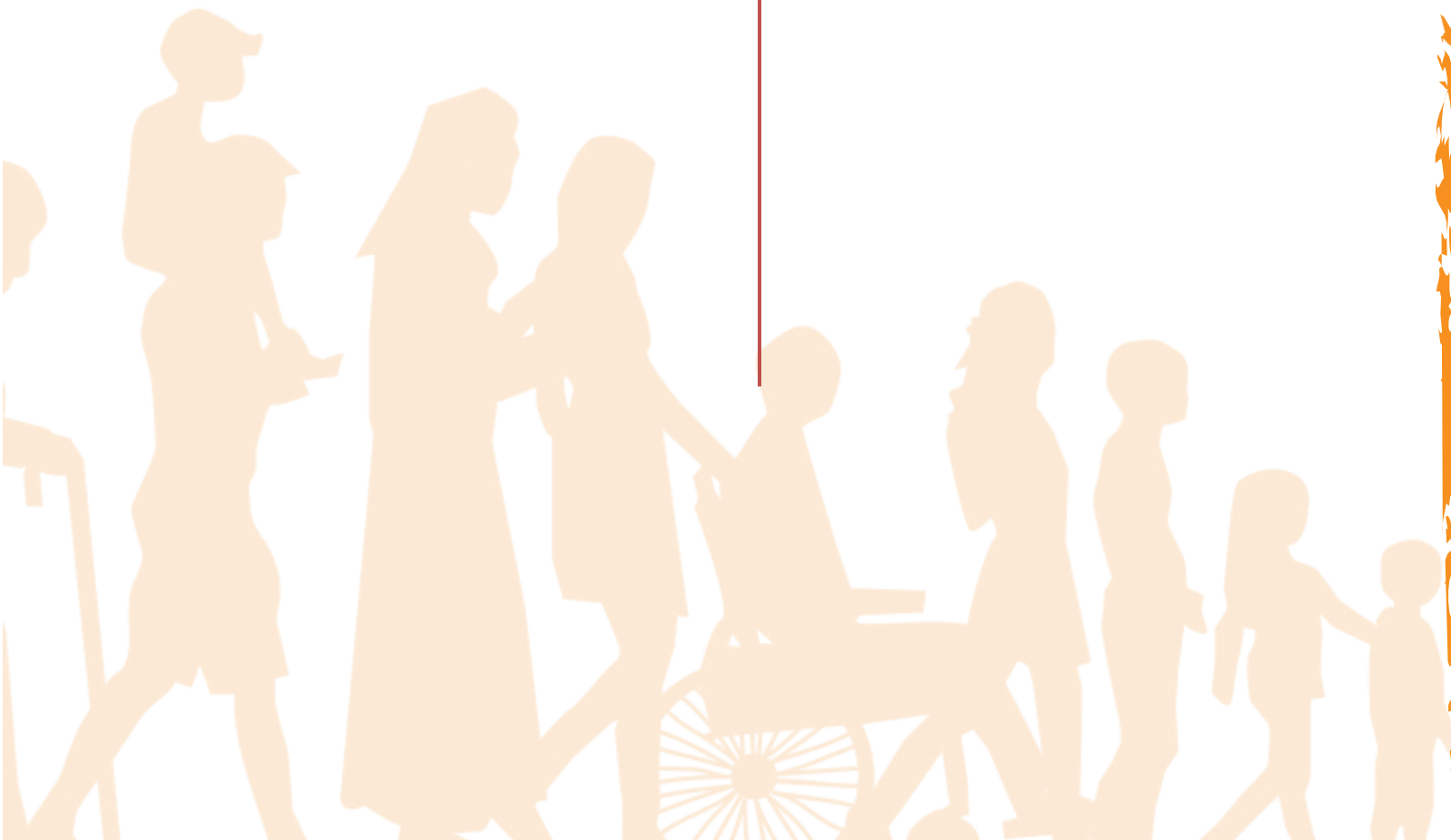




For a synodal Church
communion | participation | mission

DIOCESE OF BUFFALO

*Synod Report to the United States Catholic
Conference of Catholic Bishops*



Overview

“Listen, let us listen – the Synodal journey has begun.” This verse from the terrific song by the Antilles Episcopal Conference of Catholic Bishops says a great deal about our approach in the Diocese of Buffalo. The Synodal Journey has begun – yes! – but it will live long past the filing of this report.

