

Diocese of Buffalo

Listening in Love and Hope Synod Report

ATTACHMENT 2A – DISTINCT VOICES

There were 35 Synod sessions held in the Diocese of Buffalo, eight general sessions and 27 with targeted audiences. Based on session evaluations, 96% of the participants were able to share, listen and learn from each other; 60% felt more hopeful for the Catholic Church in the Diocese of Buffalo and 89% indicated they were more likely to engage with the Church in the future.

Participants expressed a lack of trust and concern that their input would be heard and acted upon by the hierarchy. There was considerable doubt but much hope that meaningful change can come about from the Synod. Many questioned how the input would be used, hoping, or fearing, it would change Church doctrine.

Racial Equity

The Diocese of Buffalo is a Caucasian-dominated congregation. Issues of diversity, particularly around race, were nonexistent in general Synod conversations until when, around the middle of our consultations, an 18-year-old male drove 200+ miles to murder Black shoppers at a Buffalo supermarket on a Saturday afternoon. It took this event to raise our collective Catholic social conscience. Many questioned the leadership and clergy response and presence of our Catholic Church immediately following the event. Many, feeling the desire to do something, looked to their Pastors and Parishes and found the response lacking. For a city in shock, many Sunday homilies did nothing to address the shooting, some did not even mention it as a prayer of the faithful. There was no call to action to support our Black brothers and sisters in the immediate aftermath. We must ask ourselves, if this happened in a white neighborhood, would the response on Sunday have been different?

People turned to the Church in time of crisis, and it was unable to meet their immediate pastoral needs. We would be remiss to see this only as a diversity issue, this says more about how disjointed and lethargic the church operates and its inability to pivot and connect to what we experience in daily life.

The Buffalo Diocese has several parishes with primarily Black, Hispanic, or Asian populations. The Synod held listening sessions in some of these locations to hear the “Distinct Voices” of diverse populations.

African American

[Note: This session occurred prior to the racially motivated supermarket shooting several blocks from the location of this parish]

The African American community recognizes the changing role of the laity with the decline in the number of priests and the need for more faith formation and enrichment to develop the skills needed for lay leadership. They expressed that there is not enough outreach from the Church to African American communities, no vocational recruitment, poor connection, and lack of inclusivity between urban and suburban Churches.

There was a call for the Church to take an open stand on racism and put more energy into social justice issues. There needs to be more outreach to the wider African American community and engagement with other Christian denominations. A woman told of *“attending a largely Caucasian church on Martin Luther King holiday weekend and of her disappointment that there was no mention of his legacy or civil rights.”*

There was hope for meaningful changes in the priesthood to allow priests to marry, ordaining women, and giving more responsibilities to laity. They expressed concern that there is little involvement of youth and young people, and therefore no succession of parish involvement. Current ministers need to identify and recruit their successors. Need youth ministry.

Communication needs to be two ways: more opportunities to continue to have these Synodal-type sessions for clergy to listen to parishioners to understand their needs and concerns and the need to respect older parishioners and not rely solely on electronic communication.

Concerns about finances and financial transparency, especially in the city parishes and without support from wealthier suburban parishes. Hope for *“authentic renewal to bring about actual change,”* better financial stability and richer parish life through the new Families of Parishes recognizing the gifts of each parish but creating greater cooperation.

African Communities

This group of parishioners, many who speak French, at Our Lady of Hope parish expressed the need to have African priests who understand their culture and language so they can more fully celebrate their faith. *“The Mass is rushed, not celebratory enough, need to consider cultural respect for how Africans celebrate their liturgy.”* They were frustrated about work demands, especially on Sundays, challenging their ability to celebrate their faith.

This population also expressed concern about the lack of young people for the future of the Church and suggested a youth group might be helpful in identifying vocations. They

also observed that “white members of the parish no longer attend the Church.” There was a call to focus on the word of God through liturgical seminars and growth in the charismatic group, *“teach Christians how to pray.”* Additional formation was called for to better teach the rules and symbols of the Church. There was strength and hope in the women’s group and the singers who could be successful in outreach to grow participation in the Church.

Ministers to Asian Immigrants & Refugees

Fruitful input was garnered from those who minister to refugees at Our Lady of Hope and Coronation Parishes, and although we attempted to engage with the refugee community, it was another lesson learned. The people of this parish don’t have time for anything during the week, except work. Holy Days of Obligation don’t make sense in this 21st century culture. Most were converted in refugee camps and there exist strong cultural and language barriers, however at Our Lady of Hope Parish they feel welcomed and come together in strong numbers with more than 400 at Mass and 55 altar servers registered at their small parish. They don’t take their religion for granted and want to come to Church and serve in the Church.

Americans don’t understand the background and struggles of the refugee population. The education levels range from none to eighth grade. This parish contains members from many different countries of origin, different cultures and has many different languages spoken. They rely on lay translators as there are not clergy who speak their languages. A Sunday Mass could have people of 10 countries represented. This is a barrier to sacraments being available to the faithful. There is hope for a Burmese Priest in the future.

