

Synthesis of Consultation Sessions



Diocese of Springfield-Cape Girardeau, Missouri



SUBMITTED BY:

+ Edward M. Rice

Most Reverend Edward M. Rice
Bishop of Springfield-Cape Girardeau

Lynn Melendez

Lynn Melendez
Diocesan Coordinator for the Synod on Synodality

INTRODUCTION

In 2021, the Diocese of Springfield-Cape Girardeau rolled out a new call to parishes to “Move from Maintenance to Mission.” When introducing this call, Bishop Edward Rice invited pastors and their Parish Pastoral Council members to orientation workshops which explained what a missionary disciple looked like and gave some practical steps for building parishes of missionary disciples. They were then tasked with evaluating the effectiveness of current evangelization and discipleship efforts within the parish and concurrently developing a new Pastoral Plan for their parish which would possibly change and expand some of those efforts.

Shortly after the roll out of this plan, the Synod on Synodality came into play. Bishop Rice chose to use the Synod as an opportunity for pastors and parish council members to gather in consultation sessions with parishioners, where they could learn from the experiences and insights of the larger parish membership. Through participation in the synodal process, the parishes and institutions of the Diocese of Springfield-Cape Girardeau were able to both contribute to the world-wide discussion on synodality and use the process to further explore and develop our diocesan priorities of: “growing in holiness, forming intentional disciples, and being sent forth to witness” as the parishes of the diocese strive to “move from maintenance to mission”.

Every parish and Catholic Campus Ministry Center in the diocese were invited to host in-person synodal dialogue sessions. Information and training were given to conduct the sessions. Fifty-nine of the eighty-three parishes and mission churches held consultation sessions. Three out of four college campus ministry groups also held sessions. Additionally, the religious sisters of the diocese gathered for a day of reflection and dialogue.

The diocesan offices issued invitations to all parishioners of the diocese to participate in a session of their choice by posting all dates and locations for dialogue sessions on the diocesan website and Facebook page, and in the diocesan newspaper and newsletter. Pastors were given bulletin inserts to distribute as well as postcards to mail out to everyone within their parish boundaries. They were further encouraged to use social media and local media outlets to publicize the meeting date and time in their particular communities. Smaller parishes in particular extended invitations through “word of mouth” and phone calls.

Feedback on the structure, content, and proceedings of each dialogue session was generally positive and participants found it to be a fruitful process for their individual parish or institution. For some, this was a first-time experience of synodality and they expressed their enjoyment in having constructive dialogue with their fellow parishioners. Although strong emotions and disagreements arose at times, respectful and empathetic dialogue seemed to be consistent throughout the majority of the consultation sessions. Many parishes expressed the desire to utilize a synodal process on a continual basis as they plan for future ministry within the parish and outreach to the community.

When preparing for the diocesan roll out of our “Move from Maintenance to Mission” plan, sacramental records and parish registration records from the last twenty years in the diocese were reviewed. They revealed a slow and steady decline of active Catholics. The statistics were validated by the discussion which ensued during the Synod consultation sessions. Many participants appreciated the opportunity to share their disappointment and grief for the growing number of family members and friends who have walked away from the Church. Some of the reasons for leaving the Church were described as: getting married to someone of a different religion, no longer agreeing with Church teaching, being hurt by a leader or member of the church, not trusting organized religion in general, or they just slowly drifted away from the Church and it is no longer a priority. Some loved ones that left the Church felt unwelcome in the Church because of their lifestyle choices or disagreements with Church leaders or Church teachings. Others never experienced a sense of belonging in the parish community and found it easy to walk away.

CoVid-19 made ministry challenging and intensified the already existing decline of participating Catholics in the past two years. Synod consultations often included some argumentative discussion on whether or not churches should have every been closed. However, participants seemed to agree on one central point, that parishes now need to bring back or create a new sense of community and fellowship within their local parish and in the greater Church. They recognized the need to foster a more welcoming atmosphere where the doors of the church are open to all people without judgment; a place where people are “known” and loved as sons and daughters of God. When a sense of belonging is established, the people of God will move forward and journey together in “holiness, discipleship and witness.”

