

# Introduction to the Region II Synthesis

*“There is strong consensus that people are hungry for relationships with each other and with their priests, especially sacramentally.” -- Diocese of Ogdensburg*

The Roman Catholic Church in New York State is as diverse and multicultural as any in the world, contributing immensely to the spiritual life of the state, as well as being one of the largest non-governmental providers of health care, human services, and education to Catholics and non-Catholics alike. Catholics represent the largest single religious faith in New York, numbering approximately 7.3 million faithful out of a population of 19.3 million residents.

Region II includes all eight New York dioceses, organized geographically under the spiritual leadership of a diocesan bishop. They are the [Archdiocese of New York](#) (Timothy Cardinal Dolan), the [Diocese of Albany](#) (Most Rev. Edward B. Scharfenberger), [Diocese of Brooklyn](#) (Most Rev. Robert J. Brennan), [Diocese of Buffalo](#) (Most Rev. Michael W. Fisher), [Diocese of Ogdensburg](#) (Most Rev. Terry R. LaValley), [Diocese of Rochester](#) (Most Rev. Salvatore R. Matano), [Diocese of Rockville Centre](#) (Most Rev. John O. Barres), and the [Diocese of Syracuse](#) (Most Rev. Douglas J. Lucia.). The region has more than 1,500 parishes and hundreds of schools, hospitals, nursing homes, Catholic Charities social service agencies, and countless parish-based ministries.

The regional synthesis here represents the common and uncommon perspectives of Catholics and non-Catholics from all walks of life. A concerted effort was made to craft a synthesis that equitably and accurately represents all eight dioceses in Region II. We took great care to include opportunities for prayer, sacred silence, music, reflection, and active listening in a welcoming and non-judgmental setting, guided by the Holy Spirit every step of the way, from planning to preparing our diocesan syntheses.

## The Experience of Synodality & Emerging Themes

*“Almost every speaker spoke from a perspective of love for the Church – even those who spoke from a perspective of deep hurt or were estranged or who felt unwelcome.” -- Diocese of Syracuse*

The concept of “synod” is unfamiliar to most in the United States. Many apply the secular mentality of “voting” to the Church--which is perhaps the nearest cultural touchstone to the idea of synodality, but this was for many their first or only exposure to the concept of discernment, which inspired some to ask for more opportunities to experience it. The idea of synodality was one many struggled with; however, it appeared easier for those familiar with *Encuentros*, and many looked forward to it as an antidote to the isolation of three years of pandemic living.

The atmosphere of the listening sessions was one of prayerful reflection and respectful sharing of hopes, dreams, and concerns (and some “complaints”). Many people spoke very positively of their parish experience and exhibited profound respect and concern for their pastors and parish priests. The concerns revolved around the Church being strong and courageous, providing moral teaching in today’s world, without apology. At the same

time, people have very different understandings of what those teachings should be. They expressed concerns about ministering to the People of God in situations within which they are trying to live their lives faithfully, but in a very different world than the one in which most of us have grown up.

We heard suspicion articulated about the Synod itself, and how responses would be used, if at all. Some participants felt that the most regularly practicing, faithful parishioners were the ones treated as if their voices do not “count.” These respondents felt they provided for the financial stability of the parish, yet were unheard in decision-making.

Participants criticized the relationship between the diocese and parishes, particularly around parish closures or clustering. Longstanding feelings of loss at parishes and schools that closed over the past few decades run deep. In addition, people expressed frustration that, while women hold significant leadership roles in the diocese, parishes, institutions, and schools, their potential gifts are not fully incorporated into the general leadership of the Church on all levels.

Regarding decisions around the sex abuse crisis, many expressed ongoing anger about moving offending priests in past decades and an historic lack of transparency. For some, bankruptcy processes added to that anger.

There is a great concern for the declining attendance at Sunday Mass and other sacraments, as well as a decline in the number of students in Catholic schools, parish catechetical programs, and youth ministry programs. Often, parents and grandparents speak about their heartbreak that the children whom they raised in the faith are now adults who no longer participate actively in it.

Without desiring to present a dualistic summary, it is important to try to capture some of the varying hopes, dreams, and concerns that we heard.

