

Diocese of Ogdensburg 2022 For a Synodal Church Synthesis

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Background	1
Response	1
Writing the Synthesis	2
Synthesis	3
Consensus	3
Who are the people of God?	3
How are we journeying together?	4
Outliers.....	5
Committee observations	6
Notes.....	8
Conclusions	9
Building Parishes with Living Stones.....	9
Strengthening Faith Formation in Family Life.....	9
Creating a Culture of Vocations	9
Steps Going Forward.....	10
Appendices.....	11
Discussion: Parish participation map.....	11
Links	11

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Introduction

Background

In 2014, priorities and goals for the Diocese of Ogdensburg were prayerfully developed and announced after an extensive envisioning process facilitated by the Catholic Leadership Institute. The process included eleven listening sessions held around the Diocese by Bishop Terry R. LaValley. The priorities and goals developed continue to guide the diocesan mission and are intended to be living, continuously revisited and refreshed. Bishop LaValley views the Synod journey as an opportunity to discuss anew the diocesan goals and priorities while engaging in the wider synodal discussions and journey at the parish level, diocesan level and for the universal Church. The Synod also coincides with the Diocese of Ogdensburg's 150th anniversary and is part of the celebration.

Rather than repeating the diocesan-level process used in 2014, Synodal conversations were held largely at the parish level. To that end, each pastor was asked to appoint a delegate for his parish or parish group. Pastors and delegates participated in one of three regional delegate training sessions, which were designed to explain and model synodal conversations. A three-phase approach was suggested. The three phases include reaching out to:

1. Existing ministry groups
2. "People in the pews"
3. Those outside or on the margins of the Church

Pastors and delegates were provided packets with resources to aid them in facilitating Synodal conversations. Delegate packets and additional resources were also distributed via email and on the diocesan website. Delegates were further supported with weekly online discussions that enabled them to share and discuss ideas and challenges.

Response

We received feedback from approximately half of the parishes, see Figure 1. The majority of feedback came from the first two phases referenced above, ministry groups and people in the pews.

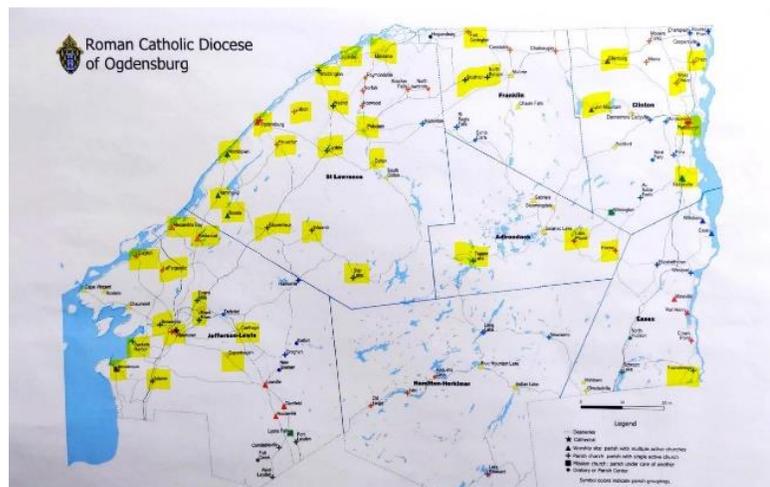


Figure 1. Yellow indicates synodal discussion summary(ies) received. For a larger image, refer to Appendix Discussion: Parish participation, page 11.

Delegates found limited success reaching out beyond the parish or to those on the margins of the Church. Recognizing there were parishes with little participation and a lack of response from the margins, the diocesan Synod Committee created and published an online survey with a paper option to collect individual responses and linked to them from our Anniversary page <https://150.rcdony.org>.

During our compilation of this report, the committee closely reviewed the My2Cents statistical reports. Reaching out through in this manner did not reach phase 3 people – those outside the Church or in the margins. In fact, 114 of 119 responses (96%) listed themselves as Catholic. Of the 113 responses to “How often do you attend Mass?”, 104 responded daily or weekly. The My2Cents survey succeeded in providing a platform for those unable to participate in synodal discussions for health or security reasons. However, it failed to reach those outside the Church.