A variety of factors kept us from getting a good start last fall – and we did not begin until early February. Bishop Mike Fisher made it clear that he hoped that our Synod efforts bore fruit well beyond this report (as important as this report is). And so, we made a decision to divide our work into two “Phases.” Phase 1, completed for this report, focused on bringing together diocesan-wide listening groups including groups of “distinct voices” – those with common perspectives, or shared experiences, or mutual interests. An upcoming Phase 2 will reach to the “Parish Families” in our renewing Diocesan structure.

In Phase 1 we hosted 650 laity and 130 clergy at 35 listening sessions. These included many General sessions as well as Distinct Voices sessions for women, those committed to justice work, the LGBTQ+ community, the African American, African, and Hispanic communities, traditional Latin Mass Catholics, youth, young adults, refugees, persons with disabilities, those who have experienced the effects of divorce, survivors of abuse, Church ministers, women religious, priests and deacons. Their voices, together with the voices of our general sessions, have been used as the basis for this report. [Attachment 1 contains materials distributed at the Synod sessions, and Attachment 2 is a summary of Distinct Voices]

The report is supplemented by previous Synodal-like experiences in the Diocese including The Movement to Restore Trust 2019 Bishop’s Listening Sessions Report [Attachment #3] and the Diocesan Renewal Task Force 2020 Report [Attachment 4], as well as the results of a Diocesan-wide Disciple Makers Index Survey conducted by the Catholic Leadership Institute [Attachment 5].

Our Diocese is going through a “Road to Renewal” that was begun two years ago. We are reorganizing our parishes into thirty-six “Families” of three to six parishes with one pastor for each Family. This process is, understandably, disruptive and cause for concern. We will be having Listening Sessions in the Families as they are rolled out to allow them to air their concerns, but importantly, to help them to “dream about” the future Church.

Our Synodal efforts here in the Diocese of Buffalo encompass a number of areas where we have an opportunity to emerge from the cloud we have been under for the last decade. We have the largest number of reported abuse cases in the country, we have filed Chapter 11 bankruptcy, closed the Seminary, and have lost a tremendous number of parishioners. Our Synod team pledged to listen to the distinct voices in our Diocese to let the Spirit speak through them so that we can, perhaps, join to renew the mission of the Church through our efforts as intentional disciples.

What Surprised Us

Given the recent past of our Diocese, we knew that there were some very raw emotions among our people. What was surprising was the level of distrust that was expressed – from those who regularly attend and are faithful to our Church. We certainly expected a level of distrust from the LGBTQ+ community, or abuse survivors, but it was quite startling to hear such distrust expressed from those who are currently supporting and participating in our faith communities. Their issues tended to be gathered into three categories: 1.) the handling of the abuse crisis (at the “hierarchy” level as well as the Diocesan level), and the ongoing handling of priests who are accused; 2.) fiscal transparency – no clear understanding of where the money contributed is spent on both the Diocesan and local parish level; 3.) the futility of expressing an opinion or giving input to clergy – there is little confidence that whatever is said, including during the Synodal Listening Sessions, will make any difference in the direction, organization, or operation of the Church.

This distrust might be the underlying cause for the second surprise for us – apathy. There were a few Listening Sessions that did not even draw enough participants to make holding the Session an opportunity to gather a variety of input and opinions. Even among those who attended some of the sessions, they made it clear that this was the “last chance” for the Church to engage with them. *“I’m hanging on by a thread, and if this effort isn’t worthwhile, I don’t care enough to stick around.”*

We were also surprised by the difficulty that participants had in envisioning the Church emerging from the current malaise, and their role in it. In our Listening Sessions, we asked three questions: “When you think about the future of the Church: 1. What are your concerns? 2. What are our strengths and what gives you hope? 3. How can you further the mission of the Church?” We discovered that answering the first question was relatively easy, the second was harder, and the last was really hard. Consequently, we were able to gather a fair number of challenges we face, and some strengths to build on, but far fewer pathways for participation from the folks in our congregations.