The ministers expressed their desire to continue to find ways to overcome the barriers and enable more participation in the Church. An example is providing white robes for all the ministers to overcome a barrier that they didn’t think they had the proper clothes, or having adults be cross bearers as a means of participating in a way that doesn’t require a language mastery. Another important aspect is youth formation and social engagement: *“if the parish feeds the children, the parents become involved.”*

There was a tremendous energy of faith expressed by those involved, the ministers expressed that we need to *“go back to the first century”* Church where the priest goes to the people. There was a sense that the higher-ups did not appreciate the ministry at Our Lady of Hope. There is a desire for the Bishop to join them on a Sunday and get to learn the people, *“eat with them, talk with them, they have many stories.”*

Hispanic

The Hispanic Community has a strong and deep culture with the Church and brings an important diverse presence in three parishes where Spanish masses are offered. They

feel largely underserved by the Diocese, most notably by the lack of Hispanic pastors, clergy, catechists, and the regular provision of written materials in Spanish, which also was a failure of our Synod experience. Hispanics do not feel represented in the Diocesan office of Cultural Diversity. *“Buffalo is Black and White, Hispanics not seen or heard.”* Bilingual Masses need to be equally spoken in Spanish and English. They need Church spaces to be secure and safe.

“A ministry of communication” should be established. They shared that the recent letter from the Bishop about the supermarket shooting was only provided to them in an English pdf format. When they tried to get a version that could be translated, they received no response.

The Hispanic community shared the same concerns about the small number of young people and the need for youth ministers to explain the faith, and more age-appropriate social activities. Faith formation opportunities for young parents and adults of all ages need to be available. Retreats, bible study, lector and eucharistic minister training should be available in Spanish. Need stability in Pastor leadership, and clergy with Spanish skills who can relate to people. They hope for more vocations to relieve the overburdened priests.

Prayer and Evangelization can rebuild the Church. *“Use flyers, home visits, social media, have to go out and seek people.”* Offer services to meet current issues, make the Church the center of the community.

It was suggested the Church adopt a diversity of images that portray Jesus and the Blessed Mother in their more historically accurate ethnic image and that every Church in the Diocese should display at least one of these images.

Church Employees/Ministers (5 sessions)

Listening sessions were held for employees of the Chancery and for Lay Parish Ministers who universally called for a more welcoming, more approachable church. Even in the U.S. the Church remains Eurocentric, and lacks attraction to diverse people. Images should display accurate ethnic origins and other ways of authentic engagement are needed to become more welcoming. This was illustrated by the slow response by the Church to the supermarket massacre and the minimal presence of a service and justice ministry in the Diocese.

The Church does not provide leadership roles for women and there is very low participation by people under 45 years old, although some experienced a breath of new engagement from families of young people expressing a new curiosity about the Church.

There was recognition that our Church in the U.S. is in a “Post-Christian Culture” and we must find new ways to minister without yielding to societal trends. There are places in the world-wide church that are growing, and we should understand what is driving them. Lay ministers are fed up with references to *“becoming a small and purer church – that is not of God..* There is a belief in the Holy Spirit to guide a rebirth, and we should not settle for a smaller church, but focus on how to grow and reengage people in the faith. We are *“breaking down to break thru.”*

The Lay Ministers recognize that the Sunday Mass is a critical bond for the Catholic Faith. Presently, people are not drawn to our liturgies, they want homilies that reflect the Gospel into their daily life and push them to do more. Music ministry should inject joy into the celebration. The Sacraments and Eucharist are a core value of the faith.

Faith Formation should become more of a choice than a mandate; we should be asking more what people need rather than offering them sacramental-based programs. By empowering families, we are evangelizing. One-on-one encounters are a very meaningful way to engage and promote the faith. Volunteer catechists are limited in knowledge and need the support of trained lay minister professionals. Priests also need support to reconnect with parish communities in light of the abuse scandal.

There is a large void in trust, in the past *“everything was done under the table,”* we need more transparency, in particular about finances and litigation.

Significant concerns exist in Lay Ministry regarding the Road to Renewal. There is concern that the adoption is very focused on the Pastors and business aspects, and pastoral ministry and mission are not being addressed. The role of Lay Ministers is not being articulated, and some are concerned that it is being replaced by voluntary positions. Several concerns were raised questioning the future of the profession and if people would invest the time and money in theological education given the level of pay and job security. Concern was expressed about the closure of the Seminary resulting in fewer and more difficult options for training. Another area of concern is the openness for parishes to truly collaborate, with fear of the unknown resulting in them holding on to what they have and know. While lay people know how to collaborate and need to have greater role in leadership, it is often harder for Pastors. Importantly, there is a feeling that the Diocese as a whole is at a STANDSTILL, waiting for Renewal to come to them. There is a fear that by the time the roll-out is complete there will be little left.

There was hope that the Renewal will drive more openness and Synodal behavior and that future Parish Families will be communities that work together, not just be service centers. Also, lay ministers described the Diocesan communication as broken and archaic. This is an issue that needs to be fixed now – it cannot wait until Renewal is completed. More information about Parish ministries needs to be available so that parishioners can be directed to meet their needs. There is hope that there will be an increase in Community, *“more friend raising and less fundraising.”*

Lay employees are concerned about priest morale and wish the Diocese would allow them to function in their best charisms. They need a wellness program that encourages them to form strong friendships. Parishes need to have a mission and continuity that transcends changes in Pastoral leadership. Priests need to embrace and promote lay ownership wherever possible. The phrase, *“it has always been done that way”* needs to be dropped. Need to embrace and expand the role of the Diaconate. There is hope that we can grow by sharing, and we will be better for the Community.

