

Executive Summary from the Synodal Process



Catholic Diocese of Evansville
July 2022





July 2022

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Over the last several months, it has been a joy to listen to the people of the Diocese of Evansville share their experience of how God has been present and active in their lives. It is clear that there is a great treasure in the hearts of our people that often goes unnoticed and unappreciated. It is our hope that the work we have done in doing our part to prepare for the 2023 Synod of Bishops on Synodality will not only be an offering to the Universal Church, but a starting point for more intentional dialogue with our people. We need to find more ways to highlight the great cloud of witnesses who simply and often silently bear witness to Christ.

One of the most striking aspects of this process was the initial challenge for participants to speak of their own experience of God. Though this changed as the sessions progressed, it is clear that teaching people how to look at their own experience and to reflect on those experiences is much needed. The immediate tendency for most was to criticize structures or their parish's way of doing things. Setting the sessions within the context of prayer proved to be a very important way of helping people to look inward and consider their own journey with God.

Overall, those who engaged in the process experienced wonderful facilitators who listened to them and shared a sense of gratitude that the Church cared about what was happening in their lives. Our experience suggests that more frequent opportunities to gather and speak about faith and its relevance to life would prove very useful for the people of our Diocese and may help people to be more confident in witnessing to the faith. It is our hope that this process will be a helpful step as we seek to better understand the needs of our people and how best to respond.

We want to express our deep appreciation to all those who took part in our listening sessions or our online survey. Your contributions have provided a solid foundation on which to build future endeavors that seek to acknowledge the power and presence of God.

In Communion,

Very Rev. Alex Zenthoefer
Diocesan Synod Contact

Megan Erbacher Farris
Diocesan Synod Contact



INTRODUCTION



The Diocese of Evansville conducted over 25 listening sessions throughout its 12 counties in Southwestern Indiana. We also offered the opportunity to complete an online survey, made available on our diocesan website and shared by parishes. There were over 600 people who participated in either a listening session or completed an online survey. At the same time, we realize that there were still those who were not heard. We hope that ongoing efforts at synodality will result in a deeper relationship among the people of our Diocese.

A team of 16 lay facilitators were trained to guide the listening sessions and generate a synthesis for each session. These syntheses were used, along with the feedback from the online surveys, to create a synthesis, which was submitted to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Those who facilitated the listening sessions were also invited to review this synthesis to ensure its accuracy. This Executive Summary summarizes what we discovered throughout this process.

EUCHARIST



The Eucharist was the predominant theme that emerged from the People of God in the Diocese of Evansville.

The Eucharist as source and summit of our faith |

“It is through the Eucharist that Christ makes himself present in our lives.” The people of our Diocese strongly emphasized the importance of encountering Christ in the Eucharist. It is through Christ that we come to know and understand ourselves and our mission in the world.

The Eucharist as the font of unity | *“The Eucharist strengthens us to live our faith in community.”* The Eucharist brings a wide diversity of individuals

together, strengthening us as a family in Christ, who in receiving the Eucharist are then sent out to act.

The Eucharist as a place of sustenance | The Eucharist is what helps us listen: it is what puts us in front of Jesus so that we can listen to Him. We are fed not only by the Most Holy Body and Blood of the Lord, but we are fed by the companionship that sustains us in our mission of discipleship.

PARISH LIFE



“I need others to live a full life.” Many people shared that their parish community is a source of joy in their lives. We journey together by participating in Mass and through opportunities to share our faith with each other through programs and retreats, working at parish picnics and serving in various ministries within the Church.



The involvement essential to community | Our people acknowledge their need to play an active role in their parish. It is by being actively engaged that our people appreciate their parish more and are more attentive to the needs of their brothers and sisters. This creates a place where one feels as though they are “*building God’s kingdom*” and given an opportunity to get to know others who are Christ-centered.

Being creative to stay connected | Our Diocese and our local parishes must be open to new methods of evangelization and faith formation. The pandemic gave

us an opportunity to become a domestic Church and to grow in faith with our own families.

