

# Synodal Synthesis

## Region III

Archdiocese of Newark, NJ  
Archdiocese of Philadelphia, PA  
Diocese of Allentown, PA  
Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown, PA  
Diocese of Camden, NJ  
Diocese of Erie, PA  
Diocese of Greensburg, PA  
Diocese of Harrisburg, PA  
Diocese of Metuchen, NJ  
Diocese of Paterson, NJ  
Diocese of Pittsburgh, PA  
Diocese of Scranton, PA  
Diocese of Trenton, NJ

## INTRODUCTION

All dioceses across Region III participated in the diocesan phase of *For A Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission*. The methodologies and approaches used by the dioceses were similar, while also tailored to the specific needs of each. Dioceses utilized a variety of opportunities for engaging people in the synodal process, including local gatherings and listening sessions and remote/virtual listening sessions. A number of dioceses, for the sake of encouraging broader participation and providing greater access to those unable to attend sessions, also gathered feedback through online surveys. Other dioceses decided not to employ surveys as a means of feedback in order to emphasize the importance of hearing others as part of a synodal experience.

Dioceses held sessions for the faithful in parishes and with advisory bodies, as well as specific communities such as Catholic schools and universities. The planning teams for various dioceses also collaborated with a variety of groups to ensure breadth of participation and to reach individuals on the peripheries by holding listening sessions specifically for them. Such individuals and groups included religious communities, Catholic schools, high schools and universities, LGBTQ+ Catholics, abuse survivors, outreach centers and ministries, and incarcerated individuals, among others. Some of these groups, such as religious communities or groups ministering to LGBTQ+ Catholics, also organized their own synodal sessions and offered feedback to the synodal process through other channels.

A number of dioceses noted that finding ways to reach out to and engage non-active Catholics and those on the peripheries was a challenge. While participant demographics varied, the majority of participants who engaged with the process in all dioceses were members of the faithful already actively engaged in the Church. This should be taken into account when considering the input and main themes which surfaced. Topics and perspectives that arose from sessions with greater diversity, including the marginalized or groups not as involved in parish life, have also been included in this synthesis, because while such sessions may have been in the minority, they bring unique insight.

Across the board, those who engaged in synodal sessions expressed deep appreciation for the process. Comments such as “After 66 years, I’ve finally been asked for my input!” abounded. Syntheses submitted to the dioceses repeatedly requested ways to gather in a synodal way more frequently and regularly in the future.

Given the breadth of input received, this synthesis is unable to touch upon all topics that were discussed in the synodal process across the dioceses in the region. That said this synthesis captures the main themes consistently expressed in all the dioceses. The order of this listing is alphabetical and therefore does not indicate greater or lesser significance amongst the themes. All these themes surfaced repeatedly across every diocese in the region. The consistency of both hopes and concerns expressed by the members of the faithful in each of the dioceses in the region is noteworthy, and indicates that the perspectives offered in this synthesis, while

including some diocese-specific experiences, are reflective of the faithful at large in the region. All descriptive statements in this text represent the beliefs, experiences and perspectives communicated through the conversations held on the ground level and are not intended to be interpreted as statements of fact.

Collectively, the dioceses in Region III engaged in approximately 2,900 in-person listening sessions and 136 remote listening sessions, resulting in over 2,900 local syntheses. A total of approximately 43,000 people engaged in the listening sessions, and approximately 53,000 additional individuals gave feedback through online surveys. While this is a small percentage compared with the number of baptized Catholics in the region, and even compared to the number of actively practicing Catholics in the region, it nonetheless offers a sizable and significant, if not universal, perspective.

## MAIN THEMES

### **Authority and Decision Making**

The question of how decision making occurs, who is involved, and whether the status quo needs to be reconsidered for a variety of reasons came up repeatedly during the synod discussions. Despite good intentions and valiant effort, there is still a strong perception that Church leadership/hierarchy make decisions without consultation and do not listen to the faithful. Furthermore, the needs of the whole community are believed to be secondary to the needs and input of those with power and financial influence. In some of the dioceses there was the concerning feedback of a nearly universal perception that the Church rarely listens, does not want to listen, and discourages the faithful from speaking up. It was offered that true leadership and good decision-making, if they are to help the Church follow Christ more fully, require inclusion, authenticity, equality/universality and true concern for the community.

