



DIOCESE *of* GAYLORD

DIOCESAN SYNTHESIS REPORT

for the

SYNOD 2021-2023

BACKGROUND:

The Synodal process of the Diocese of Gaylord was entrusted to the Office of Faith Formation and Evangelization. Training sessions were held for the coordinators in parishes and parish clusters. Overall, there were 40 such individuals whose job was to shepherd the process in their parish or cluster. In addition, there was a portal on the website of the diocese for individuals to contribute. The process was open to everyone, and, in several locations a real effort was made to reach out to the fallen away to understand their concerns, hopes and dreams. The level of participation was quite good, either through in-person listening sessions or through questionnaires that were made available. All responses, whether from a parish, a cluster of parishes, or from individuals, were entered into a Google form for ease of tracking. The original hard copy responses, if submitted to the diocese, were also retained. The main focus of the Synodal process was to consider the question: “What is the Holy Spirit saying to us?”

When the responses, both individual and from parishes/clusters, were extracted from the Google form and exported into a Word document, there were approximately 60 pages, single spaced at 10-point font, 80% of which were the parish/cluster responses. It is to be noted that, in general, the parish/cluster responses were more positive and forward looking than the individual responses; however, both sets of responses were taken into consideration in writing this synthesis. Providentially, there emerged a tremendous amount of similarity of responses from around the diocese, and we must see this as a sign that the Holy Spirit is very much at work within the Diocese of Gaylord.

PARTICULAR CHALLENGES IN THE SYNODAL PROCESS:

The Diocese of Gaylord had some particular challenges in carrying out the synodal process: primarily, for much of the time we were in *sede vacante*, and many people were focused on waiting for a new bishop. The See of Gaylord became vacant on March 25, 2020, at the very beginning of the pandemic. Bishop Steven Raica was able to defer his installation in Birmingham until June 23, 2020, at which time Bishop Walter Hurley was appointed as Apostolic Administrator. The new bishop of Gaylord was not named until December 21, 2021, and his episcopal ordination and installation were on March 4, 2022, just short of two years from the transfer of Bishop Raica. In addition to this, the Diocese of Gaylord is very geographically spread out, comprised of the 21 northernmost counties of Michigan’s Lower Peninsula. Some counties have only one Catholic parish. There are currently 75

parishes and 16 Catholic schools, but there are only 48 clergy who are actively serving those parishes. In addition, it must be acknowledged that there is a highly vocal opposition group within the diocese, as well as certain external groups who regularly voice criticisms as well. A significant challenge to the Synodal process is the reality that, over the past 20 years, the Diocese of Gaylord has seen a significant reduction in the number of practicing Catholics, most especially young families and young professionals. In addition, there is no four-year degree granting institution and no major urban center or significant industry to generate employment.

SIGNIFICANT LOCAL FACTORS:

A few significant local factors need to be acknowledged to aid with context to the findings of the consultation: the most important factor in the success of the Synodal consultations was not the size of a given parish or cluster, but the involvement and dedication of the clergy. In parishes or clusters where the community feels valued by the clergy and laity who serve them, and as a result feel a greater desire to be involved, more participation was noted. At the same time, there was a real overlapping of ideas and themes across the board. There was a clear acknowledgement that the rapid changeover of bishops — four bishops in 10 years, including Bishop Hurley — has not been helpful to meeting the challenges of a diocese which is vast and has limited resources and personnel, especially so few priests. There is a general consensus that there is a very real disconnect between “Church life” and “real life.” As one participant put it, “When we come to Church, we all come together, but when we leave Church, we all go our separate ways. We need to stay united afterwards.” There was also universal agreement that the pandemic has exacerbated this, especially since many places have yet to restore the fellowship opportunities that existed previously.

There emerged a very real understanding of the difficulty posed by the acute priest shortage, and several of the respondents wondered if there were not some way to have laity more involved in the administrative dimension of the parish so that the priests could be more available to administer the sacraments, to teach and to give spiritual direction. In other words, there is a recognition that, between clusters of parishes, or priests having responsibilities at the diocesan level, it is not easy for them to be able to dedicate the time and attention that is required to feed their flocks and help them to grow. There is also a strong sense that our Protestant brothers and sisters play a much more visible role in the community as a whole, and that, as Catholics we need to be more vocal about our faith and how it moves us to be charitable. As one participant put it, “Protestants know what it means to have a personal relationship with God, but do we as Catholics?” There was also a recognition that there is a great deal of woundedness within our community and that there are not many mental health resources in Northern Michigan and that as a Church we should be doing something about this.