We expected to see some polarization in the Church, but the level of it within the Diocese was very pronounced. We did experience some division along “political” lines and hot-button issues like abortion or ordaining women as priests, but the greatest polarization went far deeper. There were expressions by participants to find ways to engage and evangelize the ambient culture, which sometimes was expressed that the Church ought to *“get with the 21st Century.”* Other examples of this were requests for the Church to re-examine its teaching regarding the LGBTQ community, divorce and remarriage, a broader approach to being “pro-life,” a more vocal promotion of Catholic Social Teaching, and a larger role for women.

In opposition to that was the view that the Church should go back to its “older ways.” Although a minority opinion, it appeared in some Sessions, and very vocally. Many of the comments revolved around the desire to have a more explicit availability and endorsement of the Traditional Latin Mass. However, it was not limited to the form of worship; in many cases there were calls to return to a pre-Vatican II Church, with emphasis on devotions and pietistic practices. Finally, the request was to have a parish designated a “Latin Mass” parish, with daily Latin Masses.

Another surprise was the widespread support for a larger role for women in the Church and the broad call by many for the Church to be more welcoming of the LGBTQ+ community. As society has radically changed, and the Church has not, relationships with women spouses and daughters, and family and friends who are gay, lesbian or transgender are causing many to question how they remain connected and active in this faith.

Most significantly, there was an overwhelming commitment to the Eucharist. Reports of Catholics not “understanding” the Real Presence of the Eucharist notwithstanding, Session after Session had expressions of the centrality of and appreciation for the Eucharist. It was clear that the Eucharist was, in fact, the “source and summit” of their Catholic lives – even if they did not express it in those terms. There were phrases like “*it’s what we have that no other faith has,*” and the acknowledgment that the Eucharist is a gift that supports them throughout their lives and feeds them to be present to one another in Christ. In fact, one participant remarked that “*Eucharist should become a verb*” – so that taking part in Communion impels us to go forward to proclaim the teachings of Jesus.

Shadows and Lights

Since we asked participants in the Listening Sessions to express their concerns as well as their hopes, we uncovered a number of areas that were both the “shadows” of our Church – the areas where there is polarization, or a lack of inclusion, or deep pain. But, of course, there were also some areas where people had great hopes – where they saw the light that the Church could shine on itself and on the world.

Shadows on Our Faith

First among the “shadows” that we assessed as critical is one that goes to the heart of Catholic life. Within the comments there was an underlying theme that we can only describe as a desire for “**Catholic Identity**” – a yearning for help in living a life by Catholic ethics and principles, an ability to see social issues and challenges through a “Catholic lens.”

Although not specifically identified by participants in those terms, there were quite a few concerns that were expressions of this view:

People are looking for more **direction on social issues**. Many want guidance – not **what** to think, but **how** to think about things like reproductive issues, climate change, sexual orientation, atheism, and others. They are looking for consistency from the Church Hierarchy, many citing the confusion caused by the handling of Eucharist for politicians.

They are aware that there is much teaching available, for example, in the Catechism, but they perceive that Catholics are not “**catechized**.” While for some this term harkens back to Baltimore Catechism days, for most it rather means that much of Catholic teaching has not been made “*practical*” or applicable to “*daily life*.” Much of this is due to the lack of “**adult formation**” – the absence of regular, organized, accessible teaching. As one participant put it, “*Faith formation*

programs not just for youth but adults – kind of RCIA for the already baptized – consistent curriculum managed by the Diocese.”