Outreach | For those who have returned to Mass and parish life, there is joy in being together again, in belonging to a community, praying together and in fellowship. However, there is such a need to evangelize because many people have not yet returned. Some expressed their disappointment that they do not feel included or welcome in their parish community.

ECCLESIAL MOVEMENTS



“*By being involved in smaller groups, we are more effective in journeying together.*” The following movements and retreats were identified by our people as having a substantial impact on their lives: Cursillo, Christ Renews His Parish, Teens Encounter Christ, Communion and Liberation, Source and Summit, The Christian Family Movement, Renew, and Why Catholic?

Sharing life and changing culture | The relationships formed through these experiences have given great strength and encouragement to the faithful as they strive to live holy and inspiring lives. People value a space where they can ask questions about the struggles of life and be able to support others on their journey of faith. Many dedicated people take these opportunities seriously and are changing the culture around them.

An entry point into the life of the Church | These movements and retreats provide an entry point for many who are still searching for a place to belong. For many, they are the avenues through which people

discover the Presence of Christ in their daily experience at work, school or home. Furthermore, they often introduce the faithful into the broader life of the Church, allowing them to gain perspective on the fullness of the Body of Christ.

A place to deepen one’s spiritual life | Spiritual practices are an important element to these movements and retreats. The uniqueness of each charism provides for greater flourishing and opens new opportunities for expressing the faith in a relevant and meaningful way in our culture today. People not only want to belong to a place; they also want to be led into something deeper.

ACCOMPANIMENT



“*I believe God is asking us to come together as a family and take care of each other.*” There was a sense among our people that, as Catholics, we are being asked to be part of a larger community and to be in relationship with one another. There is a real desire to be welcoming and accompany new people, but also an awareness that we sometimes



fail in this regard because of fear, uncertainty or discomfort. But, we can be better ambassadors of the faith; God is asking us to speak of our faith to those who are hungry for something more than the world can give.

Journeying together | The desire to be welcoming was part of a larger theme of unity. There was a sense among some of our people that disunity is a significant threat in the Church. Our people see a real need to live in community with others because we are social people. Parish members must feel that they belong to a rich community where valuing, not evaluating, is at our core and all are empowered to participate.

Supporting our brothers and sisters in Christ | The experience of walking with others has offered mutual support and friendship among people in our Diocese and parishes. God is trying to teach us to realize how important we are to each other and not to take anything for granted. He wants us to realize that we are all His children and that our faith in Him and love of each other is the most important thing we share.

COVID



The COVID-19 pandemic caused our people a lot of sadness and distress as churches were closed in an effort to keep everyone safe and healthy. It led to feelings of frustration and anger toward the Church, and many expressed a profound loss at the absence of the sacraments. The desire that churches not be “closed” again was a point of significant emotion and concern.

Adjusting to virtual Masses and services | The pandemic may have taken away the feeling of unity within the Church family and community, but many expressed gratitude that parishes provided services online. Some said they experienced more time quietly reflecting on God’s Word. The pandemic paved the way for a deeper yearning to be near Jesus at a time when no one was allowed in the Church. The Eucharist was deeply missed by all, and the human connection to people wasn’t felt via virtual Mass.

Missing the parish community | It was painful to see our churches closed and to not receive the Holy Eucharist, but it did bring some people closer to God because we needed to depend on Him throughout the isolation felt by so many. Although the Eucharist was deeply missed, the time without it challenged our people to not take the value of the Eucharist for

granted. It also allowed us to become a stronger domestic Church, and to grow in faith with our own families, making good use of all kinds of media and resources. Further, our priests missed the opportunities to be with other priests at convocation, support groups, presbyterate meetings, etc.

Lessons learned | Many people still have not returned to the Church and many of the school families are no longer involved. Some got comfortable being home, and it’s hard to convince them that it is worth returning to Mass. The pandemic allowed increased time for reflection and intimacy with God in a deeper manner; however, we need to come together in person to celebrate who we are as Catholics.



