



“Church is home and we feel comfortable, but we need to feel uncomfortable so that we reach out to those in need. We need conversion from the idea that people who make us uncomfortable do not belong. We don’t need to lead them but just walk with them and see God in them. We need to seek out even those who have nothing to give in return.”

Diocese of Columbus, Synod Participant

The Diocese of Columbus, Ohio

Real Presence, Real Future: A Synodal Strategic Planning Process

Real Presence Real Future is a strategic planning initiative for the Diocese of Columbus, which set out to increase the presence of Christ throughout the Diocese. This was intended to be accomplished by listening to the needs of our people and hearing their concerns and desires in order to determine the best path forward to meet our structural needs and engage in the important work of evangelization. So, in essence, it is a synodal process which is rooted in prayer and in listening to the members of the Body of Christ.

This Diocese contracted with the Catholic Leadership Institute, a non-profit, lay apostolate of the faithful to help hear from as many people as possible. This was begun by surveying the priests, deacons, and diocesan employees about the local church’s operation. Evangelization subcommittees were established which focused on six primary areas of evangelization consisting of a majority of lay faithful along with some clergy. A 40-person Commission for Planning was established from various areas, and they served as a representation of the Diocese. Key Parish Leaders were chosen by their pastors to be the first to review parish materials and draft models for structural possibilities. Two virtual parish consultation sessions were held for each of our 105 parishes/missions in the Diocese from September to November, 2021. There were 5,333 total registrants.

During Lent of 2021, we administered the Disciple Maker Index (DMI) which is a tool designed to provide parishioners an opportunity to reflect on their individual spiritual growth and overall parish effectiveness. Responses to the DMI survey came in from 21,462 parishioners throughout the Diocese, in ELEVEN different languages, including English, Spanish, Korean, Haitian, Italian, French, Polish, Chinese, Brazilian, Portuguese, Swahili, and Vietnamese! Some key findings were:

- 74% of those who responded indicated that they strongly agree with the statement, “I believe the Eucharist is the Body and Blood of Christ.”

- With respect to faith practices, 75% of survey respondents indicated that they attend Mass weekly.
- Regarding the Sunday Mass experience:
 - 38% indicated they strongly agreed that their community is welcoming.
 - 30% indicated that they strongly agree they find growth during Mass.
 - 27% strongly agreed that music deepens their participation.
 - 32% strongly agree that they find growth from the preaching.
- Regarding their parish:
 - 30% strongly agree that their parish helps them grow spiritually.
 - 21% strongly agree that their parish helps them grow their prayer life.
 - 17% strongly agree that their parish helps them grow through small groups.
 - 21% strongly agree that their parish helps them grow through formation as a disciple.

For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission

Beginning in January, 2022, a local Synod Leadership Team met weekly to discern our Diocesan approach. We prayerfully and thoughtfully covered details of the sessions, including questions, locations, publicity, and training for facilitators and notetakers. Facilitators and notetakers attended the virtual training offered at Fordham by the USCCB, in addition to a local training session. As a result of the virtual training, we created all necessary materials for the listening sessions, including a binder for facilitators, a folder for notetakers, and a Google Reporting Form for each notetaker to complete after each session.

From March to May, 2022, each member of the Diocese was invited to attend the listening sessions, which were held by Deanery to provide a geographically accessible session for all. We had 20 in-person sessions, including three in Spanish, in addition to one virtual high school session, and one in-person university session. We had close to 1,000 participants. The participants were:

- 47% male, 53% female
- 61% caucasian; 31% Hispanic or Latino; 6% black or African American
- 21% ages 41-55, 41% ages 56-74, and 23% over 75
- 78% laypeople, 12% priests, 5% deacons, and 5% vowed religious
- 59% Catholic since birth, 25% Catholic convert, and 13% returned Catholic
- 53% attend Mass every week, 31% attend more than once a week, 12% attend almost every week

The above percentages include the most statistically significant groups.

The four main questions we discussed during each session were:

1. The Synodal process invites each one of us – the People of God – to recall that we journey together. Moreover, in that journey of faith, we are called to listen to the voice of the

Holy Spirit. As you listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit, what have been the joys and obstacles in your journeying together with the church? Please share a brief story that illustrates your experience.