This deficiency also applies to most **homilies**. People are looking for *“homilies that connect to daily life”* – especially when major events occur. When ten African Americans were killed in a racially motivated massacre on a Saturday afternoon, it was rare to have that tragedy be the topic of the Sunday homily. Even the next week there was little mention of racism, gun violence, or the Church’s teaching on either of those topics, or if it was mentioned it was not the core of the homily.

In a broader sense, there is also a desire to hear more about **Catholic Social Teaching** – both from the pulpit and on a regular basis in other communication. Although there is a slight awareness of that teaching, it is rarely communicated or taught or spoken of, and there appears to be a *“resistance to Catholic Social Teaching, and a lack of clergy promoting it.”*

Broadly, the Synod voices called out the lack of engagement of our youth, young adults and families with children in our parishes. They observed that today’s young often don’t see a place for Church in their lives, *“the Church isn’t God.”* Young Adults feel the Church is intolerant *“Traditional Catholics will turn others away...especially with sexist, racist, or generally judgmental tendencies.”* Many felt that issues of how the Church connects to secular society and a lack of understanding of the teachings of the Catholic Faith were driving the young away.

There are significant disconnections as appears in the isolation or “independence” of **parishes**. As one participant said, *“Parishes are not connected as one Church.”* In some cases, parishes are considered more as *“fiefdoms”* than as **communities** connected into one Diocesan family. There were several comments that there was *“no alignment between parishes and the diocese – everything is very parochial.”* As we continue with our Road to Renewal, which will establish a collaborative ministry model in the Diocese, there is a great uncertainty about the wisdom of this, and many parishioners are concerned that their parish will somehow lose its character if joined to other parishes and *“forced”* to coordinate activities across parish lines.

The ability to keep parishes as *“parochial”* units points to a *“lack of accountability”* within the Diocese. Some see this lack of **accountability** of clergy to the Bishop, of the Bishop to the people, and no mutual accountability for the operation of parishes.

Some are concerned that there is not enough financial transparency, questioning *“Where is the money going?...like St. Paul says, ‘we are looking through a glass darkly’”* for how resources are managed.

The issue of accountability is most clearly seen in the handling of the **abuse crisis**. The perceived failure to formally acknowledge the abuse and cover up by the Church and offer an authentic apology has meant for many that *“the Church has lost its moral authority.”* But the abuse crisis is not just an issue of accountability – it is important to realize the level of pain that exists among so many in the Diocese. The horrible pain borne by the many victims of clergy abuse became shared widely, although to a far lesser degree, beginning when so many of the cases were revealed, in *“2018 – the year of shame!”* With the largest number of reported cases in the country, scores of Catholics had a connection through a parish or a school with a priest who was credibly accused.

And from some perspectives, there was *“no judgement on the perpetrators, and no justice for the victims.”*

One major effort of the Synod is to listen to voices on the **margins**. In our Diocese those who are on the margins are those who are other than the white, suburban, middle-to upper-class Catholics. Prominent among the marginalized are the **African American and the Hispanic communities**. Both communities are situated almost entirely within the city limits and both groups see the lack of inclusion within our wider Diocese.

Another marginalization occurs along geographic lines. From a geographic perspective, parishioners in the Southern Tier, in the **rural** eastern counties, and in Niagara County all feel disengaged from the “Diocese” *“Why weren’t any of these sessions held in Springville? I wasn’t surprised – we’re always ignored.”* The general impression is that the suburbs that ring the City get all the attention, and everyone else is “second class.”

As noted above, there is extensive support to stop the marginalization of the **LGBTQ+ community**. They feel rejected and excluded from the Church, both in practice and in Church teaching. *“I am not intrinsically disordered,”* declared one participant in the Listening Session.

Our Synod primarily reached those who remain affiliated with the Church. We often heard from disaffiliated second hand through friends and parents and grandparents who described their children’s departure from the Church. Issues that parents often cite as reasons that their adult children have left the Church are the distrust that arose from the abuse scandal, the lack of respect for women as manifested in an all-male clergy as well as positions on reproductive rights, the lack of acceptance of LGBTQ+ and the changing nature of family construct in today’s society. One woman said, *“I feel angry that I have to apologize to my children for being Catholic.”*

Most dramatically, the apex of the sexual abuse and cover up caused a massive exodus from participation in the Church. This can be illustrated in Buffalo by looking at the number of donors to the Catholic Charities campaign in 2018 to 2020 which went from 44 to 31 thousand; a 30% drop.

