



SYNTHESIS OF LISTENING SESSIONS

Roman Catholic Diocese of Albany

Most Reverent Edward B. Scharfenberger, Bishop of Albany

June 2022

Contact: Amy Brozio-Andrews, Archivist
archives@rcda.org

As invited by Pope Francis, the Diocese of Albany participated in his call for “Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission” in the spring of 2022 after a period of prayerful reflection and discernment that began in the fall of 2021.

Appointed and invited members of the committee guiding the process committed to giving everyone the opportunity to speak from their hearts, whether Catholics who seek to follow the teachings of Jesus Christ or non-Catholics who were interested in synodality. We held seven formal listening sessions that welcomed the churched and unchurched, clergy, religious, and laity. We also offered parishes, parish networks, and any other groups who wanted to participate in a listening session a toolkit that we prepared. More than a thousand of our fellow Catholics and non-Catholics shared their hopes and fears, and joyful and sorrowful experiences, and we take seriously our responsibility to convey their statements as guided by the Holy Spirit.

[Methods](#)

[Key Ideas](#)

- [Women in the Catholic Church](#)
- [Families & Young Adults](#)
- [Respect Life](#)
- [Clergy](#)
- [The Joys of Living Our Faith & Celebrating the Eucharist](#)
- [Life-long Faith Formation & Catechesis](#)
- [Diversity and Inclusion](#)

[The Experience of Synodality](#)

[Next Steps](#)

We hope that these listening sessions offer powerful insight into where people are on their life’s path and how we may best accompany them, supported by the love of Christ and the motivation to see His Word made real in our world.

Methods

Journeying together as part of the synodal process is key to our method. By hosting listening sessions that were at first organized by vicariate, we facilitated communication among parishes that already share a collaborative nature based on geography. We hosted dedicated sessions, some of which were self-selected, and others that we more directly organized because of outreach from the Committee. Input was also invited from other faith leaders in our communities. We expect listening sessions for parishes and parish networks to continue well into the future.

At each diocesan-organized listening session, clergy and parish leadership met separately from the group before the main session, intending to allow them to speak freely. Following that, the larger group sessions opened to all welcomed participants with a program of prayer, devotion, and discernment before breaking into table discussions.

The committee developed two sets of three questions based on the Vatican’s synod resources. One set aligned with the background and experience of clergy and parish leadership, and one set aligned with the

lived experiences of lay people. We collected table scribes' sheets and demographic data and synthesized them into this single report, the results of which we shared with our Bishop, the USCCB, and synod participants throughout the Roman Catholic Diocese of Albany.

Key Ideas

While each of the synodal listening sessions reflect the individualized perspectives of the participants based on age, geography, and other factors, multiple themes became apparent across groups. However, it is important to note that even with consistency among themes, participants sometimes had divergent worldviews.

Overall, the conversations we heard focused primarily on:

- The potential value of women in the Church may be an overlooked gift from God
- Families and young adults in the Church, including how to encourage them to come and stay
- Clergy, their responsibilities, and how they may be better supported by the diocese, each other, and the laity
- The importance of respecting life, life-long faith formation, and catechesis
- Ways to be welcoming and inclusive to all, including LGBTA and BIPOC, on their journey of faith

We explore the ideas behind these broad themes in the following sections. In all instances, we worked to avoid paraphrasing. The thoughts and feelings expressed by these quotes and bulleted statements are representative of repeated feedback across groups and sessions, as it was not possible to include all of it, given the limitations on the length of the synthesis.

Here is a representative synopsis of one of our listening sessions for the Hudson Valley Vicariate:

On May 22, 2022, 75 people met in Hudson, New York for the listening session of the Hudson Valley Vicariate. The strong attendance was buoyed by the fact that every parish was represented, quite impressive given the small size of the parishes and the distance people came. The music was particularly stirring and invested the entire evening in a spirit of prayer and cooperative conversation.

In the afternoon, the leadership of the parishes of the Vicariate met first. They were aware of the challenges in ministering in small, almost all rural communities. The needs of the parishes are imposing, "sucking strength" from leadership and giving them the sense that they wish they could "do more." They see the role of the priest in transition and are reluctant to become attendants at a spiritual filling station. "I am trying to meet the needs of the people and address them the best I can." One leader mentioned, "I need prayer and space to be renewed," while another offered, "I am journeying more alone than I expected." They are ready and excited with evangelizing ideas to meet new challenges. "Jesus needs to be primary, not the institution."