Difficulties arose from the timing of the start of the Synodal process. Delays occurred due to the busy Advent season and parishioners leaving for warmer climates. COVID also hampered the gathering for synodal conversations. For those who were able to participate, delegate reports indicated many participants were surprised by how much they enjoyed the in-depth discussions about how we journey together as Church. The Diocesan Synod Committee and Bishop LaValley reviewed all feedback received from the parish conversations as well as individual responses such as from the My2Cents survey. Areas of consensus in the feedback received from the parish conversations are reflected in this report. The My2Cents feedback was used to supplement the synthesis, providing support or counter-voice in communion with the Holy Spirit.

Writing the Synthesis

This synthesis was composed in a synodal fashion. The diocesan Synod Committee reviewed the feedback as a group, asking, “how are we journeying together, what do we hear, what is the consensus, and where is consensus lacking?” The synthesis is intended to reflect what was shared without clarification or conclusions.

Synthesis

Consensus

Two major themes emerged from the responses: “Who are the people of God?” and “How are we journeying together?”

Who are the people of God?

The universal Church allows and encourages diversity including expressions of spirituality.ⁱ Rather than divide us, our diversity should be a source of strength. A variety of discussions reflected the idea that input from diverse voices should be sought by Church leadership at all levels. Anxiety exists regarding the institutional Church and her leadership’s perceived lack of connection to the modern world.

There is strong consensus that people are hungry for relationship with each other and with their priests, especially sacramentally.ⁱⁱ The pastor's attitude and presence set the tone for the parish and school.

Joined or merged parishes need to see themselves as real, singular faith communities, journeying together and sharing resources. As parishes come together, mission and vision must override the tendency to compete.

There is a call to recognize the giftedness of the laity and encourage collaboration and co-responsibility for the mission of the Church. We promote collegiality by identifying and promoting the talents of others.

The Church is seen as judgmental and rulebound; we need to reach out and journey with people on the margins. Those coming to church out of obligation, visitors and parishioners not involved in ministry may not feel welcome. Some of the marginalized were identified as lapsed Catholics, transient, poor, those struggling with moral teachings, elderly, homebound, prisoners, women, divorced/separated, young, LGBTQ, those preferring the Extraordinary Form of the Massⁱⁱⁱ, liberals, non-whites, special needs and broken families. Due to the abuse scandal, some rejected the Church, creating a new group on the margins.

There is a desire to better understand Church teaching regarding marginalized groups, especially LGBTQ. Many of the responses also indicated a desire to understand how to apply and live applicable Church teachings.

At the diocesan Youth Rally, “In HIS House”, on April 2, 2022, the Evangelization Office offered youth ages 12 to 18 a fifteen-question survey that breaks down into five categories. Students were asked to rank a statement’s validity on a scale of 1 (Not true at all) to 5 (Very true). A link to the survey used at the Youth Rally is available in the Appendix. The highest scoring category is *Celebrating*, where youth were asked about participating in religious celebrations and the meaning those celebrations have in their lives.

How are we journeying together?

The diocese and parishes need to clarify their mission and vision statements. Many of those participating in the discussions recognize a lack of understanding of worship and sacramental life and would like to hear homilies that connect the Gospel and Church teaching to their lives.

Formation

In a number of discussions, the faithful expressed that many of their fellow parishioners have not encountered Christ in the Eucharist. There is concern some see Him or the Eucharist as unimportant, irrelevant and not present in their lives.

On the other side of the coin, conversations indicate the importance of articulating the tenets of the faith in a way that is accessible and understandable to the inadequately catechized.

There is strong consensus that parental involvement in catechesis is necessary and lacking. Some discussions also pointed out a need to balance catechesis with experiences of faith and a relationship with Christ.

The need for catechesis is not limited to children. Adults seek opportunities to learn the teachings of the Church, the rationale behind those teachings and how to apply Church teachings in their daily lives. People want to be taught to pray; they want their churches open and available for both personal and communal prayer. There is also a genuine desire for opportunities to participate in devotions.