In the broadest sense, these are the recurring themes organized under communion, participation, and mission:

- Inclusion, welcoming, and community
- The need for family participation and support
- Life-long catechesis at all ages
- The roles and responsibilities of clergy
- The roles and responsibilities of the laity, and women, in particular
- Mass and the Eucharist
- Polarization

## COMMUNION

*“I think our parish is divided. Some think more narrowly, and [some] think more broadly. Both groups are very faithful Catholics, but they do not speak to one another.” -- Archdiocese of New York*

By his gracious will, God gathers us together as diverse peoples of one faith, through the covenant that he offers to his people. The communion we share finds its deepest roots in the love and unity of the Trinity. It is Christ who reconciles us to the Father and unites us with each other in the Holy Spirit. Together, we are inspired by

listening to the Word of God, through the living Tradition of the Church, and grounded in the *sensus fidei* that we share. We all have a role to play in discerning and living out God's call for his people.

## Finding, Sustaining, and Building Community

Throughout the synodal process, it was evident that most participants genuinely believe that support for one another is essential – laity and clergy; Churched and unchurched; and those in need of healing. Community is created within parishes through shared experiences such as outreach, service, parish events, and intentional small groups meant to promote deeper sharing and opportunities to be vulnerable. Hospitality and fellowship strengthen and support community building. Invitation is critical to improving our sense of community, engaging the marginalized, and sharing the Gospel. Invitations should be personal, joyful, and enthusiastic. They need to be expressed through varied channels such as individual contact, phone calls, preaching, bulletins, social media, and mailings. Many believe in the value of good greeters at Mass.

One major effort of the Synod is to listen to voices on the margins. Prominent among the marginalized are the African American and Hispanic communities. Both communities typically sit almost entirely within city limits, and both groups experience a lack of inclusion within the wider diocese. Another marginalization occurs along geographic lines. Parishioners in rural counties often feel disengaged, and sometimes inner city parishes do, too. The general impression is that the suburbs that ring the city get all the attention, and everyone else is second class.

Dioceses experienced the importance of using communication technology during the Covid-19 pandemic for keeping parishioners who were confined to their homes in contact with and ministered to by their local faith communities. New forms of media technology provide inroads for reaching inactive Catholics and registered parishioners who rarely attend parish programs.

## Engaging the Diversity of Catholics in New Ways

A variety of discussions reflected the idea that input from diverse voices should be sought by Church leadership at all levels. Rather than divide us, our diversity should be a source of strength.

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 the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday weekend and did not hear any prayer that recognized the message of civil rights. Some sessions for Hispanics failed to provide the written materials in Spanish. Several believe that Churches should display religious art that embraces “original ethnic faces” rather than common Eurocentric portrayals. People with disabilities say the Church denies them the ability to fully participate in sacraments. Rural communities want to feel better connected to the Diocese.

In many parishes, there is a lack of synodal communication between English-speaking and Spanish-speaking members of the community. Participants cite examples of ethnic groups being marginalized when it comes to decision-making. At the same time, many described offering separate liturgies and prayer groups as further separating parishioners.

## Belief in the Eucharist

The universal Church allows and encourages diversity including expressions of spirituality. There is a wide range of perspectives on the *Novus Ordo* and the Traditional Latin Mass, and much discussion about how best to express belief through worship to attract new or returning disciples. Some turn inward and feel Mass is a time of private prayer, instead of the communal prayer of the Body of Christ. Many saw a need for the Church to accompany others without compromising Church teaching.

## Polarization is an Obstacle to Communion

By virtue of baptism, the priesthood of the baptized, and the Eucharist, there is a need/potential to see common unity in Christ. The Christian Community's togetherness is most profoundly evident in its participation and celebration of sacraments, especially the sacrament of Eucharist. People commented quite often that a common expression of beliefs gives us a profound sense of community.

While most participants shared generalized comments about the reasons for a lack of togetherness in journeying, some, especially the middle-aged generation, did take issue with the Church's teachings on sexuality and contraception, in particular. The younger contributors pointed out more contention with abortion and LGBTQ matters.

A large number of participants took issue with the way the Church handled the most recent scandal of abuse. There was a general sense of the importance of openness in communication and general transparency from all levels of Church leadership. People who felt particularly scandalized by any of these issues, especially bankruptcy, viewed parish appeals for funding various church projects and asking for money negatively.

Dioceses expected to see some polarization in the Church, but the level of it 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. People want to find ways to engage and evangelize the ambient culture, which sometimes was expressed that the Church ought to "get with the 21<sup>st</sup> Century." Other examples include requests for the Church to re-examine its teaching regarding the LGBTQ community, divorce, and remarriage; consider a broader approach to being "pro-life"; more vocally promote Catholic social teaching; and explore 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 reflected 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, people called for a 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 Traditional Latin Masses.