When the rest of the faithful met that evening, they focused on the gift of community within and beyond the walls of the church. A common desire to grow in faith allowed friendships to form, "the best kind of friends." One believed, "The experience of Church had been

foundational and a deep comfort.” The Church needs to be a warm and welcoming place, (“Greeters go a long way”) and most importantly led by personal invitation from the clergy and each other, including those who often feel they do not belong.” We need to extend our arms to people who may have fallen away from our faith and potential new members of the Church.” Service to the poor was seen as an essential Christian value.

The sacraments are a great joy. There is a need to catechize about their importance, especially the Eucharist and the Real Presence of Christ. A key to growing the Church is of course young people, who seem to “disappear” after receiving sacraments and young families. Not seeing many families in church made one “wonder what the future of the Church will look like. People who do not come to church do not realize what they are missing.” The Church should be, “more aware of the pressures facing families. ”

Those gathered pointed to a great sense of ownership of their parishes and the Church. “People should recognize the Church is theirs and take responsibility for it.” There was an emphasis on focusing on Christ and the Holy Spirit more than the institution. One hoped for a less vertical church. Many agreed on the need for greater lay leadership, including women, especially to lighten the burdens of their priests.

There was a consistent theme of reliance on the Holy Spirit. “We should help people learn to be open to the gifts of the Holy Spirit and how to use them in our communities.” Even programming on how to discern gifts was recommended. “The Holy Spirit is the conduit for new thinking and inspiration. There is a need for intentional disciples and to speak from the heart and ready to answer questions with sensitivity.” There was also hope for more Pro-Life activities and devotional activities. They bemoaned the loss of parochial schools and acknowledged the cost of the sexual abuse scandal to the Church.

Above all, they focused on the Gospel and how it is lived. “Most meaningful is living out your faith. Live the Gospel and people will see it. People want to be cared about. ”

Women in the Catholic Church

Many listening session participants suggested that women have gifts to offer the Church and that those gifts are under-utilized. There is a generally consistent feeling that the pace of change in the Church is slow and women are frustrated because they want to increase their service to God and their Church according to how God calls them.

- Not equal opportunity for ministry for women and men.
- Disappointed by women’s lack of leadership role in the Church
- Assumption that men are always the boss
- Clericalism
- Hope that one day women can offer homilies instead of a reflection
- Change at a faster pace
- Allowing women to have a higher role in the parish would allow the priest to focus on sacraments and laity can handle the rest
- Role of women: larger voice and more prominently featured in leadership
- Possibility of ordaining women, especially to the diaconate

Families & Young Adults

The overall theme of this synod session is they are concerned with the decrease in families that attend Mass. We need to be more welcoming to families of all different types and meet them where they are, showing them that the Church is their family as well.

- Focus on faith as a “life skill” that children need
- The Church needs to journey with people in the changing dynamics of the parish. Asking the people what they want to get out of their spiritual journey could give more insight into how to minister to them.
- Ministering in ways that are more creative and reaching out to the marginalized. Loss of a priest is a huge upheaval for every parish, and it is hard to make the Church feel like home if a huge part of that parish [the priest] is being moved.
- There needs to be more of an increase in laity and a decrease in priest administration to give people what they are looking for in the Church.
- There needs to be more acceptance and teaching about mental health to our youth.
- There is a sense among many that the Church is cloaked in secrecy and that there is a lack of honesty and transparency.
- We need more support for young people and families. For example, it is a common experience for young people to have a lot of daily Mass and adoration opportunities and a lively faith life, but then they return home to their home parishes and it often feels like there is nothing. A similar challenge for families; it feels like families get some attention from the Church at a few key points, but then are often forgotten about in-between times. Families tend to have little voice in the parish.

Community is also a recurring theme, as it is understandably critical in smaller towns. The Church needs to engage in social responsibility and community outreach (such as food programs), and there was a particular interest in ecumenical and interfaith cooperation even among youth groups (given that the other churches in town are not other Catholic churches.) “Social connection is so important.” They heartily endorsed small and large group gatherings such as bible studies and “meeting people who understand our faith, trials, and tribulations.”

Consistently, the greatest concern is, what will the future bring? Do we understand the challenges? Liturgies that are appealing to families and young people (music, preaching), and family-centered events are important. We need their energy and hope.