Deacons

There was considerable focus on how the Church can change and adapt to the demands of today’s ministry needs. They called for more lively liturgies. The opinion was stated not to make the *“Eucharist a reward, instead of food for the faithful, Eucharist is food for the journey.”*

They called for more faith formation for adults, an RCIA for already Baptized, that has a consistent curriculum managed centrally. There is an overall concern with engagement with the Church, particularly with younger generations who may not see the need for an organized Church. Also need to reengage the Religious Women in parish life. Deacons expressed the need to embrace diversity and increase the role of women in the Church and consider women in the diaconate.

There is a need for renewal and changes to overcome clericalism, but concern that the priests may not be willing to change, or willing to trust laity, and that the current renewal is struggling. Current leaders are stuck in their ways. The alignment between Diocese and parishes is weak. Lay engagement is waning; need to leverage the commitment of those who remain through all the turmoil. Strong Christ centered community, ministry to the poor, acts of social justice and the Sacraments are fundamental to on-going engagement.

Deacons discussed how their role supports the Diocese, they said we *“are not treated as equals,”* role and accountability varies from parish to parish, and they are pulled into parish administrative responsibilities and away from their ministry of charity. Deacons cited numerous ways to enhance their ministry: inviting lay to get involved, supporting more vibrant formation courses, be more involved in liturgy planning, expand use of collar to be more visible as clergy, prioritize ministry of charity, *“become intentional leaders.”* The Deacons identified that they need to work to clarify and enhance understanding of their role – for priests, parishioners, and themselves.

Deacons hope their role can be enhanced to include anointing, that there may be paid part-time or full-time roles in ministry and that they can adapt and accept the potential of women Deacons.

Divorced Catholics

A small group of divorced Catholics shared that they feel abandoned by the Church, the Diocese offers no ministry or support group. The annulment process is broken--confusion abounds, there is a lack of transparency, the timeframe is too prolonged.

The inability to be granted an annulment is a “*Life Sentence*” which is not understandable when a murderer can go to Confession and be absolved. A grandmother who is an active volunteer in her parish and married 33 years to a divorced man, shared her angst at having to turn down her granddaughter’s request to be a confirmation sponsor because her husband’s annulment request was rejected twice. They expressed that many divorced Catholics abandon the Church because they are treated so poorly, and their wounds are exacerbated.

The attendees also expressed concern about Church finances, the loss of young people and the fact that many do not choose the sacrament of marriage. They called for the Church to elevate the status of women; they should not be “*second class Catholics.*”

While they described the Church as a strong but damaged brand, they hold out hope it can be repaired. They expressed hope that Bishop Fisher would find ways to improve the annulment process and engage divorced Catholics in parish life. “*There is always a way with God.*”

Hearing Impaired

The session was attended by both hearing-impaired and abled people. They expressed the need to have more American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters at Mass and other Church events, and more communication about programs and ministries throughout the Diocese. They like priests who can communicate with them in sign language, and appreciate Masses that offer ASL and hope for more of both, including ability to sign at Latin Mass, funerals, etc. They have a strong ministry centered at Fourteen Holy Helpers Parish and are concerned that Renewal will affect them: don’t “*move the deaf community around from parish to parish.*” 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.

In addition, there was recognition of the lack of young people and their ability to form a “*personal relationship with Christ*” and a need for evangelization. Concern over loss of Catholic schools and catechist for young, and expressed a desire to understand how non-denominational churches are successful.

There is concern about the Bishops’ position on Church doctrine and lack of consistency of application which confuses young. “*Want more Bishops with a backbone to stand up to civil authorities.*” Catholic High Schools and Colleges are “*losing identity and are cooperating with and teaching sinful ideologies like gay pride and gender confusion.*” There were expressed

strengths in the deep history of and traditional values of their parish, including pilgrimages and healings. Some hopes expressed a desire to return to pre-Vatican II celebrations, while others hoped for women priests, married priests, and acceptance of divorced people to remarry.

Many expressed a desire to ‘show love, joy and hope to all.’

LGBTQ+

There was energy from the LGBTQ+ Community to participate in the Synod with the attendance hitting our capacity limits. This energy emanated from a strong desire to feel accepted and able to participate fully in the Church, *“less welcoming and more acceptance.”* Attitudes vary significantly from parish to parish, *“Churches do not feel like safe spaces for us.”* This disconnect was experienced by the Synod team in overcoming false starts to arrange a session in a culturally acceptable manner.

The actions of the Church toward the community do not match the Bible, and it is sometimes twisted to be used against them. Church teaching that being gay is an intrinsic disorder needs to be stricken, *“God made us who we are.”* The lack of acceptance leaves only the choice of celibacy and repressing who we are. *“Jesus would love everyone equally.”*

There was a feeling that the Church does not know *how “broken hearted we are”* at being separated from our faith. Where is the accompaniment when *“we experience valleys like sickness and death?”*

The LGBTQ+ community draws hope from the changing culture and young people who are far more accepting. There is more diversity education in organizations, and the recent Diocese of Buffalo statement was shared, and it was acknowledged that Bishop Mike and the Diocese leadership took an important step forward with its publication.