There is strong consensus that the breakdown of the family has made passing on the faith more difficult and hinders all aspects of formation and vocational awareness. Participants in the Synod discussion broadly desire to engage youth and accompany them on their faith journey.

We need to promote church vocations.

Community

The theme of community appeared in the majority of comments. Community is described in many forms in the varied discussions.

There is consensus that community is created within parishes through shared experiences. Examples of shared experiences include outreach and service, events and intentional small groups meant to promote deeper sharing and opportunities to be vulnerable. Hospitality and fellowship are viewed as means to strengthen and support community. Invitation is critical to improving our sense of community, engaging the marginalized and sharing the Gospel. Invitations should be personal, joyful and enthusiastic. They need to be expressed through widely varied channels such as individual contact, phone calls, preaching, bulletins, social media, mailings and other means. The value of good greeters is mentioned often.

Participation and discussion

Discussions reveal a longing for opportunities to be heard and for safe, non-judgmental dialogue. Participants indicate they do not engage in conversations related to faith or Church decision-

making. This is attributed to fear or a lack of deep knowledge, as well as the perception that people do not listen unless it fits their viewpoint. Polarization, created by unexamined biases in modern culture, makes listening to each other very difficult.

At the Youth Rally, the second lowest score was given to the statement “I feel heard when I have participated in some activity of event at the parish, in parish groups, etc.” Of the five categories of questioning, the categories of *Listening* and *Discern and Decide* tied for the second lowest average scores. The category *Participation and Responsibility* scored second best.

A sense of disconnection between the Church hierarchy and the people is described in a number of comments. It is asked, “Does the Catholic bureaucracy inhibit sharing?”

Whether anything will come of this Synodal process is a source of both hope and pessimism. The Synod was compared to the Diocese of Ogdensburg’s 2014-2015 Census which several comments described as a missed opportunity for evangelization due to a lack of follow up in many parishes.^{iv}

Outreach

Comments indicated the Church must go forth and convert the world and affect the culture rather than building a fortress to protect herself. The faithful are called to service to God and His people. It is through this service we bring others to a joyful encounter and a relationship with Christ. Many outreach ministries were mentioned such as: phone trees, soup kitchens, drivers, and bereavement and prison ministry. Community outreach can happen in collaboration with other agencies and faiths.

For some Synod participants, COVID created a disconnect from the sacraments, the Church and community. In others, it reinvigorated the longing for community and sacraments. Livestreamed liturgies offered many people a connection to the celebration of the Mass which some recognized as imperfect.^v

Specifically, outreach to the homebound and additional ministers for that outreach were expressed as needs. Comments emphasized that the homebound remain part of our parish communities. As such, the homebound can participate in ministry through actions such as praying for others.

Responses suggested communication to internal and external audiences needs to increase and improve, especially via digital means. This was supported when “The voice of the Church is heard in our society, denouncing injustice and announcing the message of Jesus” received the lowest average score and poorest distribution of scores on the Youth Rally Survey. The questions in this category, *The Church and the World*, received the lowest average score.

Outliers

Feedback received from parishes revealed consensus on the themes above, desire for community, hospitality, relationship, adult faith formation and faith sharing opportunities, and concern for youth. Other themes are mentioned in only one or two parishes and corroborated in

the My2Cents survey feedback or repeatedly emerge in the My2Cents feedback alone. Most of these themes qualify as being on the extremes of the theological spectrum. These comments are included to ensure the synthesis remains as synodal as possible, supporting a listening environment where individuals have the courage to speak and be heard.

Included in those comments is a call for a greater role for women in the Church, with some calling for women's ordination to priesthood or diaconate. This is expressed by some as solution to the shortage of priests. In response to the lack of priestly vocations, there is a call for married priests.