Participants spoke of the ongoing negative impact of clericalism, which affects all laity but especially women, who are still perceived as subordinate to the clergy. Many of the faithful feel unable to communicate openly and freely with parish leadership due to fear of reprisal, criticism or rebuke. Individuals who participated in various parish sessions shared that opportunities to be involved in decision-making at the parish level are lacking and that they do not feel like there is transparent communication regarding how decisions are being made, particularly related to finances. Greater transparency is needed and would be appreciated. Some discussions also emphasized how dramatically a parish changes when the pastor is moved. There was an expressed hope that parishes could become less pastor-centric and more community-centric, valued and defined not by the personality of the pastor but by an appreciation of the gifts of all parishioners, a genuine understanding of the universal baptismal call and a shared responsibility by clergy and laity alike for the life of the parish.

Reports contained several recommendations on leadership/leadership development. Specific suggestions include:

- Diversifying leadership to include more laity, in particular women, and ensuring their inclusion in administrative and decision-making roles;
- Offering better training and formation for all clergy and lay leaders (including parish councils);
- Selecting leaders based on competence for the specific office/function;
- Providing greater support for clergy (a wide range of ideas were offered, such as less frequent changes in assignment and improved co-responsibility with lay leaders to decrease administrative responsibility and increase availability to minister, while creating more space for relationship/friendship);
- Fostering a better understanding of the role of parish pastoral councils and taking steps to ensure all parishes have such councils. Most parishes have working finance councils, but not all have functioning pastoral councils;
- Some are advocating for ordaining women to the diaconate and/or priesthood.

### **Catechesis, Evangelization and Formation**

Feedback in all dioceses expressed a consistent concern regarding a lack of effective catechesis, evangelization and formation. Participants discussed ineffectiveness of current programs and the lack of overall catechetical opportunities in parishes, as well as the impact of a lack of awareness of the significant role parents and the family play in the faith formation of their children. Not all parents know the faith (Scriptures, doctrines, social teachings, etc.) well enough themselves to pass it on to their children. The closing and merging of many Catholic schools has further compounded the situation, and the parents of Catholic school children are often only marginally involved in the life of the Church. Given the lack of faith formation in many homes and other activities competing for people's time, religious education/sacramental preparation programs face the impossible task of creating a solid spiritual life rooted in the Catholic tradition and effectively teaching the doctrines of the Church in a very constrained context and time frame.

The faithful expressed different views about the nature of Church teachings. Lack of understanding or agreement regarding the teachings of the Church impacts both the ability and the motivation to participate in formation and evangelization. In the feedback received by one diocese, for example, less than half expressed belief in the teaching authority of the Church, although a majority did express belief in Jesus' moral teachings as taught by the Church. Conversations among university students indicated that they find it difficult to know what the truth really is, particularly regarding complex and controversial topics, but they desire to engage in such discussions. Teachings are often imparted without any explanation of the rationale behind the teaching.

With regard to witness and evangelization, a range of experiences and perceptions was conveyed. All agree that personal witness is very important. Some expressed how the personal witness of others played a significant role in their conversion. Sharing personal conversion

stories is a simple way of evangelizing and inviting others to consider what is possible in their own lives. Similarly, those who participate in small groups find such opportunities for faith sharing and formation to be very positive. On the other hand, many participants acknowledged that they rarely answer spiritual questions that others might have. They stated that better formation for both children and adults is needed for Catholics to feel more confident in talking about and explaining the faith. Lack of clarity regarding the mission of the Church and the laity's role also serves as an obstacle to evangelization efforts.

The Church's social teachings, described as the "best kept secret", resonate greatly with the younger generation and offer a significant and concrete way for people to connect with the Church, yet these teachings are not often talked about or taught. The Church is at her best when her ministries and charities are strong, well-functioning and known.