The existence of the Dignity group of Catholics in Buffalo, although not formally recognized, is a strength to build on. There is a desire for more groups, civil conversations and listening. Laity must be better educated. One story was shared about a son who came out to his mother, only to be told he would go to hell for being gay.

While expressing the Church is SLOW to change, there was hope that the Church will change its fundamental teachings on sexuality, as we have *“2,000 years of eventually correcting our mistakes.”* The community wants to be able to access marriage as a sacrament. There was a desire more for actions than just words, such as a call for the Pope to apologize to the LGBTQ+ community in a public place as he did to the Jewish People in Israel. The LGBTQ+ community wants overt acceptance: *“fly the flag”* became a chant in reference to the rainbow flag which represents the gay community.

While most of the discussion surrounded specific issues of the LGBTQ+ community, those present shared more general concerns over the lack of women in leadership roles, absence of youth, history of abuse of youth and women and concern that these, together with its positions on LGBTQ+, are contributing to a dying Church.

The Church is too focused on politics and should emphasize Catholic Social Teaching and the Beatitudes. *“Church too focused on negatives – what not to do, versus love and what to do.”*

People with Disabilities (2 sessions)

Synod sessions were held with two active parish-based Ministry Groups for people who are differently abled in the Diocese who called out that there is no Diocesan-wide ministry in existence and requested Catholic Charities take on this responsibility. Parishes do not network to even explore and promote what exists in other parishes. Communication and awareness about what are available needs to improve.

Broad disability awareness training, and specifically for those who minister in the Church, is needed to understand the reality of life for families and people with disabilities and *“see all as God sees them.”* People are discriminating toward those with a physical disability, *“feel judged when they come to Mass.”* Ministry needs to extend to family caregivers and non-physical disabilities. Parents have left the church because they can’t find a place for their child with disabilities.

The Church should advocate for more group homes and consider them as an alternative for unused Church property. Consider providing transportation from group homes.

Parishes need to accommodate appropriate sacramental preparation, and liturgical participation, and need to be physically accommodating, including the altar and sanctuary. Parishioners of different abilities can be paired up for roles at Mass. Set up safe space and develop a sense of belonging. Be flexible to allow many means of celebration such as banners and dance to engage those with varied ability.

A story was shared by a mom whose *“non-verbal daughter composed a symphony using technology and shared it with the parish!”* Another worked with the pastor to allow *“a boy with disabilities to also be part of Mass along with his two brothers who are altar servers.”* A woman shared that her *“blind son is a greeter at Church, but sadly people go through another entrance to avoid him.”*

Priests

We hosted almost 100 priests and there were significant themes that emerged which corresponded, in many ways, to the themes expressed in sessions with the laity.

The priests of the Diocese are first and foremost concerned about the declining nature of the Church. The abuse crisis, the Diocesan bankruptcy, the pandemic have all led to a decrease in attendance and participation in the Mass and Sacraments. These developments have created a lack of trust among people and put many on very tenuous footing in their relationship with the Church. *“How many more people are we going lose?”* The lack of young people in the Church is concerning, and no single approach to reversing this trend was put forth except perhaps to *“invest in youth in an ‘out of the box’ way.”* In addition, they are seeking more engagement with families, especially those who are experiencing challenges: *“Do not be ok with the brokenness of families.”*

Given so many of the negative experiences in the last few years, there were several comments about the *“need to heal in the Diocese”* as a result of *“the abuse crisis and effect on people leaving the Church.”* The abuse crisis also has become a crisis of trust -- even among themselves. But there also were expressions of calling on virtues to move into the future: *“Be courageous, trusting in God’s protection, to be truly just, whether in-season or out-of-season.”*

Being in the midst of the Road to Renewal, there were questions about the outcome of it. Phrased as questions, there was more uncertainty than opposition – and they raised issues such as: *“Will laity take ownership of process of renewal and future? Will priests be overworked? Are all priests capable of pastoring six parishes?”* and *“Will priests have less engagement and less authority?”* There also was unease about the timing and priority of the Renewal: *“Are structure needs seen as more important than spiritual needs? For example, is Road to Renewal not truly at the service of the people?”*

There was also a common theme of how priests’ lives and ministry must change to meet the future demands of the Church – and the Diocese. There were various pleas for their role to be *“missionaries rather than maintainers,”* and an overwhelming desire to increase the spirituality of their lives and ministry, to *“deepen prayer life,”* *“make more time for prayer,”* and have a *“personal encounter with the Lord”* and to move *“from a functional priesthood to a spiritual priesthood.”* The current roadblock to enhancing the spiritual life of priests is that *“clergy are too burdened with administration. Parishes do not have the staffs needed to complete the work.”* Because of this, they also have issues of *“time management.”*

And their concerns are not just with themselves as individuals, but in their relationships with each other. There was an acknowledgement that the priesthood is *“lonely – [difficult] convincing others to consider a priestly vocation.”* They hope to have *“better cooperation/collaboration with brother priests (to not be in competition)”* and to see *“priests supporting each other (fraternity) for example, here at convocation.”*

