



“The Holy Spirit is prompting us, in light of successes and distresses, to recognize how fortunate we are to have the gift of faith in a Savior who lived the way we are to live, who loves as we are to love, and who died for us to show us the path to eternal salvation. That’s the structure upon which we must build everything.”
Diocese of Columbus, Synod Participant

Enhancing Catholic Community: Reflections on Successes and Distresses within the Structure of the Church

Answering the call to participate in the Interim Phase of the Synod on Synodality, we prayerfully considered the questions and discerned the process we would use for our diocese. Bishop Fernandes was interested in hearing from individuals deeply engaged in various aspects of Catholic life – including university life, diocesan leadership, and Hispanic ministry – regarding the successes and distresses within the structure of the Church. Through their voices, we explore avenues for improvement and renewal in fostering vibrant, mission-driven Catholic communities.

During Lent 2024, we organized and facilitated three listening sessions, one with each of the aforementioned groups. We had 89 participants in total (42 college students, 40 members of the Hispanic community, and 7 members of diocesan leadership team). The participants were:

- 40% male, 60% female
- 50% caucasian; 45% Hispanic or Latino; 5% Asian American
- 47% ages 18-25, 42% ages 40-55, and 11% ages 56-74
- 100% laypeople
- 91% Catholic since birth, 6% Catholic convert, and 3% Non-Catholic
- 97% attend Mass every week, and 65% attend more than once a week

The two main questions we discussed during each session were the same questions proposed for use by the USCCB:

1. Where have I seen or experienced successes – and distresses – within the Church’s structure(s)/organization/leadership/life that encourage or hinder the mission?
2. How can the structures and organization of the Church help all the baptized to respond to the call to proclaim the Gospel and live as a community of love and mercy in Christ.

The following is a summary of the feedback received during the three listening sessions.

Question 1

The first question asked participants to share the successes and distresses they have experienced within the structure or leadership in the Church that either encourage or hinder the mission of the Church.

Successes:

Our diocese has seen a great deal of change over the past few years in areas of diocesan leadership, parish mergers and closures, and priestly assignments, and there are many successes to acknowledge.

From the perspective of the college students (Buckeye Catholics) at The Ohio State University Newman Center, we hear great stories of success and hope in how the structures are supporting their faith development and training to be on mission for evangelization. The students frequently referred to the opportunities for the sacraments and Adoration as central to their daily lives on campus. They are grateful for the opportunities to learn how to pray and subsequently lead prayer groups and other ministry teams. In one student's words, "We are on fire and appreciate leaders who involve us. The structure here attracts us to be spiritually fed and then invite others to those experiences." Additionally, campus groups such as St. Paul's Outreach (SPO) and Fellowship of Catholic University Students (FOCUS) allows them to experience a strong faith-based community which they will carry to their parishes after graduation.

Within the Hispanic ministry community, there are successes noted as well. As the population of our community becomes increasingly diverse, it is critical that we are welcoming and including all, regardless of language or cultural differences. One way that we have done this is by bringing in more religious orders of sisters and priests. A participant noted that, "The many groups of religious sisters have done a great job evangelizing. They bring a very positive energy and help to grow the mission." There is a deep gratitude for priests who speak *or are willing to learn* Spanish, allowing this community to feel connected. As stated, it was "A powerful moment when we visited an event with Bishop Fernandes along with other missionaries, youth, and seminarians. The Bishop heard us and sent us out to go on our mission. We need more events like this, to see him and be motivated to go out." It is important to structure the local activities in an inclusive way for all Catholics to participate and allow all to know we are walking together.

Those people who are in leadership positions in the diocese expressed gratitude for walking together with the current Bishop and the parishes as well. They expressed that the Bishop is intentional about choosing leaders who are willing to be disciples, serving the Church with a willingness to listen to and journey with the parish leaders and all members of this diocese. For example, one participant mentioned that "The decision-making process for impactful changes, such as church closures or pastor re-assignments, is not rushed. Rather, there is an appropriate amount of time given to these decisions, allowing for listening and discernment." In terms of how the structure of the church works between the diocesan leadership and those who lead in the parishes, they note success when the parishes see the diocese as a working resource, when we

have pastors who are committed to a prosperity mentality dedicated to collaboration and mutual trust. There is a strong desire to support parish leaders, reinforcing that all are working towards the same mission, reinforcing that diocesan leadership is focused on sharing their talent, dedication, and drive with parish leaders to achieve that mission.

Distresses:

In addition to the many successes that participants shared, they also noted distress within the structure of the Church, with a hope for healing and growth.

The college students reveal structural distresses that confuse them and challenge them simultaneously. They reveal a sense of empowerment to tackle the distresses and turn them into successes. Some mentioned that the experience they are having in college is different from parish life “back at home” and a deep concern that they will be hungry for more of the same in their parishes after graduation. They expressed that all parishes should create community, centered around the liturgy, that is vibrant and welcoming. There is a frustration that not all parishes offer that and that “at times it can seem like one parish to another is like seeing polar opposites.” There was an echoed concern especially for those rural parishes who are really feeling the shortage of priestly vocations – those people need the sacraments, good liturgy, and Adoration opportunities, too. They also expressed a deep desire for the leaders of the church and all priests to be bold in spreading the truth, even when it is difficult to speak or live the truth of the Church’s teachings. This was mentioned in connection with several comments about Catholic education in elementary and high schools. As one participant shared, “Catholic schools seem to be missing the mark because they are not focused enough on teaching students how to build and maintain personal relationships with the Lord.” Additionally, although they are grateful for opportunities in the diocese like Catholic Youth Summer Camp and parish youth groups, they feel that the diocese could do a better job helping to streamline the youth groups as “There is not enough investment for the youth group programs at all parishes so kids end up flooding one or two youth group programs, so if you belong to a parish who doesn’t have the resources to figure it out, you lose out on some great formation opportunities.” One way they think parishes should assist with this is by incorporating youth in leadership roles and in service opportunities as both of those help people take ownership in their faith. There was a suggestion that the Catholic Church needs to do a better job meeting the youth in the Digital Age, on social media platforms, etc.