Generally, there is a recognition that LGBTQ persons are marginalized. There are comments and questions about how to welcome members of this community while upholding Church teachings. However, there are voices that call for recognition of gay/same-sex marriage or blessings of same sex unions. At the same time, other voices counter that it is vital that the church continues to promote and proclaim difficult teachings such as those related to life issues and homosexuality.

In some conversations and in the survey, especially with young adults, a hunger for the "rejuvenation of the Mass" rises to the top. There is a desire for reverence, quality music and homilies, prayer and a sense of welcoming. For many others, the desire for tradition is a pre-Vatican II mentality that is divisive and polarizing.

Especially in the My2Cents survey, respondents feel as though they marginalized and not part of the community. Many indicate they feel unwelcome in their parishes. Others opine that they are marginalized because they hold opinions on an extreme of the theological spectrum.

Although there were not many conversations with those who left the Church, whether they became non-affiliated or joined another denomination, there is a need to share the few such comments submitted. For some, there is a great sadness. Most speak about their experience of Church being uninformed and consisting of boring ritual. The Church is seen as judgmental, and participants feel rejected.

On the other hand, many respondents to the survey wrote beautiful stories of their journeys back to the faith or of conversions to the faith. These stories came as responses to a question about their experience of Church or faith.

Although these outlying themes did not rise to a level of diocesan consensus and communion, they speak to the greater theme of how we journey together. They speak to the themes of community, inclusion, and the need to overcome division and polarization. There is a need to be able to speak courageously and a need for all to listen.

Committee observations

The process of writing this report attempted to continue in the spirit of the Synod and included prayer, open discussion and seeking a communion of ideas. After hosting and participating in dozens of synod sessions and during the synthesizing of group discussions and responses

collected, the Synod Committee developed observations and ideas derived from the Synod discussion but not stated.

The Synod provides a much-needed opportunity for dialogue among the people of the diocese. The overarching area of consensus is the need for community, including such themes as hospitality, inclusion, invitation. Even the theme of marginalization speaks of including and inviting those on the margins back into community. The theme of outreach speaks to inclusion of the marginalized, but also speaks to how service and working with others on a common mission builds community and spiritual friendships. There is a deep sense of isolation and loneliness that existed before and became more prevalent with COVID.

Despite the predominance of the community theme, responses almost never make any connection between the Mass, the Eucharist and the community being sought. One quiet comment was, "There is a lack of understanding of worship and the sacramental life." That lack of understanding extends to the teaching and structure of the Church. This misunderstanding appears occasionally in discussion groups and more frequently in private responses. The good news is many desire adult catechesis and formation on how to compassionately live the teaching of the Church. The bad news is many are shopping for a Church where they can pick and choose the personality, spirituality and teachings they value personally. A disconnect exists between an individual's desires and being in communion with the people of their parish.

This consumer mentality is present in remarks about traditional and progressive Catholics. On a positive note, it primarily emerges from discussions that acknowledge a fear of division in the Church community. The consumer mentality questions the validity or desirability of the other side of the spectrum. It limits or extinguishes dialogue, any attempt to appreciate others' perspectives and recognition of the value of other expressions of spirituality. Some of this stems from a lack of understanding of Church and Mass.

Many discussions regarding the lack of youth engagement in the parish disregard the need for parents to lead the family to Church and God. Similarly, many comments about vocations do not recognize that vocations come primarily from family life and a wider understanding of the daily realities of clerical and religious life. Zero comments were received about the lack of men, especially fathers, participating in sacramental life.

The biggest contributor to the health of a parish seems to be its pastor. It is difficult to replace a pastor's presence. The dwindling number of priests and need for pastors to take on more parishes or worship sites presents enormous challenges. The committee asked repeatedly, "What happens to parishes when struggling or inadequate pastors are left in place?"

There was both surprise and disappointment at how little discussion related directly to current social justice and political issues. The committee speculates some participants self-censored to avoid political and cultural polarizing topics. Polarization is a most effective form of anti-union.

In several discussions about marginalized groups, it is evident that quality catechesis is needed. For example, statements regarding the marginalization of the LGBTQ community seemed to reflect media assertions rather than Church teaching or practice.