SIGNIFICANT THEMES THAT POSE CHALLENGES/CREATE OPPORTUNITIES:

Several overarching messages and themes emerged. First, we want to address the negative themes, because experience shows that these are often the ones that get overlooked, even though they

provide the greatest opportunities for growth. Among them was the feeling that there is a great deal of confusion about what the Church actually believes and teaches because there appears to be a very real disagreement amongst the bishops themselves. Several respondents noted that they often feel as if the Faith is being politicized at all levels of the Church, and that whether that is real or merely apparent, it is harmful to evangelization.

Another significant theme was the perception that the Catholic Church is merely a collection of rules which are rigidly enforced, with a style of worship that is distant and does not connect with individuals' daily lives. What was perhaps most surprising about how common this observation was, is that it came from all over; that is, this was not a comment coming from people who have already disengaged from their local parish community, but rather from those who regularly attend Mass.

Another significant theme related to the reality of the Diocese of Gaylord is that it serves an overwhelmingly aging population, and that, as a result, many young families often feel unwelcome in their parishes. Specifically, several people noted that there are often cliques who control various parish ministries and that those small groups do not want others to join in or to take them over and breathe new life into them.

Following on the aforementioned theme of a disconnect between "Church life" and "real life," many of the responses acknowledged that there is a great deal of work to be done on making our parishes more welcoming environments. It is not so much that parishes are unwelcoming as that they appear impersonal. Several responses noted that the reality of our diocese is that we have a large number of summer visitors and that more can be done to make them feel welcome in our parishes. There was also a real sense that within our parishes more should be done to acknowledge milestones in parishioners' lives, and especially to acknowledge newcomers to the community.

Perhaps the most commonly voiced concern across the board is that there is a very real lack of community within our parishes; at the same time, there was a clear desire to build up community and for the parish to be more than the place we spend an hour on Sunday. Closely related to this was the unanimous observation about the lack of communication both within the parish and throughout the diocese. One clear exception to this is that everyone greatly enjoys the weekly check-in video that Bishop Walsh shares with the laity. Many responses felt that even within one's own parish it is hard to know what is going on and what are the opportunities for involvement. There is also an awareness that Catholic doctrine is often opposed to the prevailing norms in society, but that we do not do a good job of explaining this. Most especially, several participants noted that they simply do not have an adequate formation to understand what the Church teaches, and with how busy their lives are, they would like to be pointed to good resources.

Several submissions also noted that often they feel as though they are not prayerful or spiritual enough, and that they get the sense that their priests are not either. There is a real hunger for growth in prayer and in faith, but also a recognition that it is important that Church leaders model and teach this. What was particularly significant about these observations is that they came largely from practicing Catholics and not from those who have fallen away.

Another important theme is that most respondents felt that the Catholic Church is beautiful and has so much to offer to them, to their families and to society as a whole, but that, once again, this is not well understood or well communicated. In other words, many participants acknowledged that

they believe the Church is beautiful, but they do not know exactly why that is so, and they have a strong desire to be educated.

Another theme which came up consistently was the divorced and remarried, LGBTQ, and young people. In all three of those cases, there was a clear sense of non-belonging, of being judged and of a lack of compassion and/or understanding. Almost all participants know someone who has left the Church over divorce and remarriage, and several have friends or family members who are LGBTQ and who perceive the Church as harsh and judgmental. The youth who participated often expressed a sense of alienation from the Faith and felt that it was mostly something their parents were imposing on them. Youth are particularly vulnerable to the messages of society that are at odds with our Faith, and it is clear from the Synodal process that we must do more than simply expect them to embrace the Faith.

Again, these three areas are very much affected by miscommunication and by lack of community. Unfortunately, this is a problem as old as the Gospel itself. How many times was our Lord criticized by the falsely pious for His closeness to those of whom they did not approve. As much as these three groups are among the most marginalized, there was a real sense that by true pastoral accompaniment and a welcoming environment, much can be done to console them and to engage them.

There is also the very real problem of the growing number of homebound parishioners either because of age and infirmity, or because of underlying conditions that make it difficult, if not impossible, to worship in person. There are also a number of long-term care facilities where residents rarely, if ever see a priest or receive the sacraments. There is a hope that livestreaming of liturgies which began during the pandemic might continue for their benefit and also that more men and women be trained to bring communion to them.

Several of the submissions also noted that they feel as though women do not have an active enough role in the Church, and that it is important to find ways to foster their collaboration and contribution. Except as a couple of parenthetical comments relating to the shortage of clergy, this was not expressed as a desire for women to be ordained as priests or deacons. It bears mention however, that, within the Diocese of Gaylord, several of the leadership roles are held by women: the Chancellor, Director of Finance, Director of Communications, Director of Hispanic Ministry and, until recently, Director of Worship and Liturgy. In addition, five of the seven Directors of Parish Life who currently serve in our parishes are women.