There was an expression of concern about *“unity among clergy and laity,”* whether they will continue to have *“oppressive administrative responsibilities”* and *“how to minister with fewer priests.”* During this time of change in the Diocese, some wondered, *“Change is needed, but why rush so much?”* As their roles are changing, they recognize the need for *“reviving*

collaboration as a model of ministry.” Building on the “*core of parishioners with desire for opportunities for service,*” they see the opportunity for “*clergy and laity work together to build up the Church.*” Although some perceive an “*increasing reluctance of laity to volunteer for ministry and/or roles in the Renewal,*” and that “*clergy do not have enough trust in the ability of the laity to take a more directive role in the Church,*” still there was the recognition for the need to “*relinquish power,*” to “*develop better, persistent listening opportunities,*” and “*empower people.*” Even more hopeful was to recognize the “*common priesthood of the people*” in order to “*develop relationship in ministry with laity.*”

Furthering the mission of the Church will mean “*evangelization and outreach*” including “*reach out to youth,*” “*inclusion of cultural diversity,*” and developing that “*missionary formula.*” It will be an effort to begin “*bringing families back to Church,*” “*helping families prioritize faith,*” assisting all of the faithful to deal with “*becoming more secular/individualistic/relativism,*” and the “*idols upheld by sports.*” Acknowledging the need for “*adequate and proper faith formation*” for adults as well as the young, they also admitted to sometimes having “*little connection between Sunday Mass and living out the faith,*” and so to “*preach the whole Gospel, even the hard teachings,*” but always to “*continue to preach the Gospel in love.*”

The future can be built upon the wide variety of strengths of the Church that were mentioned: the “*diaconate,*” “*sacramental life,*” the “*gifts and talents of the laity,*” the “*strong faith of the majority of Catholics,*” “*a Bishop who is a true shepherd,*” and “*the strength of persevering through storms and the willingness of people to be a part of the future Church no matter the size or location of community and worship space.*” But, most importantly, the true strengths are that the Church is “*built on Christ/Gospel,*” strengthened by “*Sacramental life/Sacraments,*” inspired by the “*Holy Spirit,*” and sustained by the “*Church’s spiritual tradition*” in addition to a “*greater commitment to social justice.*”

Perhaps the big question about the future of the Diocese is: “*Can we develop parishes that meet a wide variety of needs and outlooks while negotiating the human concerns and social dissonance that marks contemporary life?*”

Survivors of Abuse

Holding a Synod session to listen to Survivors of Abuse presented challenges that are telling unto themselves. As we reached out, we learned the pain of the abuse perpetuated by clergy and the resulting deep distrust of the Church made it too difficult or distasteful to engage. Seven survivors of clergy abuse bravely came forward to participate when we reached out through Counselors to offer the invitation to attend a Synod session with the Bishop. We asked to hear their concerns, get input from them on ways that the Church can help lessen the pain and heal to the extent allowable, and how to demonstrate the commitment of the Church to prevent these sins from happening again.

There was a strong call for a public admission that this happened and a “*public apology*” which they feel has never been issued. “*Where is the public statement of apology?*” “*No one has ever said. ‘I’m sorry.’*” There was also a concern that “*the Pope should have come out with a public apology to survivors.*”

The apology must go not only to the survivors, but “*to the entire congregation – apologize to everyone*” because there is much bigger picture than just the individual. They expressed how clergy abuse has hurt their families, “*I have 39- and 40-year-old kids and I hurt because I robbed them from the faith.*” They also called out that it has impacted everyone in the Church because the hypocrisy has caused all to distrust the Church leadership. There was concern expressed about the many who may still live with this in silence, and for those that may have been lost through suicide. Many only have come forth after years when the breadth of this became known and public. There have been so many years of life lost. They feel the Church “*failed me on all fronts.*”

Many shared their struggles to be believed when they reported the abuse, within their families, to clergy and with the hierarchy, “*told I was lying,*” dismissed as “*a couple bad guys*” and how it left them feeling “*so alone.*” The stigma of being abused caused them shame, guilt, and anger. They spoke of how profoundly their lives were affected by the scars they bear, causing issues with respecting authority, alcohol, and drugs.

Many shared how they spent their life trying to hide their pain, trying to not feel so alone. Hiding this secret caused them “*difficulty in loving and being loved.*” One man described the pain he carried his whole life: “*At age 61, I felt I couldn’t go on and am only still here four years later only because of the support of my therapist.*”

Thoughts on how the Church can engage, in addition to the admission and apology, include the Church holding seminars with ministers and priests where a survivor speaks, survivor writing articles about their healing, and providing counseling and support for families of those abused.

It was observed that now “*Lawyers have control*” of the interface with the Church, and that is currently yet another barrier. There was a sentiment for economic settlements, “*They eat like kings, and we are the servants, we try to do the right thing, who helps us?*” They suggested the Pope selling off artifacts to give proceeds to abuse victims and called out the Church’s large real estate holdings.

