

Synthesis of Parish Synod Consultation Sessions

Parish Name: The Cathedral of Saint Mary of the Annunciation

City: Cape Girardeau

Parish Listening Sessions Synod on Synodality

- College-age Students via Zoom: 2/22/22 8:00 pm- 9:00 pm
- Parish: 3/16/22 6:30-8:00 pm and 3/20/22 1:00-2:30 pm
- High School: At Notre Dame 3/29/22 During lunch hours 11:36-1:17 / Also March Youth Group meeting
- St. Mary School Families and Teachers: 4/25/22 During Home and School Meeting 7:00-8:30

Total Attendance: 106

How were the invitations issued?

Parish: Bulletin, announcements after mass, a postcard sent to each parish family, Facebook, parish website, personal invitation

College: Through Remind, email, text, parish bulletin, personal invitation

High school: Parish bulletin, email, Remind, personal invitation, morning announcements at NDHS

Noteworthy participation

Participants at parish listening sessions were primarily regular church attendees who take advantage of the opportunities offered by St. Mary. The same is true for the college session - regular attendees who are involved either in the parish, local Newman Center, or both. The high school session that was facilitated at Notre Dame and the session that took place at the Home and School meeting were able to reach individuals who were not regular churchgoers. Notre Dame has sixty-three parish members who attend the high school. Only nineteen chose to attend the lunch discussion. The high school attendees were given a survey in which only six self-identified as regular church attenders. The Home and School meeting for the grade school was a good mix of practicing Catholics, lapsed Catholics, and non-Catholics. There was not much participation from parish members under 45 years of age except in the targeted groups.

Growing in Holiness

Many individuals in the sessions expressed appreciation for the multitude of traditional practices that St. Mary offers: Adoration, Benediction, Stations of the Cross, Novenas, devotions to Our Lady of Perpetual Help, weekly praying of the Divine Mercy Chaplet, and daily masses. These were recognized as being beneficial to the growth of holiness. It was also noted that St. Mary provides many opportunities to receive the sacraments and attend mass. Parish members felt that these bedrock faith expressions, combined with a knowledgeable pastor who outwardly displayed reverence for the Eucharist, the office of the priesthood, and the Church aided in their personal growth of holiness and the Catholicity of the parish as a whole.

The reviews were mixed on the challenges that affect the growth of holiness. Some of the participants wanted to bring back some of the traditions that were changed in the Canon Law by both St. Pope John Paul II and Pope Francis; citing the lack of reverence for the Eucharist displayed in inappropriate attire and the increase of female participation in the mass as the reasons for “lukewarm” Catholicism and the decrease in vocations to the priesthood. They felt that due to “pastoral error” in the hierarchy of the Church that this break in tradition was prohibiting them from experiencing the true holiness possible in the liturgy and was perpetuating a “cafeteria-style” Catholicism.

Roughly half of the participants expressed the feeling that a perceived lack of dynamic programming in the parish was frustrating or disappointing. They want to experience a wider variety of programs that meet the diverse needs of the parish community. There was a recognition that programs needed to engage, edify and encourage members in multiple age groups and marital status groups, while mentoring the participants with respect to their personal place in their faith journey.

The data and comments supported a strong desire that dynamic programs be developed for youth starting at a young age, to address not only faith topics, but encourage fellowship, the development of supportive friendships, and defending against the secular aspects of the world. Participants would also like to

see adult programs aimed at divorced individuals, single parents, young adults, women, and men so all people feel welcome and supported no matter their unique life state. Finally, the opinion was expressed that the parish should attempt to minister to the whole family to encourage faith growth in the entire household.

One of the big takeaways from these sessions was participant recognition that programs of this nature require full-time commitment and dedicated resources for planning, development, communication and execution. It was felt that a full-time ministerial position should be established to support this vision. Childcare resources are also a critical piece of ensuring participation by members, volunteers, and paid staff.

All participants agreed that a lack of knowledge of catechesis and apologetics was affecting the growth of holiness. They would like some opportunities to learn more about the faith. Some of the suggestions were opening up RCIA classes to all parish members, or hosting weekly information sessions during Lent. Parish members felt that a better understanding of the faith and traditions would help make everyone feel more welcome in the parish.

Forming Intentional Discipleship

Participants agree that St. Mary offers a wide variety of activities that encourage intentional discipleship. Some of the mentioned highlights were: the existence of a parish grade school, an active RCIA program, morning and evening book studies, and high school and junior high youth groups. The youth were thankful to have opportunities to participate in retreats, Steubenville, and the Diocesan Youth Conference. Parish members felt Fr. Allan frequently makes himself available to answer questions, provides helpful information in his homilies, and encourages the use of parish resources and partaking the sacraments. They also concurred that a variety of educational materials are available in the Maria Room.