THE JOURNEYING COMPANIONS

Through the synodal process in the Diocese of Springfield-Cape Girardeau, the Holy Spirit opened the eyes of participants to recognize that the Church and specifically parish communities are currently not journeying with all people, of all ages, genders, races, etc. Participation in the consultation process predominantly came from the most active parishioners. It was very difficult to draw in disengaged Catholics and non-Catholics. Those parishes that commented on reasons for lack of participation stated that some individuals chose not to participate because they were either not interested or they did not understand the purpose of the Synod. Although disappointed by the low response, many did not seem surprised. They made comments about the “same twenty people” showing up for parish activities. However, the lack of participation led to fruitful dialogues exploring why others are not actively participating in the parish and it encouraged some beginning dialogue on how to change that scenario.

The highest percentage of participation in consultation sessions came from the age group of forty years and older. Notably missing from the parish consultation sessions were

young adults, ages eighteen to forty. Speculation on reasons for which this age group did not participate included: this age group is not normally actively engaged in parish activities at this time, they had busy schedules and did not have time to attend the gathering, or they did not understand the purpose or had no interest in participating in this Synod.

Synod participants expressed disappointment in not being able to get the input from this age group. They believe the young adults are becoming less engaged with the Church overall, yet they are the ones who are especially tasked with carrying on the faith and spreading the Gospel message to the children now and in the future. Participants reported their concern over the decline in the number of young single adults and in the number of parents coming to Mass with their children. The discussion on the decline of young adults sparked the desire to explore ways to better connect with and encourage the single and young married adults in their communities.

Also notably missing from the consultation sessions were the seven parishes with heavily Hispanic populations. The facilitation instructions and questions for holding a consultation session were distributed in Spanish to all pastors and parishes. However, the majority of Hispanic communities chose not to participate in the dialogue process. Two pastors commented that their Hispanic communities were disillusioned with the lack of results from the V Encuentro process that occurred in the diocese several years ago and they did not want to go through a similar process without results again. It was determined that the diocesan staff will need to do follow up with these communities to learn more about why they chose not to respond and to create other opportunities for dialogue with them. The Church is at a great disadvantage when the voice of this fast-growing population is not being heard.

College age students who gathered at campus ministry centers to participate in a consultation session, identified that they were again the ones who are most active in their parish and/or campus ministry programs. Through their time of dialogue, campus ministry groups recognized that their communities may tend to appear unwelcoming of others. They wait for Catholics to seek them out but do not often actively go out and invite others to join them. They recognized that there are many non-believers on campus with whom they do not or make connections.

College students stated that they did not have a strong presence on the college campuses, nor were they participating as a group in many of the main campus activities. Outnumbered by Protestant groups and those students who do not identify with a religion, Catholic campus ministry students often feel intimidated about sharing their faith. The consultation sessions motivated them to be more involved as a group on the main campus, giving them opportunities to be more visible to students and promote campus ministry. Their dialogue fostered a conviction to be evangelizers on campus so that they may draw in those who may not yet know Jesus, invite others to journey with them in relationship with Jesus

through the Catholic Church, and also correct some of the misconceptions about the Catholic faith with other groups on campus.

A majority of parish consultation sessions, campus ministry sessions, and the religious sisters' session identified specific groups of people with whom they believe the global Church as well, as their local church, is not fully communicating or journeying. First, the elderly and disabled are often restricted in their ability to participate in a parish community due to their physical limitations and/or lack of transportation. Some parishes offer homebound ministry but not all are on the list for help and not all parishes offer consistent ministry. It was mentioned that parishes also need to be mindful of how they can better welcome and accommodate those with physical and mental disabilities at the parish facility. Elderly and disabled may easily feel disconnected from the faith community if ministry for them is not planned and carried out.

Secondly, there was great concern for those who are grieving a loss through divorce or death of a family member. Discussions pointed out that those most in need of accompaniment are sometimes not assisted by the Church. Some who are divorced left the Church because they thought divorce excluded them from the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church. There is also great misunderstanding and frustration regarding the annulment process. Participants dialogued about the need to invite and welcome divorcees back to the Church and then gently provide Church teaching in regard to divorce and the annulment process. Additionally, they stated that Church should be a loving and supportive community journeying with those who are grieving in time of divorce or death. Support groups and mentors could be helpful.

Some discussion included how to accompany those, who by their lifestyle, may be living outside of Catholic teaching. The LGBTQ community, those cohabitating without being married, and those who advocate for political views in opposition to the Church were groups specifically mentioned. Many found it challenging to welcome such individuals in the Church or were unsure of how to invite them in or begin a relationship with them. The majority seemed to agree that parishes need to work harder at building some type of outreach to these individuals, but the Church should not compromise on any Church teaching while trying to create those connections. Some stated they would like training on how to evangelize with these groups.