2. Listening is the first step, but it requires an open mind and heart, without prejudice, and all are invited to speak with courage and parrhesia, that is, in freedom, truth, and charity. How have you experienced the Church reaching out to those who are on the peripheries and marginalized, including cultural groups, women, the disabled, those who experience poverty, marginalization, or social exclusion? What enables or hinders you from speaking up courageously, candidly, and responsibly in your parish and society?
3. Synodality is at the service of the mission of the Church, in which all members are called to participate. A Synodal church is a participatory and co-responsible Church. How do we promote participation in decision-making within hierarchically structured communities? What hinders people from being active in your parish? How is authority or governance exercised in your local parish?
4. During this conversation, we have shared rich experiences of faith. We have discussed how we have journeyed together as a Church and how we might do so even more faithfully in the years to come. In thanksgiving for the gift that this conversation has been, I invite you to think of a specific grace you received or an insight you gained from this experience.

Within a week following each listening session, we collected the reports completed by the notetakers and facilitators on Google Forms. We used that data to create a spreadsheet of all responses, and separated the spreadsheet into sections based on each of the 4 questions. Once we assembled the report writing team, we decided to have teams of 2 work on writing the first report draft for each of the 4 questions, in addition to two people working on the introduction and methodology sections.

We then met to pray about and discuss the first drafts for each of those sections and decided one person would combine those drafts into the summary document to be reviewed. During two additional meetings, we discussed drafts and edits of the report, in addition to maintaining regular email communication throughout the editing process. We decided to present the report by responses to each of the four questions.

Question 1

The first question asked participants to share the joys and obstacles they have experienced in their journeying together with the Church, including a brief story where possible. For the purpose of this report, we offer the summary of those two categories, described from most frequently mentioned to least frequently mentioned.

Joys: The Church gives access to Truth, growth in the faith through its teaching and preaching and opportunities to study. There is joy in the lived experience of the Church as a community of believers who grow together and care for each other. Some expressed this by likening Church to family. The joy and beauty of receiving the Sacraments or of family members receiving the Sacraments offer the sense of God's presence or His grace in a tangible way. *"I was Baptized in the same church where I was married and Baptized my children and grandchildren and there is great joy in that."*

Many participants placed similar emphasis on both receiving and participating in the experience of the Church's service. The ability to be involved in service in a meaningful way both in ministries that were spiritually oriented, as well as those who served temporal/corporal needs, fulfills a deep hunger for being an active participant in the life of the Church.

Participants frequently mentioned the joy of participating in the Mass. Inherent in these comments are different understandings of the Mass from worship, to sacrifice, to Holy Communion, to the music, preaching, incense, bells, and other shared aspects of the Liturgy. Responses also included the joys of experiencing a welcoming parish, sensitive to language and cultural issues.

Many participants mentioned the joy of the Church's support or consolation in times of trouble or difficulty. A number of these responses recounted experiences having to do with the death of a loved one. The Liturgy and the pastoral care received from the priest or the community, are both aspects of these responses. Some expressed the joy of Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, and shared how meaningful it is to experience the intimacy of being with our Lord in this way.

Similarly, an equal number of participants expressed the joys received from Catholic education, either through Catholic schools or PSR programs, both for themselves and others. The joy of the Eucharist was often mentioned in a stand-alone way and may be echoed in joys expressed in the Mass or in Adoration. Inherent in these responses is an expression of the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. Finally, participants mentioned the joy of being a part of a universal Church, which amidst its different expressions, is the same Church established by Jesus Christ.

Obstacles: In the same way as with the joys cited above, there are a number of themes that appeared repeatedly in the collated responses about obstacles. First, among the responses, is the obstacle of not feeling like they belong or that they are not welcome, essentially feeling like an outsider. Some respondents cite the presence of cliques in the Church that create barriers to participation. Some specifically offered a lack of acceptance of language or culture as the barrier. Other participants mentioned a lack of inclusion because they are an unmarried person, widowed, gay, or a woman.

More specifically, a number of respondents identify the treatment of women in the Church as a major obstacle, from feeling dismissed, to citing the lack of women's roles in the Church (preaching, women deacons and women priests), which is seen as a missed opportunity at best or a discriminatory lack of respect at worst. Additionally, the treatment of minorities/racism in the Church by both parishioners and the hierarchy is frequently cited.

The theme of clericalism is repeatedly mentioned. The term does not seem to have a universal definition, but it includes the exclusion of laity in decision-making, emphasis on the separation between clergy and laity, failure of clergy to be open to listening to laypeople, priests speaking over the heads of their parishioners, or an unwillingness to speak to parishioners about relevant issues.

Another frequently mentioned theme is that the Church on the one hand is too conformed to the modern world (too secular) or on the other, returning to a pre-Vatican II mode of being. The obstacle is probably best expressed by saying that for a number of participants, the Church does not conform to their sense of what the Church should be in this day and age. However, as one member noted, *“We have to be careful how we think about this because we should not be asking how the church should change to conform to us but how we need to transform to conform to the church.”*

Another widely repeated theme present in these sessions, in an impassioned way, is the treatment of LGBTQ+ persons in the Church. This stems from the Church’s consistent moral teaching on homosexuality and gender identification issues and perceived discrimination in the administration of Sacraments. It also stems from a lack of pastoral care for LGBTQ+ persons and their families.

