated the intent of parishes to use their synodal feedback as a source of reflection for months or years to come. Bishop Knestout has indicated his eagerness

for this summary to be an ongoing point of reference for diocesan offices and consultative bodies. In some cases, reports described local issues, which have already been passed along to the appropriate offices to address.





Interior of historic Pro-Cathedral of Saint Peter, established in 1834, and the second oldest church of any faith tradition in the City of Richmond.



Catholic Diocese
OF Richmond