# PARTICIPATION

*“Meet us young people where we are. But don’t leave us there.” -- Diocese of Rochester*

A call for the involvement of all who belong to the People of God – laity, consecrated and ordained – to engage in the exercise of deep and respectful listening to one another. This listening creates space for us to hear the Holy Spirit together and guides our aspirations for the Church of the Third Millennium. Participation is based on the fact that all the faithful are qualified and called to serve one another through the gifts they have each received from the Holy Spirit. In a synodal Church the whole community, in the free and rich diversity of its members, is called together to pray, listen, analyze, dialogue, discern and offer advice on making pastoral decisions that correspond as closely as possible to God’s will (ICT, Syn., 67-68). Genuine efforts must be made to ensure the inclusion of those at the margins or who feel excluded.

## Evangelization, Catechesis, and Formation

To fulfill our shared Baptismal promises to become an apostolic missionary Church, we must become evangelists to the inactive, those waning in their faith, and those who do not yet know Jesus.

Many value inviting, simple homilies applicable to daily life. A gathering of permanent deacons expressed their hopes for more formation and education to improve their ability to offer theologically sound and engaging homilies. People desire more intentional hospitality by all members of the parish, especially with the decrease in the staff and the burdens already placed on pastors and parochial and parish administrators.

There appears to be a struggle between knowing/proclaiming the fullness of the faith and balancing it with welcoming those who feel alienated by some Church teachings. Tensions exist as to what it meant to invite people back, particularly those in relationships or taking positions at odds with the teachings of the Catholic Church. Some questioned whether people should be kept from the Eucharist because of their relationships or beliefs, while others questioned what it meant to speak of Catholic teaching if everyone can receive Communion.

At times, people raised different viewpoints about what the Church’s teachings should be. Some voiced the idea that we neglect those already in the Church. Some spoke of faithfulness to the present practice of ordaining only men and saw women’s role as complementary, not equal. Sometimes, that included an affirmation of the hierarchical model of the Church.

Most of the participants agreed that we should be listening first and foremost to Jesus Christ before anyone else. Faithfulness to the Gospel is the key to renewal. Perhaps the most profound and succinct statement came from a synod participant: “We are in the world but not of the world. [We] need to present the alternative to the world’s ways.”

## Moral Guidance and Courage

Many listening sessions reflected a belief that the Church needs to be courageous in providing moral guidance, even when it’s counter to the prevailing secular culture. Many want guidance – not **what** to think, but **how** to

think about things like reproductive issues, climate change, sexual orientation, and atheism. They seek consistency from the Church hierarchy, with many citing confusion caused by the handling of the Eucharist for politicians.

- “We forget that the purpose of the Church is to save people from their sins and to lead souls to heaven.”
- “The Church needs to work on respect life themes (all stages of life) from the top-down and bottom-up.”

A common theme is the deep love and appreciation that parishioners have for their pastors, priests, and parishes. People also spoke often of a need to be fed by encounters at Mass and in the sacraments.

Some questioned the fact that the Traditional Latin Mass is available in the diocese, seeing it as a rejection of Vatican II, and wondered why it is attractive, especially to young people. Those who advocated for the Traditional Latin Mass spoke movingly, noting especially that, in their opinion, it is much more reverent and satisfied their longing for a more transcendent experience of worship. Included often was a love for more traditional music.

## The Role of Families and How They Can Be Supported

Families are key; we need to have a generational approach to education – youth and adults. There is a strong consensus that the breakdown of the family has made passing on the faith more difficult and hinders all aspects of formation and vocational awareness. Participants in the Synod discussion broadly desire to engage youth and accompany them on their faith journey, and also recognize a need to promote vocations.

A great connection was recognized between the life of the parish and the family life. Strong and spiritually active multigenerational families are constructive elements of dynamic parish communities. At the same time, parish activities and initiatives, targeting the involvement of families, make the most positive impact on keeping families together.

- “In many cases, the request is for the [faith] formation of the whole family.”
- “Walk with busy parents so that they value the faith journey as much as their children’s sporting events.”
- There is way too much secular education absorbed by parents and children in today’s world... forming a family group that is educated together [is important], perhaps developing sports programs that encourage family and children to work together.”

Many families want to be included in the parish community. To support all families, both traditional and non-traditional, greater awareness must be paid to the diversity that now exists within the family unit. This includes family members living on the margins of church and social life. Groups identified as being marginalized or having a sense of fear or rejection include yet are not limited to: divorced and remarried couples, single parents, members of the LGBTQIA+ community, the homebound, families living with special needs, victims of domestic violence, and those families living with addictions.