SPEAKING OUT

Through a synodal process, all participants have the invitation to speak out. Those who participated in the consultation sessions overwhelmingly reported that they enjoyed having a fruitful dialogue where everyone was given the opportunity to speak and be heard with empathy and respect. It allowed individuals to describe the joys, challenges, and hurts they have experienced in the Catholic Church, in a receptive environment. Participants were able to get to know one another's journey, fostering a greater sense of community. Further, it

encouraged participants to begin discerning how they can best minister to one another as a parish/campus community.

Some voiced concern that their contributions to the consultation sessions may not be heard beyond their own parish. They expressed the hope that the local diocese and greater Church will listen and respond to the concerns of even the smallest parish in Southern Missouri.

Synod participants conveyed that it is challenging to try to speak out and share their faith convictions in the mainstream society which some described as full of anger, mistrust, disrespect, and division. Many of the faithful face opposition or retaliation. They are additionally challenged in sharing their faith in this geographic area of the United States which is often referred to as the Bible Belt. The overall Catholic population is less than five percent and Protestant religions are dominant. There are many misconceptions about the Catholic faith and mistrust of the Catholic Church among other faith communities which makes it challenging to speak out.

Several reports from dialogue sessions stated that Catholics are frustrated with some priests, Bishops, and the Pope. These leaders are considered to be the voices of the Church, heard not only in Catholic media but also in mainstream media. Consultation participants expressed frustrations over the contradiction and opposition in what is stated (or has gone unstated) by various Church leaders, sighting that it causes confusion and division for Catholics and others. Additionally, it is believed that some Bishops and priests live hypocritical lives delivering a silent message that sets examples contrary to Church teaching. Lastly, participants would like Church leaders to more boldly speak out on societal and political issues which involve morals and justice.

CELEBRATING/GROWING IN HOLINESS

A common thread through all of the consultation reports was that Catholics look toward the Mass and the celebration of the sacraments as a way of experiencing the presence of God and growing in holiness. The presence of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament draws people to the Catholic Church. Gratitude was expressed for those parishes which offer frequent opportunities for Mass, Confession, Adoration, and prayer. Additionally, reports conveyed appreciation for those pastors and parishes who spend time making liturgy beautiful and engaging through the environment, music, and effective preaching.

Some participants made note of their appreciation for having a priest who takes the time to prepare homilies which are inspirational and educational. Several participants expressed the desire to have more homilies which: 1. break down and explain the readings 2. draw in the Catechism and Catholic teaching, and 3. address moral issues they are facing in society today. As the religious sisters' report stated, "A gentle reminder for priests to prepare homilies as we are in a mission territory and for many people, the Sunday Mass is their only time they are being spiritually fed."

There were areas of disagreement on what constitutes a beautiful and engaging liturgy. For example, some wish to offer a Mass targeted toward young families and youth which has more contemporary music, while others stated that the use of more traditional sacred music to encourage greater reverence would be a better choice. Two reports notated a desire to return to some of the practices that existed at Mass before Vatican II. Most parish reports identified the need for various styles of worship to be inclusive of different ages and backgrounds. Through the dialogues, participants were made aware of how the different nuances in celebrating Mass touch each person differently. Perhaps each parish will be encouraged to further explore what beautiful and engaging liturgy means for their particular community.

Some participants expressed the desire for the Church to further explore women's roles in the liturgy and in ministry. They asked for the consideration of allowing priests to get married or to allow women to be ordained. Other participants disagreed or were unsure about these suggestions.

Overall, the participants shared their common desire to make the Mass inviting and welcoming for all. Descriptions of being welcoming included having greeters at the door to welcome everyone or identifying visitors before Mass and asking a parishioner to introduce themselves and sit with them at Mass to answer any questions they may have. Creating a welcoming environment would allow visitors and new parishioners to more fully participate in the Mass and experience the presence of God in the Word, communal prayer, and in the breaking of the bread. It would also foster a sense of familial community which would entice them to return.