Few practical suggestions were offered on how to better evangelize, catechize or provide faith formation. General suggestions included focusing more on salvation and the complete message of the Gospel, increasing awareness of the significance of the "domestic Church" and addressing the urgent need for formation in family settings, such as how to read the Bible and pray. Accompanying individuals on their personal faith journeys and better utilizing homilies as opportunities to teach and provide formation were also suggested.

### **Inclusivity and Welcoming**

The significance of inclusivity and welcoming came up repeatedly in discussions across all dioceses. Many who are actively engaged in their parishes have felt personally welcomed by the Church. They identified the sense of community their parishes provided and the parish support they have experienced from their parishes throughout their lives as significant elements of what they appreciate about the faith. The ability to find a Catholic Church anywhere in the world and know that it is the same Mass being celebrated is one way that the importance of community and belonging is experienced in the Church not only locally but also globally.

At the same time feedback was received regarding the experience of those who do not feel included or welcomed at their parish. Concerns about not being welcomed were surfaced most frequently by those who are often on the peripheries or feel marginalized, including Latino Catholics and other minorities, those divorced/remarried, women, those who identify as LGBTQ+, and those with special needs. With regard to how the Church welcomes people, comments indicated that people feel a lack of hospitality. Some questioned whether the Church too often puts rules before people and whether the many different procedures and policies related to sacramental preparation could not be simplified to make sacramental life more accessible and less onerous.

Some young people expressed a willingness to volunteer and get involved at their parish but said it is difficult to do so because current ways are not easily adapted and longstanding groups do not welcome newcomers. Some parishioners who had been divorced and remarried spoke

of challenges and difficulties with the annulment process, as well as experiences of feeling judged or rejected. Some specific groups of individuals who participated in the synodal process through sessions held outside the context of a parish, such as abuse survivors and those who identify as LGBTQ+, consistently shared that they personally experience a lack of welcome and inclusion. Some LGBTQ+ Catholics said that they feel as if the Church judges them entirely on one aspect of their lives, and that this seems inconsistent with how the Church treats people in other irregular situations. Active parishioners, while feeling welcomed and included themselves, expressed concern for those who are not being welcomed or included. Discussions about inclusivity and welcoming surfaced a real tension between those who feel strongly that the Church is too judgmental/unwelcoming and those who feel equally strongly that the priority must be defending Church doctrine and discipline.

Opinions differed about what it means to be welcoming toward newcomers and the marginalized. Some suggestions focused on the need for parishes to have intentional ways to welcome, include and actively engage newcomers. Other suggestions emphasized the importance of not focusing only on parish centered activities, but also on helping those “on the way”, since everyone’s faith journey is as unique. Another repeated request was for there to be some sort of physical and/or remote “suggestion box” at both the parish and diocesan level so that people may feel free to express their perspective, while also having an anonymous way to engage. While this suggestion pertains in part to furthering synodality and two-way communication, it surfaced in the context of people feeling intimidated or being uncomfortable in expressing their views. People need to have channels to communicate in all parishes, not only in those with priests who are open to receiving feedback.

### **Listening, Communication, Engagement and Outreach**

Participants expressed great appreciation for the synodal process. They were truly grateful for the opportunity to be heard and to listen, and for the spirit of openness. The ability to sit around the table with strangers and share joys, concerns, hopes and suggestions without intense debate or fear encouraged and motivated many. “This isn’t what we do as Catholics,” was a recurring statement that expressed both surprise and appreciation of the experience. In one diocese, every listening session started with *lectio divina* using the “Road to Emmaus” (Luke 24); for many participants, it was their first time reading the Scriptures outside of Mass, as well as their first time receiving an intentional invitation to share their voice.

Many shared the sentiment that people in the Church need to be heard more often, and such opportunities should be repeated regularly. It became clear throughout the synodal process, however, that people understand “the Church” listening in different ways. There is the challenge that some view the Church as being separate from them, consisting solely/primarily of the bishops, priests and other leaders. In this perspective, participants viewed the synodal process as a way to speak to the Church, not for the Church in all her members to listen to and hear one another as they journey together.