At the same time, many suggested that priests, catechists, and the Church need to focus on making teaching accessible. There is a desire on the part of many who want to share their love of Christ and the Church, but don’t

know how. Many say that misinformation and an absence of knowledge and understanding of our faith are the basis of many of the larger issues participants had with the Church and the Catholic faith.

Over and over again, though, synod listening sessions highlighted a genuine and deep want for individuals to be heard and the consistent desire for better communication on the local and diocesan levels. Parishioners want to know more about the financial situation and governance of both the parish and diocese and full and open disclosure of information on all levels.

## Concerns About Exclusion

For many participants across dioceses, too many LGBTQ, people of color and other cultures, divorced Catholics, and remarried Catholics feel excluded, whether actively or passively. Most painfully, some recall hearing the label of sinner, possessed or ill. LGBTQ Catholics often say they feel unwelcome despite the efforts of some parishes and the concern of individual parishioners.

- “While the Church may not be able to accommodate everyone, helping people to come to a better understanding and not feel innately excluded is important,”

Many listening sessions also reflected 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. A lot of Catholics struggle to remain connected and active in this faith while still wanting strong, faith-filled relationships with their wives, mothers, daughters, and sisters, and with family and friends who are gay, lesbian or transgender. A small but significant number of women spoke movingly about their own sense of a call to ordination. Some found other ways to minister in the Church but never lost that sense of calling.

Although there were not many conversations with those who left the Church, for some, there is great sadness. Most speak about their experience of church being uninformed. The Church is seen as judgmental, and participants feel rejected. On the other hand, many respondents to the survey wrote beautiful stories of their journeys back to the faith or conversions to the faith.

## MISSION

*“...unity in essentials, flexibility in non-essentials and charity in all cases....” -- The Diocese of Brooklyn*

The Church exists to evangelize. Our mission is to witness to the love of God in the midst of the whole human family. This synodal process has a deep missionary dimension to it. It is intended to enable the Church to better witness to the Gospel, especially with those who live on the spiritual, social, economic, political, geographical, and existential peripheries of our world. In this way, synodality is a path by which the Church can more fruitfully fulfill her mission of evangelization in the world, as a leaven at the service of the coming of God’s kingdom.

## Growing in Faith and Confidence to Witness the Teachings of the Church

In every diocese, there is a strong desire among the faithful to be formed with tools to help witness to the teachings of the Church and dialogue with those who may disagree. Many people specifically long to study sacred scripture, apologetics, and the Catholic relationship between faith and science.

- “Continually educate and form the faithful in the fundamentals of the sacraments, the Mass, doctrine and non-doctrine, Bible study, and prayer.”
- “Provide seminars based on the topics people talk about on a day-to-day basis, such as abortion, euthanasia, human rights, and theological questions that clergy and ministers can help discuss.”
- “Many Catholics do not understand the basis of their faith, and this may account for why they leave the Church.”
- “Make it so there is a real difference between the Catholic and public schools,”

We heard phrases like “[the Eucharist] what we have that no other faith has,” and the acknowledgment that it is a gift that supports Catholics throughout their lives and feeds them to be present to one another in Christ. 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.

## Subsidiarity vs. Cohesive Mission

Overall, listening sessions identified concerns about a lack of coordination between parishes, dioceses, leadership, clergy, and laity. Participants spoke of a need to retain the character of the local community within the broader view of the Church, the need to be more visible in the community by charitable acts, and the importance of parishes having pastoral plans/vision and spiritual identity. Joined or merged parishes need to see themselves as real, singular faith communities, journeying together and sharing resources. As parishes come together, mission and vision must override the tendency to compete.

## The Clergy, Religious, and Laity in Collaboration

There is an earnest concern for the clergy. The numerical decline in priestly personnel and an increase in administrative responsibilities create a situation in which parishioners sense that their pastors are not available to them. Parishioners maintain their clergy needs to be more visible within the neighborhoods and on the streets. This also implies that there needs to be a reduction in administrative responsibilities for clergy. For this to occur, the laity must take a more active role in administration.

Fortunately, in dedicated listening sessions offered to clergy, religious, and pastoral leaders, there is great joy in the sacramental life of the Church and preaching, and nearly all of the clergy indicated how they welcomed the opportunity to journey with their people through spiritual fatherhood. Many feel overburdened by administration, which sacrifices time with pastoral care of the flock, loneliness, and lack of opportunities for the brother priests to share. They feel discouraged by [the presence of] fewer people before and since COVID, and care for the health and wellness of the priests.