- Questions or offers to volunteer not responded to
- Encourage participation – return the call! Make the ask!
- Listen – is there an opportunity to connect parishioners to someone who can just listen?
- The younger generation is leaving because of sexism and judgment
- Radical hospitality
- Encourage socialization (coffee hours, adult learning, any group, crocheting prayer shawls, decorating the altar, etc.)
- Encourage people to sing in Mass and greet each other with a wave and a smile

Respect Life

The Diocese has a strong Respect Life ministry rooted in the support and work of parishioners on the ground. The consensus is that while there have been successes in building parish networks of Respect Life ministry members, there is still work to do in supporting life from conception to natural death, including the

unique and pressing needs of women and their unborn children, and we have many ideas about how to best do that.

- Lack of leadership. Acknowledged that there has been a lot of coverage lately on abortion in *The Evangelist*, but that is not consistent. Disappointed in upper Church leadership for not speaking out as one on this key sanctity of life topic and not calling out scandal. Disappointed in the lack of parish participation at 40 Days for Life vigils.
- We are in the world but not of the world. Need to present the alternative to the world's ways.
- The Church could learn to teach more clearly how to love the Lord and follow His Teachings more clearly.
- It is a challenge to bring up the subject of Pro-Life, some peers are afraid to talk about it
- Many mentioned they find the clergy to be sincere, genuine, and supportive. Some clergy, particularly among the newly ordained, seem to have insufficient catechetical formation or seem uncomfortable discussing such matters, though many of them show great joy.
- One member found a retreat at Rachel's Vineyard (Long Island) very rewarding and expressed a desire to see more retreats of this nature available and to see more people attend such retreats.
- We all need to remember that many people, both men and women, are hurting from abortions. This should facilitate an attitude of mercy when addressing the issue.
- There was discussion on addressing issues that lead to abortion, rather than focusing just on abortions themselves.
- As a part of the Church's respect for life from conception to death, we (especially our Bishop leaders) need to speak out forcefully for sensible gun control.
- The Church needs to work on respect life themes (all stages of life) from the top down and bottom up.
- On marriage, gender, and the value of the unborn, to show the world why these are beautiful, good, and true.

Clergy

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 -- especially with those who are suffering. 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 are discouraged by [the presence of] fewer people before and since COVID, and care for the health and wellness of the priests. They find joy in their ministry outside the four walls of the church by visiting the homebound and imprisoned.

- Review traditions that overlook the gifts of the faithful, including married clergy, women in leadership roles, and alternatives to parish structures.
- Have clergy become more pastoral and less administrative in their roles
- Taking burdens off of people – reconciliation-annulments
- Ministry to people who are suffering – hospital and prisons
- Preaching and witnessing the spirit at work through the dailiness of priestly ministry
- Offering Mass especially, and including the crafts of preaching and teaching those who previously did not fully understand or comprehend something
- The Sacrament of penance, especially for those who have been away from the Church for a while

- Pastoral, spiritual, and sacramental accompaniment of people and families through the years and generations and the palpable sense of healing it brings
- Bringing others and accompanying them on their journey to a friendship with Christ

Expressed ideas included:

- Pro-Life activities
- Journeying alone
- Service strengthens
- Intentional disciples
- Need prayer and space to be renewed, rely on God
- Jesus needs to be primary, not the institution
- Not just a chaplain
- Repay the Lord for tranquility of the Spirit
- Ecumenical and interfaith outreach
- Pressures from the outside, including from the Diocese, are a drag
- Disappointed promises of Vatican II not moving forward
- Coarsening of conversation
- Hunger for coming back together
- Reaching out to those who no longer identify as Catholics
- Supporting and handing down the faith
- Not being able to do enough

The Joys of Living Our Faith & Celebrating the Eucharist

There is an overwhelming emphasis on the Eucharist and the Real Presence of Christ in our Diocese, and especially the joy of gathering around the Eucharist and making it the center of our personal lives and our community. Many people described a great trust in the Holy Spirit to guide and to bring us to new ideas, and every sacrament as having a profound effect with Reconciliation mentioned often. Concern about the availability of Mass was raised often. While not always prominently mentioned, support for the traditional Latin Mass occurred in each listening session as well as a renewed emphasis on traditional devotions, especially adoration.