On the surface, there is a lot of activity happening in the parish on a daily basis. However, a number of the people participating in the sessions felt that the programs available through the parish need to be reevaluated to determine if they were meeting the needs of the parish community. Synod participants suggested a deeper look at the existing programs and possible exploration of new programs. It would also benefit the parish to become "linked in" to already existing programs in the area for high school youth, college youth, and various other groups.

A number of parish members participate in a volunteer capacity supporting formal programs, planned activities, and unplanned events. Many expressed feelings of being overwhelmed by the need to develop program material, as well as single-handedly encourage participation by members, while also juggling personal time commitments and family responsibilities. This creates a level of frustration from an inability to raise their programs to a level that would foster lasting fellowship and discipleship among participants. Pastoral support is always present and volunteers feel appreciated by the pastor, but the success of the program lies heavily on each individual volunteer.

Being Sent to Witness

St. Mary has many programs in place that witness the Catholic faith to the community. The food pantry was regarded as the most consistent outreach among all the groups participating. In addition to the Catholic Social Ministry Food Pantry, the Angel Tree Ministry, outreach to the homebound and nursing home residents, support of Birthright and Life House, and utility assistance programs were all regarded as positive ways in which St. Mary reaches out to some of the marginalized groups in society. Participants also felt St. Mary did an excellent job witnessing within the parish. They noted the ringing of the bells, Fr. Allan always dressed in clerics, bereavement dinners, the traveling Fatima statue, and the weekly radio mass allowed members to experience the mission of the church.

Parish members felt the biggest obstacle to St. Mary's ability to witness was the lack of personal invitation. While they all agreed the programs run by the church were excellent, it was the opinion of the groups that witnessing was not occurring on a personal level. Many of the participants had never been invited to participate in the ministries of St. Mary. They stated bulletin announcements were not personal, and they would be more likely to participate if personally asked. A personal invitation was especially important for the youth and new members of the parish. There were many suggestions for welcome committees and establishing mentor families to connect with new parish families.

The second most identified obstacle in being sent to witness was a lack of knowledge of the practical implications of this commission. The question that continually came up was “How do we share the faith with different people in different life situations?” Synod participants felt they needed help with the "how" to evangelize. The usual answer is "to live the faith" but that doesn't seem to be enough. They felt unequipped to witness the faith or even talk about the faith when they didn't fully grasp or know the church's teachings on a topic. They also felt that a pastoral approach needed to be taught to the parish members. Even in the small groups, many members were unwilling to compromise their position on how the presentation of faith should occur.

Summation

The synod highlighted many things that St. Mary is doing well in the areas of increasing holiness, intentional discipleship, and Catholic witness. The wide variety of liturgical activities and programs combined with active community outreach brought to light the many ways in which the parish is sharing the Catholic faith with both its members and the larger community. The participants respect the leadership of the pastor and appreciated his willingness to share the faith and help others grow in their faith journey. Practical and thoughtful ideas were offered to help improve the parish's ministries.

The most surprising insight gained from the synod was the amount of polarization that exists within the parish. A large percentage of the participating members supported an unwavering presentation of staunch tradition, while others wanted indiscriminate diversity and acceptance even when it was contrary to church teachings. Very few “moderate” parishioners chose to attend the sessions

There was quite a bit of blaming Pope Francis and the College of Bishops, while adoration was expressed, by both ends of the spectrum, for priests who speak out against the Pope, changes that have occurred in Canon Law, and the Church's teachings on contemporary issues. Very few of the small group participants seemed willing to consider that unity and diversity are intrinsic to Catholic self-identity and the identity of the parish.

There were many legitimate concerns raised during this process about programming and possible future opportunities that could be offered in the parish. The desire of many to feel more connected to the parish through fellowship, worship, and education indicates that positive growth and change are possible. While it is impossible to implement all of the programs mentioned, most groups agreed that an immediate focus should be directed at family ministry and the junior high and below age group. The hope is that by expressing the importance of faith enrichment at a young age will encourage sustainability in the faith through the teenage, college, and adult years.

There is a need for healing, and it comes from within the walls of the parish. In every session participants were able to identify different groups of people who felt unwelcome in the parish. As the parish moves forward it is important to explore different avenues to extending fellowship and a renewed sense of community to all members. Diligent efforts to unite divergent voices in the commonality of prayer, will demonstrate to the parish and the community how Christ's identity is intertwined in His Church.