Clericalism, with many varying definitions, included conversations around leadership, as well as the shortage of priests, the sex abuse scandal, and a lack of lay leadership that is more than consultative. Lay people expressed interest in being encouraged and supported in using their gifts more fully in service to the Church. Concern for the younger priests was expressed as well, both in terms of the formation offered to them and the demands placed on them due to the limited number of priests available. Parishioners in rural areas feel particularly concerned about the distance that priests must drive when charged with responsibility for multiple parishes or parishes with multiple sites.

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. The horrible pain borne by the many victims of clergy abuse became shared widely, although to a far lesser degree, when so many of the cases were revealed in “2018 – the year of shame!” Scores of Catholics have a connection through a parish or a school with a priest who was credibly accused. And from some perspectives, there was “no judgment on the perpetrators and no justice for the victims.” Parish group discussions recognized the fact that many people have fallen away from the Church because of negative events that took place in our diocese and its institutions. There is a need for transparency and opportunity for better communication through sincere efforts to update the parishioners with information on what the diocese is doing to provide support and renew confidence.

## Moving Forward

*“Prayer helps guide us, it can bring us closer together and closer to God.” -- Diocese of Rockville Centre*

While there was a great deal of love and appreciation for the mission of the Church, listening sessions revealed concern about the idea of a Church community journeying together where some people were seen as more important while others were treated in a way that excluded them from important positions or even the sacraments.

It is practically unanimous that synod listening/opportunities like these must continue. The fractured political landscape in the United States caused deep divides in our communities. Unfortunately, instead of providing a unifying foundation to counter those divisions, the experience in the Church reflects the polarization of society.

There was recognition that a synodal Church must be one that is deeply in dialogue both within the Church and with the world, but that it must also come from a place of understanding who we are and what we believe.

- “A synodal Church is not an isolated Church; it is an engaged and collaborative Church.”

Participants commented on the characteristics of dialogue and pointed to areas where dialogue is essential and urgent. Dialogue presumes openness, willingness to listen respectfully, communicate honestly, and readiness to learn from others. Dialogue also presumes clarity and ground-ness in one’s own position, in this instance in one’s faith, as well as a search for common ground.

The issue of polarization also extended to liturgical celebrations. Even though the Synod is not meant to change doctrine, some looked to Pope Francis as an agent of change in both liturgical practice and Church teaching. Depending on the view, that led to either criticism of Church leaders seen as unorthodox or criticism of Pope Francis and bishops, particularly bishops in the United States, who are not perceived as going far enough to change the Church or strong enough in upholding Church teachings and supporting pro-life issues. Homilies with political undertones received particular criticism. The secular polarization and inability to be in relationship with those from a different perspective have infected the Church nationally, and it seems poised to fracture if unity cannot be embraced.

## Looking Ahead

The National Eucharistic Revival presents an opportunity for invitation and conversation as most still seem to feel that the Eucharist is what sets us apart from others and truly is the “source and summit” of our faith and ecclesial life.

Among the dioceses of Region II, there is a commitment to re-learn the art of listening and envision a new mission, goals, and priorities – remembering that we are on a pilgrimage together. Pastoral, spiritual, and sacramental accompaniment, the healing that it can bring, and the development of quality relationships within the community were described as an antidote to polarization. Synodal gatherings in vibrant communities, while still impacted by polarization, were better able to acknowledge the value in struggling with such important issues. This vibrancy was especially seen in our culturally diverse communities.

Faith formation, catechesis, and evangelization are critical in the coming years. To be effective will require ways to engage people that can break through the polarization and promote unity. This is no easy task and extends beyond the diocesan boundaries. Finding ways to speak well with one another as we strive to be united in our common love of our Lord will be imperative as we invite others into the conversation. This will require time and space to discuss our common Catholic identity and what it means to walk with people who are at different places on the path toward Christ. Concrete training in and development of the skills of listening and discernment would greatly benefit those conversations.

## Conclusions

*“That is the best 45 minutes I have spent as a Catholic in a long time.” -- Diocese of Albany*

No one document or experience can incorporate or solve every perceived shortcoming of the Church or its flawed humanity; however, it is the fervent hope that this process has identified areas where we may be more active in the communion, participation, and mission of the Roman Catholic Church. We intend to incorporate what we have heard as we strive to improve our ability to live according to the Word of God through synodality, evangelization, and catechesis, and practicing our faith while actively seeking opportunities to overcome polarization and truly journey together.

*“Be Catholic in this big, bad world.” -- Diocese of Buffalo*