Lights and Hopes for our Catholic Faith and Church

Areas that were universally called out as strengths in the Catholic Church, mostly revolve around fundamental beliefs. Central was the **Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist**. This was called forth often as something uniquely Catholic and its power felt even more after the separation caused by the Covid Pandemic. To complement the nourishment of the Eucharist, there was a strong hope expressed for **homilies** at Mass that inspire Christian action by connecting the **Gospels and Jesus’ teaching** to our daily life. It was hoped that Catholics would **publicly show joy in our faith** through our communication and use of Catholic artifacts in homes and on our persons. *“Be Catholic in this big, bad world.”*

All **the sacraments** were identified as a central and valuable foundation to our faith and form the framework of how we experience Church through **parish life** and the Sunday **Mass**. Gratitude and a desire to form stronger relationships with our **priests** was expressed by many. While there was a recognition that the virtual tools were valuable during the pandemic, many were hopeful that we

can reach out and bring people back to the pews. There was a recognition that this will take **evangelization**: people being invited to return. The power of the personal invitation was cited, particularly from Priests and Deacons as being an important tool to engage young people to take on parish responsibilities. It was also suggested that today's aging volunteers need to recruit their replacements as part of their role in ministry. There were also ideas to build engagement within the Church to invite people back on anniversaries of their sacrament, or assign mentors to families, e.g., following Baptism or Weddings.

In nearly every Session we heard the plea to make the changes necessary and develop new or revitalized ministries to allow the Church to better engage with our **youth and young adults** so they can fully benefit from the fullness of faith. Many suggested that other faith denominations are faring better with engagement and we should learn from them. Ministries to engage community of young parents and supporting them in raising their children are encouraged. There is a hope that better promoting Catholic **social teaching** and more fully identifying our social ministries such as Catholic Charities and Catholic Health can make the Church more relevant for our youth. Church needs to build on *"equality, positivity, love and respect."*

Critical to this was the view that our **Catholic schools** are an important asset to nurture *"too many Catholic Schools have closed"*, and to use to evangelize and build a vibrant and faithful group of young people and families. One young adult shared, *"I am grateful because Catholic education gave me the foundation to come back."* Many hoped that the schools would provide high quality education and be kept accessible and affordable.

There is a hope that the Church can improve its approach to communication, particularly with respect to reaching young people through better social media means. In particular those who work in the Church expressed a strong need to fix the broken and antiquated communication systems in the Diocese.

Many also called for more **inviting liturgies** and a vibrant music ministry. Some expressed a need to modernize, reinvigorate and enliven the structure of the Mass and a vocal niche segment advocated for retaining access to the traditional Latin Mass and pre-Vatican II style of worship. Numerous people cited the **Saints and Blessed Mother** as unique gifts. The power of **prayer** individually and through prayer and bible study groups, and adoration are important to center parish life. However, all these ways we celebrate our faith are not enough to meet the needs of people in **forming community**.

There were frequent expressions of the desire for the parish to be a place of **social gathering**. Many expressed a longing for the days of potluck socials, and family activities to build relationships. Everything does not need to be a prayer event or fund raiser. *"Need more friend raisers, not fund raisers."* A young adult group spoke about the need for more activity-based engagement, *"Pray and Play,"* where they would gather in prayer or reflection followed by a sport or game.