Many participants expressed a consistent desire for the Church to meet people where they are, to reach out more effectively to the younger generation and to be more welcoming toward those who feel excluded, such as the divorced and LGBTQ+ community. Many acknowledged both that all people long for welcoming and connection and that the Church wants to be welcoming and support everyone. Listening and engagement are essential for the Church to be effective in its outreach and for people, especially those who feel excluded, to believe this outreach to be authentic.

There is a sense that greater and improved communication from the Church is needed. Many people lack awareness of opportunities that already exist on both the parish and diocesan levels. The main channels of communication used are not reaching many of the people the Church wants to engage. The average parishioner also tends to be uninformed about universal Church news and papal communications. Enhanced communications are seen as necessary to maximize awareness of all the good things that are already going on. To ensure that outreach leads to true engagement with the community, many commented that there is the need for more two-way channels of communication at both the parish and diocesan levels. It was specifically noted that achieving such two-way communications present a unique challenge for parishes comprised of various cultures. While unity is desired, language and cultural differences can make a sense of community and involvement more elusive.

Participants were universal in their sense of urgency for the Church to achieve effective ways of reaching out and engaging the community. Many expressed a sense of mourning for a lost sense of the faith as experienced in prior generations, and of uncertainty for how to move forward given the cultural landscape and absence of the faith from so many people's lives. Nevertheless, there is a strong desire to forge a new path and offer a compelling witness of faith to those who are distant, marginalized, or apathetic toward the Church or religion in general. The social teachings of the Church were again mentioned in this context since they resonate strongly with many and provide a meeting point for the Church to encounter people where they are and offer a witness to faith. Some lamented that the Church's social teachings are too often overlooked in favor of other doctrinal teachings which receive greater emphasis.

There is concern especially for the next generation. The Church's approach and communications need to be relevant to young people of all ages. Some comments focused specifically on the need for the Church to find ways to more effectively accompany and support young parents on their parenting journey.

### **The Liturgy and Sacraments**

The liturgical and sacramental life of the Church, particularly the centrality of the Eucharist, came up continually in all the dioceses as a point of unity, essential to Catholic identity, community and a life of faith. Participants expressed a deep desire and hunger for God. While perspectives differed on what constitutes "good liturgy" and what areas need renewal or better understanding, there was universal agreement on the significance of the Eucharist in the life of the Church.

At the same time, participants expressed concern that many Catholics lack a sound understanding of the liturgy or the significance of the Mass, and suggested that sound teaching regarding the Eucharist is needed. The Mass should be celebrated in a way that inspires and that offers a clearer sense that it is an act of worship. There was a recognition that members of the faithful have different preferences relating to the liturgy, such as style of music, elements of inculturation and the use of the Latin language, both with the current Roman Missal and with the Roman Missal promulgated in 1962. Many also see a need for better homilies and spoke of the importance of solid preaching as an effective way of connecting the teachings of the Church, Scriptures and daily life. While particular preferences regarding preaching and liturgy differ, there was overwhelming agreement that resources need to be committed to ensuring that the liturgy is imbued with true beauty and reverence, which transcend “style” preferences. Renewed effort, energy and resources should be directed toward the celebration of the Church’s liturgy.

### **Parish Life/Pastoral Planning**

A number of dioceses in this region have undergone parish reorganizations in the past several years. Parish mergers and the closure of church buildings have brought unique challenges to people’s faith lives and sense of community. In some Pennsylvania dioceses, the rapid succession of parish reorganizations, the release of the Grand Jury report in 2018 and the pandemic have cumulatively contributed to a sense of being lost and confused. Many shared that healing is needed. Some of the themes that came up related to parish life and planning overlap with the perspectives expressed in “Listening, Communication, Engagement and Outreach”. Many believe that parish planning structures should be established with these priorities in mind.

Participants shared time and again their gratitude for the sacramental life of the Church, which deepens their experience of unity with the universal Church and of community in their parishes. Despite many flaws, they have experienced the Church as “home”, a “place of refuge”, and a “source of great joy”. Many participants indicated that they have not been part of small faith sharing groups in their parishes. Those who have, however, have found these experiences to deepen their faith and instill in them a greater sense of belonging.