CHURCH MISSION & METHODS



With regard to the Church and her mission and methods, there were a number of themes highlighted by our people. On one side, their comments show a great love for the Church and the immense value of their faith; while at the same time, there is some frustration with the Church: dealing with everything from lengthy processes, seemingly meaningless protocols and a perceived lack of leadership.

A Church that listens | A number of our people focused on the need for the Church to be pastoral, that is, to listen to and care for people. Some felt that the Church was too focused on rules to the point that it created hardship for people who were seeking annulments or even entry into the Church through the RCIA.

A missionary Church | There was concern among some that the Church is too focused on making money and not focused enough on evangelization. People expressed a desire to be engaged in the life of the parish and to make their contribution by offering themselves in service of others. However, they want to be led by their bishops and pastors, so that they know they are not alone in those efforts. Many

expressed a longing to see the Church stand firm in her identity and defend her teachings, especially in the public square.

A servant Church | There were a number of interventions that expressed the need for the Church to be at the service of the world: to be a source of light and wisdom to a culture that is lost. There was a call for humility among bishops and priests alike, as well as a willingness to share the load of responsibility with the laity. Young people in our Diocese also expressed a concern for greater unity among Christians and how we as Catholics can seek greater solidarity with people of other faiths.

REMAINING CHALLENGES



There were a number of challenges that emerged from our listening sessions and online survey. They are difficult to categorize, but they certainly impact the life and ministry of the Diocese of Evansville.

1. Many have left the Church, partly as a result of the pandemic and partly due to the merging of parishes in the past decade. What are we doing to bring them back?
2. There is a concern about the effectiveness and pastoral care of our priests. While many expressed gratitude for their priests and their ministry, others felt priests were too clerical and disconnected from the needs of their people.
3. Some expressed the need to better understand how the laity can be empowered to assist with the governance and life of the Church. Priests are given much responsibility, but perhaps this could be better shared with the laity.
4. Some noted that the Church needs to be more inclusive, which includes the role of women in the Church, those who are divorced and remarried as well as being more responsive to the needs of those who are homosexual or transgender. Others fear that this will lead to a Church without a moral compass or that it is a sign that the Church is bending to the norms of the culture.



5. Some expressed the concern that priests take too much liberty with the liturgy by changing the words and not celebrating it in the proper form, thus creating division and confusion among the people.
6. One great challenge seems to be unity within the Church, in our nation and in our Diocese. People are experiencing great anxiety about the rampant division in our nation. In our own Diocese, there is a fear of polarization and discord among laity and clergy alike.
7. There were divergent views on the liturgy: some expressing a strong desire for Mass in the Extraordinary Form and while others desire more freedom within the liturgy.
8. While some expressed a greater desire for synodal dialogue, others felt that it has only created confusion and anxiety for the future of the Church.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS



This experience of intentionally listening to our people and inviting the gift of the Holy Spirit to shed light on our experience has offered some important insights into the lives of our people. We conclude this synthesis with observations on the process itself and the possibilities that it offers.

The challenge of speaking from

experience | This process of asking people to speak from their experience about their relationship with God revealed how difficult it is for people, laity and clergy alike, to reflect on what God is doing in their lives. It was clear that people were more inclined to bring only complaints to listening sessions. There is much work to do to help people reflect on their experience of God and learn from that encounter.

The importance of being heard | It has been some time in our Diocese since we have listened to our people for reasons other than capital campaigns or parish reorganization. People appreciated the fact that the Diocese was listening to them and was concerned about their lives. Moving forward, it will be important

for our Diocese to continue to provide opportunities for people to speak about their faith.

Faith as a lived experience | The final observation is the need and desire for faith to be a lived experience. Our people want to understand how their faith relates to life and what relevance it has to their families, their work and their leisure. This is not only a desire of our people, but it is a need, as well, for the unchurched or disaffiliated in our community. Without an education on how to listen to God speaking to them through everyday circumstances, faith becomes reduced to moral requisites or ethereal piety. We look forward to continuing this work of synodality in our Diocese as a way of furthering our dependence on God, deepening our unity with one another and sharing the fruits the Holy Spirit is bringing about in our midst.