Catholics struggle to understand and apply Church teaching to many of today's hot button topics like marriage, divorce and annulments, the critical role of family in vocations, evangelization, Eucharist, sexuality and science. Leading the faithful through the quagmire calls for knowledgeable presenters to build a foundation of understanding Church teaching and demonstrate how to live the Christian life. Diocesan staff and other appropriate subject matter experts need to be present in parishes.

In general, there is a strong desire for adult faith formation and small-group faith sharing. The committee sees many Catholics struggle to share their faith because they do not recognize God's grace in their lives and are reluctant to share their stories with others.

Many parishioners do not feel they have the ability or comfort to use language of faith especially with family or friends. Parents are the primary teachers of their children. The practice and transmission of the faith is fundamentally damaged.

Although it was helpful during COVID, people are mainly tired of online events and desire opportunities to gather, share and learn from one another.

Notes

ⁱ Comes from several discussions regarding the Novo Ordo and Extraordinary Form.

ⁱⁱ This comment arose from parishes struggling in a parish grouping or with unrealized expectations or a pastor that may be struggling.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Extraordinary Form of the Mass was not the term used. References were to the Latin Mass or lack of reverence in the Ordinary Form of the Mass.

^{iv} LaValley, Most Rev. Terry R., Pastoral Letter "Find Your Home in Christ", April 9, 2014, <https://www.rcdony.org/about/mission.html>.

^v The livestream connection many found during COVID highlights a distorted understanding of presence and communion.

Conclusions

Thanks are given to God for this opportunity to journey together, to the Holy Father for convening this Synod, and to all who participated in the Synod process and conversations. These efforts will help us continue to strive for Our Sacred Purpose: “Christ-led, Christ-fed, and hope-filled, the Diocese of Ogdensburg joyfully invites the people of the North Country to the journey of faith through the proclamation of the Gospel, the celebration of the Eucharist and the Sacraments, and the loving service of neighbor.”

Toward that goal, these discussions and what we learned from them strengthen our resolve to revisit and refresh our efforts as they relate to the Diocesan Priorities developed in 2014: Building Parishes with Living Stones, Strengthening Faith Formation in Family Life, and Creating a Culture of Vocations.

Building Parishes with Living Stones

To build strong parishes, the living stones, the people of God, must be connected, supporting and strengthening one another. An overarching area of consensus in the Synod discussions was the need for community. As part of the Body of Christ, all should grow in relationship with Christ and so with one another through prayer, fellowship, faith sharing, hospitality, dialogue, inclusion, and invitation. Pastors are ordained to model Christ’s love and participate actively in their parish communities, setting the tone for their parishes.

There is need for continued and increased outreach to those on the margins. Continued dialogue within parishes and communities to increase empathy and understanding is a means to overcome polarization and division and marginalization. Joined or merged parishes, especially, need to prioritize creating opportunities for community and collaboration.

As the Body of Christ, we should recognize and encourage the giftedness of the laity, involve diverse perspectives and voices in leadership and decision making, and encourage collaboration and co-responsibility.

Strengthening Faith Formation in Family Life

The domestic Church, the family, is the critical transmitter of the faith and is responsible for bringing children to a relationship with Christ and His Church. Parents should be engaged in catechesis for their children and their own ongoing faith formation.

Additionally, there is a yearning among adult faithful to deepen their knowledge of the truth of the Gospels and Church teachings and how to live those truths in the world. The faithful seek to know Christ through learning to pray and encountering Him the sacraments.

Creating a Culture of Vocations

All are called to holiness by virtue of their baptism. There is a need to ensure youth are taught and shown the importance of discernment and vocational awareness, whether to the dedicated single or married life, priesthood or consecrated life, which is a primary responsibility of the

family. The entire Church community, as the living stones, provides support, call and formation for all vocations.