THEMES THAT DEMONSTRATE LIFE AND HOPE:

Fortunately, more than the challenges outlined above are the hopes and dreams that the many participants expressed. First, it was abundantly clear from the Synodal process that there is a great deal of excitement and enthusiasm for the future of the Church in Gaylord. Above all else, there is an understanding that God is very much in charge and that as long as we all do our part the multiplication of the loaves and fishes will repeat itself again and again. In fact, several participants acknowledged an all too human approach to the Faith and the Church, and they saw that they have not left sufficient

space for God in their lives or have become too discouraged by what they read or see. There is a desire to deepen both their faith and their prayer life.

For as much as people commented on the lack of community, they also spoke of their desire for it. In a significant way, participants understood that the Church is a community, a home, and that, if we are to grow, it must be as a whole and not as individuals. To that end, a very significant desire was for small groups in each parish to get together and study the Bible, study the Faith, pray, and engage in charitable activities. One of the most significant requests was to provide help in how to craft personal witness stories for the good of others. There is also a strong desire for sacramental catechesis, most especially about the Mass and how it relates to the daily lives of the faithful.

A key theme related to building community is the need for the clergy to get to know their people and to reach out to those who have fallen away or to those who for health reasons are no longer able to participate in person in the life of the parish. There is a recognition that often the priest is unable to keep track of all of this himself and that the faithful have a greater need to keep him informed.

As one response so aptly put it, “We cannot separate what we believe as Christians, and how we live our lives.” There were several suggestions that a specific ministry be started in parishes dedicated to ministering to those who have fallen away either because of the pandemic or because of situations in their lives. With regards to those who have stopped practicing the Faith because of their circumstances, there is a clear desire to be open and welcoming, “to listen to their stories without being judgmental.” This is a clear reflection of the way that Jesus dealt with the woman taken in adultery and with the Samaritan woman at the well. There is a great deal of optimism that if we but meet people where they are, we can lead them to where they need to be. As another response stated: “Everyone is welcome in our Church and we need to make everyone aware of that. We need to identify those that feel left out and connect with them and reintroduce them to the beauty of our Catholic Tradition.”

There was also a great emphasis on the importance of beauty, both in terms of the liturgical space in our parishes, as well as the music used for worship. It is clear that beauty is one of the primary means of evangelization in a world which is so troubled and so full of anguish and tragedy. If people see beauty when they come to worship, it encourages them to hope beyond the problems of their lives.

One of the common elements of the Synodal process was the importance of the homily to those who are at Mass. There is a strong desire to be fed, not only by doctrine and information, but to relate the Mass readings to the daily lives of the faithful. Those respondents who experience this in their parish gave ample witness to how it transforms their lives.

Given the size of the Diocese of Gaylord, the shortage of priests, as well as smaller numbers of people attending, several responses spoke of a desire for multi-parish collaboration both in terms of faith formation and also social outreach. Recognizing that there is an abundance of gifts and talents, even amongst the clergy, there are suggestions to share best practices between parishes and schools around the diocese.

There is a sense among the faithful that there are a lot of wounded parishioners and former parishioners and that this provides us with a great opportunity to rebuild lost trust. Transparency and communication are often cited as the best means to rebuild trust.

The Diocese of Gaylord has the restored order for confirmation, and several parishes noted that this has had a negative effect on faith formation for those who are not in the Catholic Schools. The hope is that a greater adult catechesis will lead parents to continue to enroll their children in faith formation even after confirmation in the third grade.

There is a great desire for the bishop to more frequently visit the parishes, and for increased communication from him to the parishes. Several respondents want to have a greater sense of unity with their shepherd.

SYNTHETIC ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION:

Perhaps the clearest message to come from the Synodal process is that for several years the Diocese of Gaylord has found itself in maintenance mode. Numbers of faithful have been dropping, the clergy shortage has grown more acute, and there has been a significant turnover in bishops. All these factors have led to a very real taxing of increasingly limited resources. Clergy have had to wear multiple hats or shepherd many and diverse parishes, dwindling numbers have overwhelmed even the most generous of volunteers who also experience burn out. This resulted in a situation in which several people either abandoned the practice of the Faith, or else reduced their faith to fulfilling the Sunday obligation. Because of this, often, even where attempts were made to offer more programs or services, they did not achieve their goals. This also resulted in cliques forming which did not help with being welcoming to newcomers. More to the point, often people confused the physical church with the parish, and, as a result there was a sense in which the parish was more a museum than a living breathing portion of the people of God.

The good news in all of this is that the Synodal process has begun the process of self-examination, and throughout the Diocese of Gaylord there has been an honest evaluation of the limits of the past, and a real desire to be more open to the designs of God and to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit. The excitement notwithstanding the challenges is palpable. The faithful of the Diocese of Gaylord want more from their Church, but they also recognize that they are essential to that growth. Most especially evident is the growing desire to be fed by the liturgy, fed by the Scriptures, and fed by our doctrines and traditions. In short, there is a great deal of energy just waiting to be harnessed into a potent force for evangelization.