There were both questions and hope for the **Road to Renewal** our Diocese has embarked upon. Recognition of the need to nurture and support our **pastors and priests** while also changing their roles and having expanded and more formal roles for deacons and laity was prevalent in many

forms. This includes breaking down the traditional **hierarchy and clericalism** in today's structure, particularly in parish decision-making. Many hoped for more **vocations** and some suggested that we need to educate more broadly on the many and varied religious vocational opportunities in the Church. A hope was often expressed that priests should be allowed to marry, women should be ordained as deacons and priests, age limits should be reexamined. There is a recognition that the future will require a true **partnership between clergy and laity** to use the special charisms of all. There is a desire for expanded and improved formation for all people of the Church

In our various "distinct voices" sessions we heard pleas to reverse the pain caused by Catholic doctrine that has pushed away many from feeling accepted and supported by the Church. Participants spoke extensively of the need for our Church to become more **welcoming**. *"So many people are excluded from our Church."*

Most uniformly there was an appeal to reverse the marginalization of **women** in the Catholic Church. The lack of women in clergy roles, where all the power of decisions rest, has relegated women to the sidelines. *"There are 7 sacraments for men and only 6 for women."* Strongly promoted was ordaining women as deacons as well as many calls to ordain women as priests. There was a broad consensus for expanding the role of women to have more leadership and decision-making roles in the Church – at all levels- parish, Diocesan, and world-wide Church.

People who have **divorced** and remarried are kept from fully participating in sacraments, serving as sponsors, and made to wade through an extraordinary bureaucracy to attempt to secure annulment. The **LGBTQ+** community feels not just abandoned, but chastised for who they are, *"who God made them to be."* There are many people that do not live in a Catholic defined family structure who feel ostracized from the practice of their faith. The calls for changes were heard well beyond the voices of these communities themselves, but in many sessions, people expressed their hope that the Church would embrace them with respect, justice, and compassion.

As a Diocese that is largely Caucasian, it was recognized that we need to expand our **diversity sensitivity and engagement**. At a session attended primarily by African Americans, *a black woman told of how it pained her when she went to a "white" church on MLK weekend and did not hear any prayer that recognized the message of civil rights.* Our own Synod session for Hispanics failed to provide the written materials in Spanish. Several observed that Churches should display religious art which embraces *"the original ethnic faces"* rather than the commonly used Eurocentric portrayals. Disabled people are denied ability to fully participate in sacraments. Rural communities want to feel better connected to the Diocese.

Whether driven by doctrine or behavior the Church has become insular and we hope through the intercession of the **Holy Spirit** and the use of a more **Synodal approach** we can listen and reach out to those who need Church. *"We need less red tape and more red carpet."* We seek clarity around our Catholic Identity. We hope we can become more welcoming without losing what it fundamentally means to be Catholic.

Finally, most often the strength of being a **"Universal Apostolic Church"** was recognized by Synod participants. Hope was expressed that parishes would become better connected to the message and ministry of our one central leader in **Pope Francis**.

Distinct Voices

Specific sessions were designed to hear distinct voices, including those who may be at the margins of our Diocese and their collective rich and broad input has been included in this overall report. Attachment 2 A and B have been created with a full summary of the sessions; however brief highlights of distinct comments are illustrated below.

Ethnic Groups:

African American – Issued a call for the Church to take an open position on racism and a broader engagement on social justice matters. There is a desire to have African American clergy.

African Community – Desire to have African-born priests who understand their culture and language to be able to fully celebrate their faith.

Ministers to Asian immigrants and refugees – Church leadership needs to invest in understanding the needs and struggles of this population. A Burmese priest is desired to allow these communities to experience the fullness of Church and Sacraments.

Hispanic – The Hispanic population feels marginalized by the lack of Spanish speaking and culturally Hispanic ministers and clergy and the systemic lack of publications translated into Spanish.

Church Employees/Ministers – Describe the need to establish a Parish culture that doesn't change with the change in Pastor. They call for need to radically overhaul Diocesan Communication practices NOW, and shared that the Diocese is at a standstill awaiting the coming Renewal roll-out. There is great concern and confusion regarding how Renewal will impact them.

Deacons – There is concern about trust and understanding of their role from priests, and the ability for leaders to adapt to change needed for Renewal. There is a desire to better define, expand and clarify understanding of their role – specifically that they are ministers of service first and liturgy second. They identified many ways they can expand their contribution to the Church.