Within the Hispanic community, there are also several distresses mentioned. There is a hope that an increasing number of pastors will welcome Hispanics into the church and take time to evangelize and form all of the baptized. One shared that they “need more priests who can walk with us, in our language, because we all have the same goal.” With pastors who are welcoming, there is a greater sense of community in the parishes and then all members can feel like they are part of the parish. There is also a recognition of some difficulties within church structures, as one pointed out, “As a diocesan Hispanic community we have grown, many times we have seen that there is division between parishes and groups in the parishes. This is wrong because we are all baptized brothers and sisters.” There is a strong desire to grow in unity and faith and go on mission within this community. There is a desire to help but also a desire to learn how to help.

While noting the many successes, diocesan leadership also acknowledged distresses. There is a disconnect between parishes and the leadership in the diocese – a history of distrust, or an us versus them mindset, revealing the feeling that there is a power struggle rather than mutual support. They are working to overcome this, but it is not a quick process. There is an awareness that this will take the leadership providing reminders to the parishes that they are trying to reinforce better working relationships and provide consistently good treatment. There is a hope that this consistency will help reduce the resistance to change and the acceptance of mediocrity.

Question 2

The second question asked participants to share how the structures and organization of the Church help all the baptized to respond to the call to proclaim the Gospel and live as a community of love and mercy in Christ. The responses to this question focused around several themes.

The Transformative Power of Sacraments and Adoration

The sacraments, central to Catholic faith and practice, hold immense significance for believers. Participants highlighted the essential role of sacraments, particularly Adoration, in nurturing spiritual growth and renewal within communities. Adoration, described as transformational, serves as a focal point for encountering God's presence and grace. Access to sacraments was emphasized often as foundational for individual and communal spiritual well-being, underscoring the importance of providing opportunities for regular participation.

Priestly Leadership and Formation

Effective priestly leadership emerged as a critical factor in shaping parish life and community dynamics. Participants expressed deep gratitude for pastors who demonstrate strong leadership qualities, including engagement, communication, and a commitment to building inclusive and welcoming communities. Pastoral leadership is seen as pivotal in fostering spiritual growth, community cohesion, and a sense of belonging among parishioners. Additionally, the importance of ongoing formation for clergy and continuing to pray for new vocations to the priesthood are imperative for continuous growth and development in pastoral ministry.

Layperson Role in Parish Life and Community Dynamics

Vibrant parish life hinges on dynamic community engagement, and leadership that fosters a sense of belonging and spiritual nourishment. Laypeople can be part of the structure that upholds these goals. A structure of trust within parish life, especially between the pastor and parish staff and the parishioners is ideal but not always a reality. Disparities in parish dynamics, including variations in welcoming practices, and community engagement, support and prayer groups, to name a few highlight the need for greater consistency and inclusivity across Catholic communities.

Liturgy and Worship Experience

The liturgical experience plays a central role in Catholic worship, shaping the encounter with Jesus Christ and fostering personal as well as communal prayer life. Participants emphasized the importance of liturgical practices that reflect reverence, beauty, and the sacredness of the Eucharist. Attention to details, including prepared and relevant homilies as well as music

choices were noted as enhancing the worship experience, emphasizing the significance of both the Liturgy of the Word and the Eucharist.

Hispanic Ministry

Effective Hispanic/Latino ministry requires culturally sensitive pastoral care, language accessibility, and intentional efforts to foster inclusivity and engagement within diverse Catholic communities. Participants highlighted the need for welcoming pastors who understand and minister to the Hispanic community, as well as increased formation and outreach initiatives tailored to meet the specific needs of Hispanic Catholics. Cultivating a sense of belonging and participation among Hispanic parishioners emerged as essential for fostering vibrant and inclusive Catholic communities. Participants emphasized the desire to be a part of the evangelization efforts in the diocese and appreciate events which help them learn how best they can do this.

Conclusions and Reflections

Guiding question used: How is the Holy Spirit prompting us to improve the ways we are able to journey together?

- We must trust that the Lord is going to work through the Gospel and the Eucharist in teaching us how to work together and bring the Kingdom of God to others. In that teaching, and with a focus on loving as Jesus loved, we should be able to explain to others about the beauty of the teachings of the Catholic Church. We should not be embarrassed about recognizing that our Church might be a little messy – it's better not to pretend that we are the perfect institution, but that we belong to the perfect and one, true faith.
- As communities of faith, parishes should always be in prayer together, to grow through the Holy Spirit to be able to welcome and accept one another as we are. We should not judge who is a better Catholic and who is not. Let's stop measuring our holiness. This will only lead us to a more divided Church. Only with these will we grow in God's grace. As a reflection of that grace, we share our faith with others who will learn that the Catholic Church is a loving, welcoming place.
- This conversation shows that we should be on a unified mission focused on being welcomed into the Kingdom of God.
- We have to trust in the institutions and structures of the Church if we expect others to trust us. We are all part of the Mystical Body of Christ. Let us not dwell on the sins of the past but have hope in what lies ahead.