FORMING FOR MISSION / FORMING INTENTIONAL DISCIPLES

Consultation participants were encouraged to dialogue about how their parish or campus ministry community is helping to form intentional disciples. An intentional disciple is defined as, "someone that has consciously chosen an intimate relationship with Christ and chooses to live a life which reflects that relationship." Most parishes named Parish catechetical programs for children, Bible Study groups, RCIA, parish missions, and diocesan programs such as Camp Re-New-All and Totus Tuus, as current means of forming intentional disciples.

Some also described the importance of having a dedicated pastor who was readily available pastorally to his parishioners while also providing educational and formational opportunities during the Mass and beyond. It was noted that Jesus formed disciples through relationships and pastors often do the same. Those that share a pastor with another parish or who have had frequent pastor changes commented on the challenges that brings.

A majority of reports declared the need for ongoing education on various facets of Catholic teaching, the Catechism, Apologetics, and Scripture Study for all age groups. They

want a better understanding of these topics so the faithful may more confidently live as disciples of Christ and share the faith with others. Additionally, they desire training and formation on the practical steps for sharing the Catholic faith with others. Numerous consultation reports indicated that participants believed they lacked the confidence and knowledge of how to go about evangelizing.

Two hindrances to forming intentional disciples were frequently mentioned. First, the shut down and restrictions due to CoVid-19 caused a lot of people to walk away from going to Mass and active participation in parish ministry. Participants spoke of those who have not returned because they still have fears of spreading illnesses. But the general consensus was that people got too comfortable away from the parish and have not made it a priority to return. Many Catholics felt hurt, frustrated, or even angry that churches were completely shut down during the pandemic. Concern for those who are still “missing,” provoked dialogue about how to be more intentional with finding them and drawing them back to the parish.

Secondly, parents are not bringing their families to Mass or parish ministries on a regular basis. Other activities such jobs or sports have made for busy schedules and become priorities for some families. There is great concern over the growing number of young people who leave the Church at an early age and it is believed that lack of parental support and involvement has some bearing on that. Participants voiced a strong desire to engage parents and families in life long faith formation to foster intentional discipleship.

Additionally, parishes would like to have access to more retreats, guest speaker presentations, and parish missions which would spiritually form parishioners. The suggestion of joining with other parishes or creating diocesan events for such opportunities was mentioned. These types of activities, if promoted widely, could also be an outreach opportunity to those not currently attending Mass.

Repeatedly, the need for building community and fellowship while growing in knowledge was stressed throughout the dialogue sessions. Especially after the isolation from the pandemic, individuals desire connection. Offering simple community gatherings for dinner and fellowship was mentioned. Developing small group Bible Studies, prayer groups, Catechism study groups, etc. for various age groups, were suggestions found in almost every report. Synod participants described small faith groups as a place for sharing individual faith journey experiences with one another and learning from one another’s insights and experiences while also being educated through the book, video, or live speaker presentation being used to facilitate the session.

BEING SENT FORTH TO WITNESS/DIALOGUE AND INTERACTION WITH SOCIETY AND OTHER CHRISTIAN DENOMINATIONS

The parishes of Springfield-Cape Girardeau diocese are actively involved in serving those in need. Just a few of the activities described were: food pantry, jail ministry, Giving/Angel Tree, assisting pregnancy centers, offering warming shelters during cold weather, hot meals for homeless, assist Meals on Wheels, and assistance to victims of natural disasters. It was pointed out that the Knights of Columbus and PCCW organizations in our diocese do many service projects and outreach to those in need as well. Dialogues about the ways the Church physically serves the needs of others seemed joyful and hopeful. Many admitted that promotion and communication about such opportunities could be expanded so that others could get involved and know the joy of giving and helping others. They stressed personal invitation to others as the best way to draw them in.

Many pastors/parishes belong to a Ministerial Alliance to offer a collaborative effort in meeting the needs of the community. There seemed to be a general agreement, especially in the western and mid-section of the diocese, that it is very difficult to reach out to other Christian denominations within their community for any type of religious dialogue or gathering. Again, the Diocese of Springfield-Cape Girardeau is located in the “Bible Belt” and Catholics are overwhelmingly the minority. They often believe they are mistrusted or sometimes accosted for their beliefs making it difficult to form relationships with people of other denominations. However, many expressed the desire to be welcoming and inviting of other religious denominations and open to the idea of building relationships.