Others mentioned the obstacle of division in the Church, expressed by resistance to Pope Francis, division among bishops, and intolerance for the differences in the expressions of Catholicism from priest to priest and parish to parish. Additionally mentioned is the obstacle created by the abuse scandal in the Church and by the negative and ongoing media attention given to the Church as a result. A final obstacle reported is the expression of the Church’s lack of support when most needed or when help was most urgent.

Question 2

Question 2 asked participants to relate how they have experienced the Church reaching out to those on the peripheries and marginalized, and what enables or hinders them from speaking up courageously, candidly, and responsibly in their parish and society in support of those people or for themselves. For the purpose of this summary, we again offer two categories.

Reaching out to marginalized or on the peripheries Participants easily recognized many outreach experiences to poor, unhoused members of society. There currently are many programs, ministries, and apostolates within the diocese and within every parish. Those mentioned include ministries which offer assistance with all corporal works of mercy – food, drink, clothes, shelter, burial, and prison ministry, as well as honoring the spiritual works of mercy on parish and diocesan levels.

Participants seemed proud of all that the Catholic Church does to reach out to those in need but also recognizes that there is always more we can do. There is consistent feedback that the need

for volunteers is great. Often the same core of volunteers helps with the majority of projects or programs; the older parishioners are volunteering, and we need more younger participants.

In response to this prompt, as in the last question, many participants expressed concerns about various marginalized groups, including LGBTQ+, divorced, fallen away Catholics, women, and ethnic groups. *“As a person from Latin America, I see that we can come to Mass, but we are not part of the community or allowed in. We are being asked to assimilate to the Anglo community, and we don’t feel welcomed.”*

What enables or hinders people from speaking up? Some people are naturally more outspoken, or timid, in their interaction with pastor, parish staff, ministry, and group leaders. As one member mentioned, *“I’ve never felt hindered from speaking out, but what’s the point?”*

Others mentioned feeling enabled to speak up in the following circumstances:

- small faith-sharing groups
- women’s groups, like Walking with Purpose
- retreats
- sessions like this

Some hindrances mentioned include:

- if they say something, they’ll be put in charge
- nothing will change anyway
- cancel culture - *“...a pro-life student who was a devout Christian gave a talk on being pro-life, and he was pelted by his classmates with verbal abuse”*
- fear that they don’t have enough education about their faith to deserve to have an opinion, or at least a respected opinion
- bad experience previously speaking up

Question 3

Question three includes a few components. How do we promote **participation** within **hierarchically** structured communities? What hinders people from being active at the parish level? How is **authority** or governance exercised at the local parish level?

Communication: People called for better communication in all directions: from the Diocese to the parishes; from the pastors to the parishioners; from the parishioners to the pastor; and, among parishioners. Leaders of parishioner ministries need to advertise what their ministries do with clearly stated expectations. There was a consensus that most people prefer a personal invitation

to get involved. Notices in the bulletins, Flocknotes, and email blasts are seen as impersonal. One participant shared, *“I spend all day at work on my computer, reading email messages. I do not want to have to wade through more emails at home.”*

As mentioned in previous question responses, people spoke of cliques or the appearance of cliques, in their parishes. They spoke of how hard it is to break into the cliques. Some expressed that they have tried to offer help but are turned away. For example, *“Years ago, I tried to volunteer for my parish finance council and was rudely shut down because, I was told, I’m not an accountant. It doesn’t matter that in my work, I deal with hundreds of thousands of dollars daily. Since that day, I’ve volunteered for nothing except ushering, and that’s probably as far as it will go.”*

Others mentioned volunteer burnout or feeling guilty that there is no one else who wants to continue the ministry that they are providing. The list of possible hindrances to people being more active in the parish is lengthy and varied.

Some common points are:

- Lack of personal invitation
- Not knowing what volunteer opportunities are available
- Not knowing who to contact
- Fear that they will not be able to perform the duties properly
- Fear of rejection
- Lack of time – This is especially true of those who are still working, and/or those raising young children. One person said he looked at his parish’s schedule, and it seems to be most beneficial to retirees. Activities start before he can get home from work.
- Parish is no longer the center of people’s social lives. People want to spend time with family and friends who may not belong to the parish. If their children are involved in organized sports, that seems to be more important than anything else.
- Apathy
- Clericalism – People feel they are just there to *“Pray, Pay, and Obey.”* Some attendees said the newer priests are showing very rigid perspectives, being ultra-traditionalists, such as the priests should be facing the altar. *“Only those with chapel veils and rosaries seem welcome.”*
- COVID-19 – Some said the closure of the churches caused much of the loss of the sense of community. Others said the virus did not create the issues, but did make them worse.