There is a desire to see the Church “*clean house*” and recognize the business model is broken, “*Above everything, need to be accountable to all people,*” embrace the harm that has been done, and “*don’t hide the problem in the shadow.*” The Bishop can be a torch-bearer to bring forth “*the beauty.*”

There was a desire for the Church to be more transparent and authentic about its ongoing efforts to prevent abuse, its training, how it handles reports of abuse and how it deals with

both accused and confirmed abusers. They want to know that there will be civil and criminal court routes to deal with abuse.

There was dispersion in how religious beliefs fit in their lives from, *“I don’t need it anymore, God wasn’t there for me,”* to *“I’ve healed through finding God, but outside the Catholic Church”*, to overcoming the abuse and being able to reengage with their Catholic Faith. A man shared, *“I felt that God wrote me off, I can’t fix the Church, I need to fix myself first.”* One woman shared that she found Jesus in the Bible as a healer and that enabled her to *“spend 23 years in education where, because of my experience, I was able to empathize and support kids.”*

Although not typically done in our Synod sessions, all desired Bishop Mike to address the group. He shared his deep concern for all he heard and invited ongoing engagement, *“I can’t do anything to serve and heal without you.”* The Bishop expressed his own feelings of betrayal *“priests that are abusers are not priests”* and discussed that the Church has done many things to prevent abuse including training programs for those who work with children, testing for seminarians, and procedures for how reports are handled.

During the session the Survivors often offered each other advice, love and support, and there was a consensus that this Listening Session itself was a *“step in the right direction”* because it was the first time that they had this kind of gathering with the Bishop. In fact, *“even if we can open the door a crack, we’ve done something here.”* And there was a willingness to continue this process: *“maybe more sessions that look like this.”*

Those who care about Justice

A dedicated listening session was offered to groups that work on justice issues in the Diocese; the participants included some Catholic Women Religious and people from ecumenical faith groups, however it is noted, it did not include any people of color. Central to their comments were concern that the Church does not promote the breadth of its Catholic Social Teaching (CST). They feel issues of justice are marginalized and they encounter resistance by parishes and the hierarchy to these issues. They question what is taught about CST in the seminary--a participant reviewed the course catalog and did not identify any teaching on CST. Bishop Fisher and the clergy are not visible in promoting social justice, most notably late to be seen after the racially motivated supermarket shooting.

Specific issues include the lack concern on *“green world”* and adoption of *Laudato Si’*, Issues of racism, sexism, physical and sexual abuse. There is a desire for better use of inclusive language. There was considerable concern about the role of women in the Church, their exclusion from decision-making roles and unanimous endorsement of women Deacons. They shared that the risen Lord was *“discovered by women and not believed and 2,000 years has not changed that.”*

The group shared concern about the drop in church attendance, in particular young people. They expressed that liturgy that inspires passion and addressing social justice issues would engage them more. They suggested studying parishes that are really working and that strong lay, priest and deacon leaders can create a compelling parish environment. Cheerlead and teach about Christ.

The group expressed hope for the new Families of Parishes model and that these listening sessions will make a difference here. Will require lay to voice concerns more loudly, be leaders and keep reaching out. There is hope we will shift from a *“Church of Jesus and Me to a Church of Jesus and Us.”*

Traditional Latin Mass Catholics

A Synod session was held during a Sunday social following the Traditional Latin Mass (TLM) with a devout group of followers who consider the TLM as their preferred form of worship. They describe themselves as a growing, vibrant, and loving community of believers. There is great participation in the Parish with 30 altar servers, a Gregorian Chant choir, young families, many baptisms, engaged children and young adults with 25 confirmations. The congregation is family-oriented, many travel over 30 minutes to celebrate here. There is a diversity of languages and cultures.

They were singular in their comments with no divergent opinions. Their pastor advised they were there to discuss the Latin Mass, so no other topics were covered.

As a community they are concerned about the future of the Latin Mass following the Motu Proprio and that the Bishops of Buffalo and Rochester will not listen and support them. They do not feel their positions have been represented properly and unfavorable views leave them feeling disenfranchised. The Church hierarchy is marginalizing by not teaching TLM in seminaries. They shared that TLM was supported by Vatican II.

It was expressed that modernism and liberalism are harming the church and that there is a lack of proper catechesis in the Church. TLM provide robust catechesis of *“true Catholic doctrine and tradition for children and adults.”*

TLM Catholics believe that this form of worship enhances the roots of the faith, is rich in symbolism, and preserves the history and tradition of the faith. It is a cultural gift to the community. Latin is the universal language of the Church; it is used in exorcisms because *“evil spirits hate Latin.”* In addition, this form of worship brings them *“closer to God. This entire group has a love, reverence, dedication, and devotion to this form of worship.”*

Many spoke of the devout practices of the community including fervent prayer, regular reception of Reconciliation, Eucharistic Adoration, devotion to the Blessed Mother, Pro-Life prayer and support, and nearly universal belief in Real Presence.

Formal dress and the use of veils show reverence. Traditional practices support the spiritual experience including blessings with holy water, kneeling and receipt of communion on the tongue, and use of incense, *“The priest faces the altar to worship God, and he is our doorway to Him.”*

The congregation is active in evangelization for the salvation of souls; conversion and conversions happen in this parish regularly. TLM produces vocations. They would like to invite more people to experience their form of worship and be welcoming.