Divorced Catholics – Have been abandoned by the Church and need the annulment process overhauled and treatment of them, within the Church improved, particularly with sacramental ministry.

Hearing Impaired – more American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters at Mass and other Church events, more communication to about programs and ministries throughout the Diocese. There is a desire for persons who are hearing impaired to be trained to participate more fully in ministries

like lectors, eucharistic ministers, ushers, etc.

LGBTQ+ - This community has experienced hurt and pain from the lack of acceptance of their lifestyle and the separation from their faith it creates. They desire the Church to change its teaching on sexuality.

People with Disabilities – Feel marginalized by the lack of any organized Diocesan ministry and poor accommodations for sacramental ministry.

Priests – Concern for the need to heal the declining nature of the Church and our Diocese, how clergy and laity can come together to enrich spiritual life and help Parishes meet the needs of today.

Survivors of Abuse – There was a desire to share the depth of pain that clergy abuse caused to them, their families, and the Church. They want a formal acknowledgement of the abuse and cover up by the Church and an authentic apology by the Church Hierarchy. The Survivors want there to be more transparency and to continue to find more ways to reach out and engage.

Those who care about Justice – Church does not promote, preach, or practice the breadth of Catholic Social Teaching.

Traditional Latin Mass Catholics – Devout and growing group who want to have dedicated parishes to practice TLM seven days a week.

Women – Call for increased roles of women in leadership, women deacons and priests, and more progressive positions on reproductive rights, sexuality and contraception. Become a more welcoming Church.

Women Religious – Call for education to prepare laity for expanded roles, view the Church as overly conservative and call for expanded role for women and greater commitment to social justice.

Young Adults – Struggle for clarity on Catholic Identity, how to live our faith. They call out the need for more education about the Church's beliefs and desire to join a social community. Attachment 2B includes a summary of specific Young Adult outreach completed in conjunction with the Movement to Restore Trust.

Youth – They desired more education and clarity on Church teachings, energized and welcoming liturgies, and improved communication and use of social media.

Summary of Our Voices

Realizing the hopes and dreams of the many voices regarding the future of the Church will demand change from all.

There is a unanimous call for our **Universal Church** to truly live our Gospel values and become a more welcoming and diverse Church. This will necessitate fundamental changes in the roles of clergy and women in leadership, its teachings on sexuality, particularly in ways that provide acceptance for LGBTQ+ persons.

For the **United States Conference of Catholic Bishops**, there is a need to broaden and deepen its teaching to reflect all aspects of Catholic Social Teaching – and to communicate it more forcefully. People desire consistency of message from Church leadership as a guide to forming our Catholic Identity. You are challenged to find ways to unify in purpose while nurturing the breadth of worship and missions that draw people to celebrate their faith! Unity does not mean uniformity.

On a local level, for **our Diocese and Parishes**, the overwhelming message is one of true partnership. The Laity are hungry to grow in their understanding of the faith and contribute more deeply, particularly in leadership. We must accelerate efforts to authentically listen to and engage youth and young adults. Our Catholic Schools must be strengthened and access improved. Pastors and priests must be supported to truly focus on pastoral needs and cede many aspects of parish operations to laity – the current effort in the Road to Renewal collaborative model of leadership will be destined to failure without this shared decision-making. There is a desire to allow parish identity to flourish and to not be subject to change when the Pastor changes. There is an overwhelming desire to be more welcoming and to reach out and invite people back to engagement with our Church.

We have opportunities to improve our connections as a Diocese *“to be one Diocese”* and fundamental to that is our communication and awareness of all parts of the Local Church. We need to improve our inclusivity and specifically focus on connecting people and parish communities who are only marginally present.

During the coming months our Synodal journey – Listening in Love and Hope, Conversations about Church will be taken to all parts of the Diocese as a part of our ongoing Road to Renewal. We will have the opportunity to build on what each parish has learned from their Parish Disciple Makers Index Survey. In this, we hope that on-going synodality will bring about a true renewal in our faith! Communion, Participation, Mission!