For the Hispanic/Latino population, there are also language and cultural barriers. Some do not

feel welcomed. One participant offered, *“We need to be active so that we can be heard, learn English, and participate in both communities, not isolated to the Hispanic community.”*

Another stated, *“We must have done something wrong for them not to allow us in. We are supposed to be one church, not two, one body. But we are not heard, not welcomed. The church office staff only speaks English, and we are losing Catholics to other churches who serve people in their language and have their doors open.”*

Authority: The highlights from this topic strongly expressed the need for better communication. Many people said they did not know how authority was operated. Some thought parish/pastoral councils had decision making authority, while others realized they were advisory in nature.

Proposed solutions ranged from systemic changes to trusting the hierarchy, and various options in between. The systemic changes proposed included allowing married priests, female deacons, and female priests. Others called for an adoption of the Protestant model, having wards or elders who have some power, in addition to the priests. Repetitive comments suggest a need for increased accountability.

The counterpoint to this was that the mere idea of the synodal process was a dangerous step. As one mentioned, *“We have to be careful in what we are doing, ‘the tail wagging the dog’ type thing. The Church was not meant to be a democracy, it is a monarchy. The Church as a whole is treading on dangerous ground, even headed in the wrong direction.”*

Most responses were somewhere between these extremes. People understand that the pastor makes the final decision, but want him to be more open to inputs from the laity. They would like to know why certain decisions were made. A priest at one session shared that often parishioners do not understand all the issues that the priest must consider before making a decision. Some priests welcomed parish councils, and encouraged attendees to serve on their parishes’ councils.

Decisions, and the reasons behind them, should be made public. For example, one person said the parish council recommended a certain course of action, and when the pastor explained that the action violated Canon Law, the person appreciated and felt satisfied with the explanation. *“Leadership within the Church should be gentle, made up of laity and clergy, and should be open to honest feedback and suggestions between the pastor and the community, without passing judgment. Priests need councils because both leaders and non-leaders are called to priesthood.”*

Question 4

This final question asked participants to share thoughts about how we have journeyed together as a Church and how we might do so even more faithfully in the years to come. Additionally,

participants could share a specific grace received or an insight gained from this experience. Overall, there was a consensus of deep gratitude for the offering of this synodal conversation.

Comments suggest a collective realization that we have more in common with others than we realize, both in our joys and our struggles in our faith journeys. Openly sharing in this way allowed participants to recognize and appreciate that more fully. The ability to speak from the heart was an experience that most people had not previously encountered with the Catholic Church, and it was so life-giving, “*cathartic*.”

Additionally, there was a strong desire voiced about feeling a call to be more involved in the parishes, wanting to know more about their parishes, and realizing that evangelization is the work of every baptized person. Furthermore, many voiced an acknowledgement that the culture we are living in is a large challenge, but we have the chance to teach a different culture.

Another common point was the idea of radical hospitality and reaching out to others more than judging them. “*We can get beyond ourselves and spread the Gospel more when we are able to connect and relate to one another.*” There is still some concern about the rigidity of the Church and the lack of priestly vocations for the future. However, this increases the desire to encourage a culture of volunteerism and provides an invitation to more people to relate to their gifts and talents with ways they can impact the Church.

Finally, another theme was reaching out and welcoming others into the daily faith practices. We need to grow a culture of faith within our own communities so that we can evangelize beyond our communities.

Continuing the Synodal Journey

Upon reflection of the listening session comments, the following areas of suggestions include:

- Institutional church
 - give women more of a leadership role
 - provide greater communication/transparency
 - create process for priests assignment changes to ease pain of transition
 - maintain spirit of synodality

- Priests
 - have more training available
 - hire parish administrators so the priests can focus on sacramental life of parish
 - give more authority to the parish council
 - show more of a willingness to be transparent to really share and really listen

- Parishes
 - show more collaborative decision making between priests and laity
 - be more welcoming to LGBTQ+ community
 - highlight good things that are happening
 - do more for young adult group in 20s and 30s
 - be more welcoming to current, old, and potential parishioners
 - offer spiritual guidance for people who are suffering – from life circumstances such as divorce, illness, family issues
 - create more opportunities for small groups for faith-sharing
 - offer better training and support for people who are volunteering

- Spanish Speaking
 - hire bilingual parish office staff
 - offer ESL classes/catechesis
 - provide better diocesan level communication