The TLM Catholics hope that their form of worship is never suppressed and is available seven days a week here and throughout the world. They request a visit from Bishop Mike to view their extraordinary devotion. They wish the Diocese would designate one or two parishes to TLM and assign additional priests and deacons to expand the sacramental ministry for the growing congregation, *“so we don’t feel like squatters.”* To ensure the future of TLM they wish for the practice to be taught in seminaries and that more priests are trained, as well as to bring a TLM Religious community to the Diocese.

“The TLM is a timeless treasure shared between Jesus and us. The dress and actions of all present at the TLM demonstrates nothing but reverence and respect with total focus on Christ is paramount here. We welcome all nationalities, all peoples plus so many big families and all ages. We are blessed here without end.”

Women (2 sessions)

The distinct voices of women were heard through a session held for alumni and parents at a female Catholic high school and an open session publicized for women. The women were concerned by the dwindling participation in Mass, failing to return after COVID and the mistrust of the abuse scandal. They expressed a disconnect from Jesus’s teachings and a desire for the church to be more welcoming and inclusive to attract young people, be accepting of LGBTQ+, and people with disabilities.

Many women present felt a strong distrust of the Church hierarchy, and expressed clericalism is a barrier to hopefulness. They believe women’s role is disrespected by the Church by denying them the diaconate and priesthood. *“There are seven sacraments for men, and only six for women.”* Even women in the Gospels are generally nameless. There are many great teachings of women theologians that should be more prominent in our teaching. The non-ordained do not have decision making power. This is a barrier for youth engagement in the Church.

There was a call for more progressive positions on the Church’s teaching on sexuality, contraception, LGBTQ+, and reproductive rights by many women present. They expressed the desire for the Church to work to provide options other than abortion such as financial and healthcare support.

There is concern about the polarization in society and in the Church, leaving people feeling marginalized. Some feel the Church shouldn't water down traditional teachings to respond to society, and many others want to see vibrant roles for women, priests be able to marry and greater acceptance of lifestyle choices. Voices were raised to object to the Eucharist being weaponized in the political/media world, but some felt that was a valuable assertion of Catholic beliefs.

There was a desire to strengthen Catholic schools in their teaching of the faith and make them accessible and affordable. There is a desire for improved catechesis.

The women feel that the Church should be centered on love and has lost its way with emphasis on rules and money. The moral credibility has been lost with the sex abuse scandal. The Mass is robotic and does not emphasize love.

Some women expressed concern about the role of the Pastor in driving the parish culture and how the new Family Model will limit the choices when regional churches are all under the same leader. They expressed a strong desire to strengthen the sense of community through service, social justice, and acts of charity. Be visibly Catholic and joyful in our words and display personal religious artifacts.

The Eucharist was viewed as a strength and many expressed that it should be made available to all: divorced, gay, and non-Catholics. *"We are the Eucharist,"* It should be used as a verb, *"When we are helping others, we are Eucharisting."*

Pope Francis gives hope, he is a true servant leader as illustrated by his first words as pope, *"pray for me."*

There is strength in the faithfulness of the people, the universality and traditions and ritual of the sacraments, teachings of Jesus, mysticism of the Saints, and belief in the Blessed Mother. There was hope for the future of the church in drawing forth the talents of the laity, increased engagement of Deacons, and the strength of the Religious Sisters.

A high school student attended with her mother and at the end of the Synod Listening Session shared, "The entirety of my feelings and things I hoped to address about our faith were brought to the table today."

Women Religious

Women Religious expressed the need for a stronger foundation in faith, and education is needed to prepare laity for a greater role. There is a lack of embracing Vatican II principles to renew Catholic life. Liturgies need to be more inviting and reflect the issues of the day. Need to better connect to the people in the pews and pull them in to stay, however this is a challenge

with the limited pastoral staff available in parishes and the Diocese. They are concerned over the morale of priests and at the same time see clericalism becoming more pronounced.

The sisters expressed concern with the decrease in participation in the Church, particularly the young and middle-aged and so many are excluded from participation. *“We need a healing church, as well as a listening Church.”* There was concern about the role of the women in the Church--they do the work, but have little voice. Pope Francis has made some encouraging steps with women in leadership.

There is an important role for Catholic education and political advocacy is needed to ensure access for anyone who wants to attend.

We need to welcome diversity in the church and engage all including LGBTQ+, and divorced. There are great examples of social justice in action through Catholic Charities, OLV ministries, etc., the social justice teachings of the Church are strong, they are *“powerful, but hidden.”* Continue to minister to the poor, but not just physical needs, but spiritual as well. We need to *“admit personal and Church blindness.”*

It was expressed that the voice of the Church is overly conservative, with most focus by USCCB on the single issue of abortion. Catholics should expand support for crisis pregnancy. There was a desire to experience greater demonstration and conversation about the social teachings of the Church.

There is hope for significant change because of this Synod to include women in Church leadership, education, and preaching, expand the role of Deacons to administer Sacrament of the Sick, and to become overall a more inviting and welcoming church.

Women Religious need to encourage vocations by inviting casual visits to see religious life. They can offer “courses” at religious houses geared to young people

The Women Religious continue to bring a strong foundation of spirituality, service to the poor, prayer, and contemplation. They are modeling how to work together across orders similar to what is called for in the new parish model.