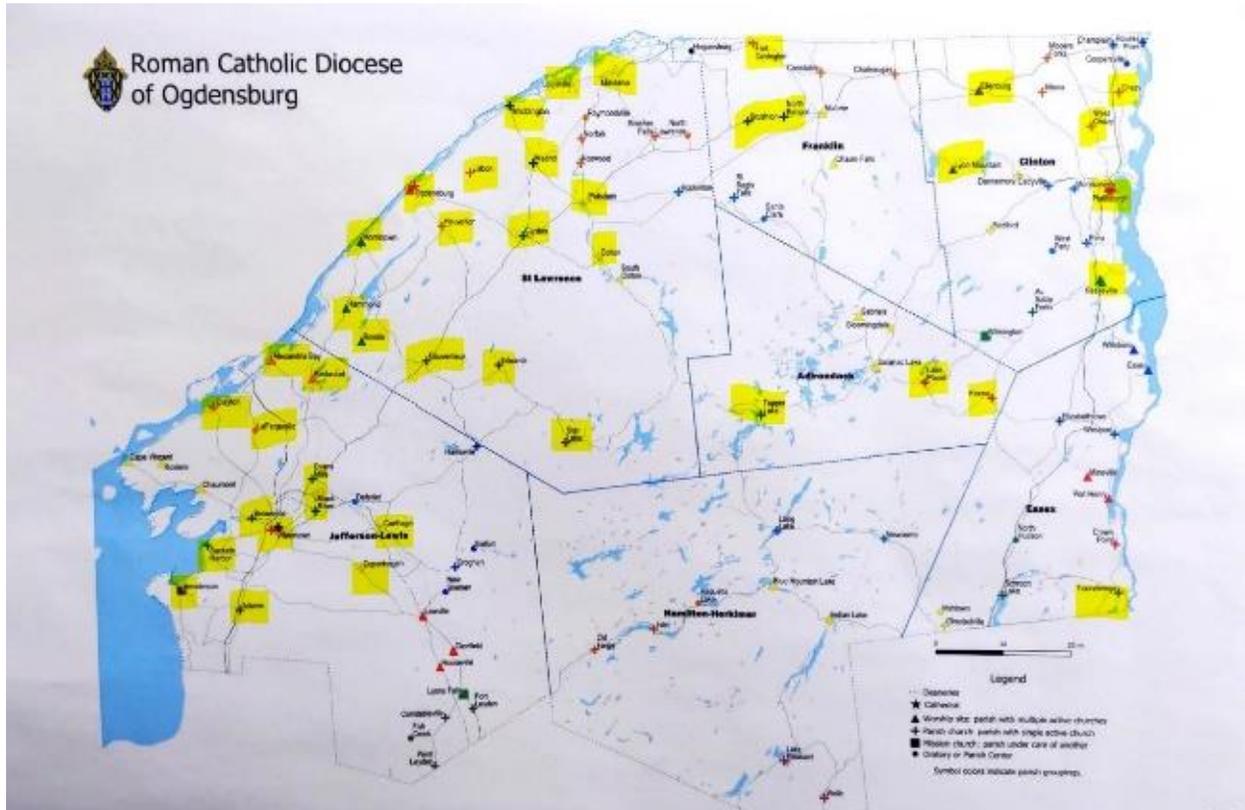
Steps Going Forward

In light of this report, which is a snapshot in time, we, as members of the Body of Christ, need to envision anew our mission, goals and priorities. What steps do we take to actually build community and form leadership so as to build parishes with living stones? How do we encourage our people to engage in formation, continual life-long learning and deep conversations about their faith so that they can be confident to go out as missionary disciples and become courageous witnesses to the love of Christ in the world? How do we improve our communication, both internally and externally, to show the beauty, truth and goodness of God mediated through the Church so that all will be drawn in, and desire to come and see and experience the joy of following Christ?

May we continue this synodal process, as members of the Body of Christ, re-learn the art of listening to God and one another, and speaking the truth in love, and truly journeying on this pilgrimage together while inviting all to join us on the way.

Appendices

Discussion: Parish participation map



Links

[Parish Delegate Packet](#) used for training

[Parish Synodal Discussion Feedback Form](#) paper version

[My2Cents survey](#) paper version

[Youth Survey](#) used at the Youth Rally