Remarks like, “Catholicism comes across as an exclusive club,” or “we have too many rules to follow and others do not feel welcome,” described what they find as the difficulty in building relationships with others outside of the Church and drawing them in. But the dialogue indicated a desire to learn how to reach out and share the faith so that others may come to know the Lord or grow in deeper relationship with him through the beauty of the Catholic church. Building relationships would also allow the opportunity to correct misconceptions and gain the trust of other Christians so that we may more fruitfully work together to further the Kingdom.

CONCLUSION

The consultation sessions offered throughout the diocese provided wonderful opportunities for communities to draw together and share from their experiences, in a time when so many felt disconnected from one another and from the Church. Participants commented on the need for more opportunities to gather and share through dialogue in the future. Respectful, empathetic conversations opened hearts and minds to the Holy Spirit, fostering a sense of hope in the future of the Church. Even through disagreements, many understood the common desire to live a faithful life in Christ and to be able to draw others into a relationship with Christ through the Catholic Church.

Common insights which evolved through dialogues included:

- Most participants agreed that the Holy Mass and the Sacraments are primary sources of encounter with Christ, and a path to growth in holiness and discipleship.

There was much dialogue on the concept of what a beautiful and engaging liturgy would look like. Discussions ranged from bringing back practices from pre-Vatican II (no female servers, Latin prayers, etc.) to keeping the liturgy the same but adding more traditional sacred music, to offering more contemporary music, especially for young adults and youth.

- Participants agreed that the parish needs to become a more inviting and welcoming place especially for visitors, new parishioners, those who have walked away from parish life, and the marginalized. All people should be welcomed free of judgement.
- Participants want to reach out and welcome those whose life is currently not reflecting a lived faith/discipleship, but they are unsure of how to do that without compromising on Church teaching. Catholics desire ongoing formation in Catholic teaching and in how to evangelize.
- Participants commented on their appreciation for priests who were pastorally present to their parishioners and for those who provided ongoing teaching in the faith through their homilies. Many participants expressed the desire for more educational homilies which: 1. break down and explain the readings, 2. draw in the Catechism and Catholic teaching, and 3. address moral issues they are facing in society today.
- There is an overwhelming desire to build community in parishes. CoVid19 restrictions were especially hard on those parishes who already lacked a sense of community and it made it easier for people to walk away and not return. Synod participants desire more small group opportunities to foster relationships and build community with others, to better accompany one another through their challenges in life, and to continue growing in the faith together.
- There is great concern for those parents who are not regularly attending Mass and/or participating in parish activities with their children.
- There is a need to specifically reconnect with young single adults, young parents and with the teenage youth to invite them back and to better journey with them. Participants are unsure about how to reach them but there is a desire to explore this issue and come up with ideas.
- Several reports stated that Catholics are frustrated with some priests, Bishops, and the Pope. These leaders are considered to be the voices of the Church, heard not only in Catholic media but also in mainstream media. Consultation participants expressed frustrations over the contradiction and opposition in what is stated (or has gone unstated) by various Church leaders, sighting that it causes confusion and division for Catholics and others. Additionally, it is believed that some Bishops and priests live hypocritical lives delivering a silent message that sets examples contrary to Church teaching. Lastly, participants would like Church leaders to more boldly speak out on societal and political issues which involve morals and justice.
- Many participants (particularly from the western and mid-section of the diocese) described the challenges of being a minority religious group. Other religious groups distrust Catholics and have many misconceptions about the beliefs and practices of Catholics. Participants expressed the desire to learn more about the Bible, more

apologetics, and some practical steps to evangelizing and building relationships with other faith groups in their communities.

- Feedback on the structure, content, and proceedings of each dialogue session was generally positive and participants found it to be a fruitful process for their individual parish or institution. For some, this was a first-time experience of synodality and they expressed their enjoyment in having constructive dialogue with their fellow parishioners. Although strong emotions and disagreements arose at times, respectful and empathetic dialogue seemed to be consistent throughout the majority of the consultation sessions. Many parishes expressed the desire to utilize a synodal process on a continual basis as they plan for future ministry within the parish and outreach to the community.

Overall, the Synod was an empowering experience for participants. When the dialogues moved quickly from phrases such as “the pastor should do ...” or “the parish should do...” to “we should do...” participants began to commit to the idea of “WE are the Church.” They acknowledged their co-responsibility for evangelization and mission in the Church. The Diocese of Springfield-Cape Girardeau is pleased that the fruits of these dialogues will further motivate and equip our parishes to “Move from Maintenance to Mission.”