The majority of those who participated in synodal sessions are routinely engaged in parish life. They have a great desire to foster an authentic sense of Catholic community, where all are encouraged to share their gifts, and where people are accompanied through every stage of life – from youth and young adulthood to family life and seasoned/senior phases of life. This accompaniment needs to include families with members who may be deaf or suffer from intellectual and developmental disabilities.

The significance and purpose of parish pastoral and finance councils in parish life and planning also came up repeatedly. While many participants said they know parish councils exist, they do not always know who serves on the councils. A concern was also expressed that these councils



do not meet regularly enough. Beyond not being connected to their own parish councils, many stated that they feel their own dioceses to be disconnected and unresponsive to what is being expressed on the ground level. Greater transparency then is needed regarding how decisions affecting parishes are made, both within the parish itself and within the diocese.

In light of parish reorganizations and the impact of COVID-19 on parish communities, planning for the future of parish life is of great importance and must include all stakeholders. Areas requiring attention include strengthening relationships within the parish, inviting people back, encouraging active engagement, fostering vibrant ministries both within and outside the parish and increasing transparency regarding financial resources and decisions. Some expressed fear that many people are content to simply belong without being actively engaged in the life of the parish.

### **Teaching, Truth and Practice**

The importance of the teachings of the Church came up repeatedly in all dioceses and in reference to a wide number of topics. There is a shared sense that what the Church teaches is very important and plays a significant role in people's experience of the Church and understanding of Catholic identity. Knowing the Church's teachings and being able to articulate them are important for authentic dialogue. There is great desire for the truth of the faith and a realization that the Church's teachings must be preserved in the face of an increasingly secularized and morally relative world. There is a feeling that both clergy and lay faithful are fearful of speaking about faith and truth to others.

At the same time, there is confusion over what constitutes the teaching authority of the Church. Sadly, many of the faithful do not seem to believe in the Church's teaching authority. The clarity and charity, or lack thereof, of what the Church teaches has become a significant point of tension. Participants were nearly split regarding their perception of how the Church should express its teaching authority on a number of issues. Some call for the Church to speak with more unity and uniformity with respect to the sanctity of life and teachings on sexuality. Others are yearning for the Church to become less rigid and modernize its teachings and for expressions to be more inclusive of different viewpoints, lifestyles and socially-accepted norms.

Discussions in a number of dioceses highlighted a perceived gap between the Church's teaching/practice and the message of Christ and his Gospel. There is an identification of the Church with Jesus in theory, but also painful recognition that the Church is in many ways failing to communicate and reveal Jesus in reality. A felt tension was identified between needing to meet people where they are and welcome them without prejudice and needing to help them be open to the Good News of the Gospel and come to personal faith in Jesus and his Church. The Church needs to discern the balance between lovingly welcoming and lovingly challenging people, especially as the chasm between Church teaching and social norms grows.

### **Trust and Credibility of the Institutional Leadership (Hierarchy)**

Trust in the hierarchy of the Church is weak and needs to be strengthened. The sex abuse scandals and the way Church leadership handled the situation are seen as one of the strongest causes of a lack of trust and credibility on the part of the faithful. Feedback revealed the strong, lingering wound caused by the abuse of power and the physical, emotional, spiritual abuse of the most innocent in our community. There was a recognition that this pain has had a compounding effect on priests and lay ministers' willingness to develop closer relationships with the people they serve due to a fear of being misinterpreted or falsely accused. Healing and restoration of trust between the faithful and the hierarchy are greatly needed.

This topic came up in larger parish sessions and in smaller synodal meetings held with abuse survivors. This lack of trust is not only felt by survivors and their families, but by the broader Church community as well.

Discussions also highlighted issues of trust for the younger generation, who generally lack trust in institutions and institutional authority figures. This is not specific to the Church but is part of current social dynamics that nonetheless influence the relationship between young people and the Church.