Young Adults (3 sessions)

Input from Young Adults (YA) was collected during two in-person sessions with active YA groups in the Diocese and via in-person written input during a Newman Center College student dinner.

There was a significant difference from the College Students who largely are not as active in the practice of their faith and the two YA Groups comprised of those who have an active engagement with the Church.

One of the YA groups represented by eight people, half of whom were converts to the Church, desired stronger catechesis for all ages and for lay and clergy to stress the Mass, Eucharist and how to pray. *“What is going wrong with Sunday school and religious education that results in so much disaffiliation of cradle Catholics?”* They referred to RCIA as creating the encounter with God to nurture the faith and recommend more adult formation in this model. This group hopes the Latin Mass is preserved for its beauty and not suppressed. Many want to trust the Church to provide a solid moral formation and for it to respond to the pervasiveness of social media in today’s culture. They seek social opportunities to catechize and promote individual witness and personal holiness to help other see Christ. *“Be radical, be counter-cultural.”* They advocate for non-Catholics to be able to receive the Eucharist, and to avoid the judgement from not receiving.

The other YA group of 12 participants focused much discussion on Catholic identity and had more varied views. There was concern over the loosening of moral values over pressures from society, with one participant calling for the Church to *“excommunicate politicians who take public positions against church doctrine.”* However, there was also concern about the push of some to go back to pre-Vatican II practices. Others felt the Church needed to be more welcoming to all in the manner of Jesus, *“Reach out to those who need Church”* and expose them to the beauty of the faith. *“Ask ourselves what kind of Church Jesus would want.”* The group discussed that the Church teaching on issues of life needs to broaden beyond abortion to reflect social issues, elderly, vulnerable, poverty. They expressed concern on the lack of roles for women, clericalism and the abuse scandal all driving mistrust and disengagement.

While they expressed confusion and conflicting opinions, they are looking to the Church to provide guidance on how to live our Catholic faith and be Christ-like. They would like to see more Ecumenical engagement, more opportunities for social engagement, *“pray and play.”* Maximize the benefits of church architecture and art as a means of engagement. Show a diversity commitment by displaying authentic ethnic images. Build on the power of the Eucharist and Mass, create opportunities for service.

The YA’s believe that we need more adult formation to pick up after Confirmation and to establish a public identity as a Catholic.

Input received from the 35 college students was largely more critical of the Church, describing it as intolerant, judgmental and not welcoming. They saw the Church as hypocritical to its own teachings of love by being exclusionary to minorities, LGBTQ+, and pro-choice women. The YA students indicated that YA are *“disinterested in religion,”* and many *“only get confirmed to appease their parents – they don’t actually want to be part of the Church.”*

Although a few expressed the need to hold onto Catholic teachings and not cater to social expectations, others expressed that extreme traditionalism and judgmental tendencies in the Church will turn others away. There is a sense the Church is too focused on financial and

political matters and hasn't addressed the sexual abuse crisis. The Church needs to *"find a place in the modern world."*

Community outreach and engagement were most often cited to reengage YA with the Church. They need the Church to be more accepting and be inclusive, *"Build on equality, positivity, love and respect,"* and *"make people fall in love with their faith again."*

[Attachment 2B includes findings from both the Synod sessions with Young Adults and input obtained by the Movement to Restore Trust efforts to conduct one-on-one/small group meetings with Young Adults]

Youth – High School (3 sessions)

High School students contributed to the Synod in four sessions held with youth actively engaged in Parish Ministry or Catholic high schools. They ranged from very devout groups to those questioning some of the tenets of our faith.

They recognize the lack of youth at Mass and expressed that the image of the Church has been damaged by the abuse crisis and there is not an understanding of the Church's teachings. The Church provides a solid moral compass with teachings that remain consistent in an ever-changing world and are explained in its Catechism. There is concern that the reverence for our Church has become too casual. There needs to be deeper discussion and clarity around controversial topics such as LGBTQ+.

The youth expressed a desire to be educated on how faith/religion coexists with science. *"We learn religion like a course, not as something we should truly care about."*

Some pastors have considerable ability to create community and deliver homilies that are appreciated by all, but it is not consistent. We need our priests to project happiness. They are overburdened with administrative duties. The Church used to be center of community, but it has *"become a country club rather than how we live."* The *"medieval structure of leadership"* needs to move on from a monarchy to include women and more laity.

Youth need to be engaged and have a role in Mass and volunteer activities at the parish from an early age. They need to appreciate the Sacraments, especially the Eucharist and Reconciliation. Offerings need to extend to music and social events, retreats. Churches need to be open during the day so people have a place to pray. Mass and other sacraments should be offered in evenings. *"Pews should have cushions, then more people would come."*

There is a big gap in communication/social media use between the Church and youth. Social media should be used for faith-based videos, and to share listing of events going on Diocese-wide. The Church should *"teach apologetics so people can vigorously defend and explain the faith."*

The Church needs to restabilize to be able to make progress. The Church can be a powerful force for good in the U.S. if it gets unified behind an issue. It is *“good at getting on peoples’ nerves.”*