### **Youth and Young Adult Ministry and Engagement**

Participants expressed a universal and strong concern regarding lack of participation in Church life by youth and young adults. All desire outreach to the young to be strongly emphasized and renewed, as they are viewed by many as the hope of the future. Some youth who participated in synodal sessions, however, stressed that they should not be seen and spoken of mostly as the future of the Church, but should be recognized for their importance now and given a significant voice in the present. They want to be both seen and heard and included more in Church life, especially by participating meaningfully in parish and diocesan councils and ministries.

Synodal session participants emphasized that the faith needs to be expressed in a way that is relevant for today. The Church must also appreciate both the challenges young people face in the current climate (mental health is one of many examples), and the values and issues which matter to them, such as diversity, acceptance and social outreach. The tendency of young people to eschew institutions in general is impacting their relationship with the Church and the degree to which they trust and accept the Church's teaching authority. They expressed, however, a real desire to engage in dialogue regarding truth and reason, and to reach clarity regarding the teachings of the Church.

### **ADDITIONAL INSIGHTS AND NEXT STEPS**

A number of insights came up repeatedly and surfaced across a number of different themes:

- As participants heard a wide variety of perspectives and opinions, they consistently commented on how divided the Catholic community has become (i.e. liturgy, politics,

moral and social teachings, etc.). Many see the Church's teaching being mixed with politics and view this as damaging and divisive. They experience this in conversations among the faithful, in comments from the pulpit, and in messaging from the bishops and USCCB. Participants pointed out that the bishops often appear polarized and that they avoid speaking out on significant issues either due to internal division or fear of public perception. They would like to see the bishops be more courageous and less political in what they communicate;

- The significance of joy in living one's faith also came up repeatedly. In all the questions on how to promote greater renewal, unity and relevance, participants emphasized the need for the Church to share this joy so that others may see that genuine, authentic joy is the fruit of a life of faith;
- People are experiencing the real consequences of a lack of priestly vocations. It is impacting the amount of work that falls on pastors and is negatively impacting their ability to build genuine relationships. Projections indicate an even steeper decline in the number of priests in the upcoming decade. Discussions on the lack of clergy also led to comments about the need to renew an understanding of vocation and vocational discernment more broadly, as applied not only to the priesthood, but also religious life and marriage;
- Ecumenism came up in a number of discussions. There is a general sense that ecumenism is neither sufficiently understood nor sufficiently valued, and yet has a key role to play in Christian witness and the mission of the Church;
- The Church is competing for the attention of its people in the midst of a plethora of other focuses – entertainment, sports, extracurricular activities and social media amongst others.

Dioceses are in a process of ongoing discernment over next steps to continue "journeying together" on the local level and in order to respond to the significant takeaways from their respective synodal syntheses.

One diocese intends to continue holding listening sessions and gathering input, and will prioritize opportunities for evangelization. It is also issuing parish-specific reports that reflect the input of each parish in the synod process and will begin issuing "state of the parish" reports on an annual basis to ensure that parishioners are aware of the opportunities and challenges of each parish.

Another diocese has identified three priorities. It is restructuring and rebuilding its outreach to youth and young adults and fostering apostolates such as Young Catholic Professionals and the Culture Project as it seeks to move from crisis to hope. It is also rebuilding its resources, bolstering formation, involving a broader range of talent inside and outside the Church, engaging the philanthropic community, and prioritizing the Deaf Apostolate and other specialized ministries. It is also working to create a culture of Missionary Discipleship through the establishment of a Commission and the creation of more formational opportunities for clergy, religious and laity.

In yet another diocese, leaders and staff are utilizing feedback from the listening sessions to forge a local synodal path to make parishes and ministries stronger. In particular, parish pastoral councils will embark on a process of learning how to do pastoral planning based on what they reported through the listening session.

The other dioceses in the region have likewise been identifying possible next steps. In truth, many of the issues and areas of suggested improvement that surfaced through the synodal process have already been known in various ways for years or even decades. Having them clearly articulated and discussed by the community will continue to help them acknowledge and accept these challenges. These synodal discussions and the fruit they have born are a graced opportunity to renew the Church in hope and recommit all her members to continuing this journey of listening to one another and discerning the action of the Holy Spirit, so to be one in Jesus Christ.