- Greater voice for women, laity taking on more leadership within the parish, lightening the burden on priests that they might focus on their ministerial duties, ministry as a tool of connecting people to their faith
- The Church has given us the comfort of filling up spiritual gaps in our lives
- Found church very welcoming [as a convert to Catholicism]. People do not understand the importance of the Eucharist. We are connected when we celebrate with others
- Churches with active, dynamic liturgies, gatherings in ministry, and the synodal process giving us a chance to express our opinions [are joys]
- Liturgy has been impoverished
- I find much that is true, good, and beautiful in the Roman Catholic faith—the liturgy of the Mass, the commitment of the Church to the poor and oppressed, and when done well, the empowerment of the laity. I also deeply appreciate the Catholic tradition of honoring the saints of the Church as

models for Christian faith. I love the reverent expression of attending to word and sacrament.
(from non-Catholic clergy)

- Feeling “connected” to fellow parishioners (coffee hour after Mass, other activities)
- An opportunity to serve (ushers, people who count offerings, being on a committee)
- Liturgy is the work of the people and the people need to contribute to it
- Upset about scandals involving clergy sexual abuse and St. Clare’s pensioners

Life-long Faith Formation & Catechesis

In the Diocese of Albany, synod listening session participants generally view Catholic education with pride at all the parochial school students accomplish with the assistance of caring and dedicated teachers. At the same time, there is also concern about the future of Catholic education, such as enrollment figures.

- There is a need for stronger relationships between parishes and Catholic schools
- Stop treating the Catholic schools as a burden
- Need to figure out how to have more of a Catholic identity with the priest and our school
- From our experience as Catholic educators, we would like the Church to embrace change, acceptance, and growth.
- Too many people never think about the big picture. People in the world think about instant self-gratification. How do we get an eternal perspective back into people’s minds?
- Make it so there is a real difference between the Catholic and public schools
- Ensure Catholic schools teach the entire, uncompromising truth of the Catholic faith
- We are experiencing an influx of students who are unfamiliar with our religious practices. This is a great opportunity to introduce students to our beliefs.
- Growing up in the faith [in their respective countries outside the US] has been full of wonderful experiences
- That the Spanish mass is not totally in Spanish because the priest does not speak fully Spanish [is a disappointment]
- When I can’t confess in Spanish because the priest does not offer Spanish confession. Or when the priest uses his cell phone to translate his prayer into Spanish during confession [is a disappointment]

Even those who disagree with the direction catechesis should take thought it could and should be made more effective. Some pointed to the need to reach young people where they are or the need to ground catechesis in experiences shared (i. e., service). For others it was a firmer grounding in the tradition of the faith; most mentioned the need to increase family involvement. Adult catechesis, including Bible study, came through as a priority in almost every synodal session.

Misinformation and often an absence of knowledge and understanding of our faith formed many of the larger issues participants had with the Church and the Catholic faith: why priests do not marry, why women are not ordained priests and deacons, the administration of sacraments, divorce/annulment, and care of the environment.

Catechetical and Youth Ministry Leaders’ Listening Session Feedback

Of particular note, 45 catechetical and youth ministry leaders gathered for their own synod listening session. It was both an in-person and hybrid session, with these highlights:

As the Church, how are we journeying together with Jesus and one another?

Participants focused on how we journey with one another as a community of faith. Although there was certainly an expressed faith, in reality, Jesus is always journeying with us. Participants shared experiences that they viewed as ways to foster genuine journeying together:

- Experiences that engaged families (and multiple generations within the parish) were highlighted, such as sacramental preparation, celebrating the liturgical seasons, and sharing the rich traditions of our Church
- Faith formation is the responsibility of the whole community, not just the leader of the faith formation program
- Parishes would do well to foster intergenerational models that actively involve youth and young adults, especially in outreach to the poor and the sick
- At the same time, the participants noted the value of other experiences such as small groups, retreats, and ecumenical events as means to enhance community

Several challenges to “journeying together” also surfaced:

- How to draw families back and enable them to hear the Gospel
- The presence, and especially the lack, of pastors/priests has had a great impact on building and sustaining community
- Participants asked whether, with less resources (priests, lay ministers, diocesan staff, money), we are stretching our gifts so thin as to become ineffective

Where have you experienced joy, hope, or disappointment on the journey?

Joys:

- Building relationships with families through phone calls, one-to-one meetings
- Simply sharing the faith brings joy as we minister to and with others
- Doing ecumenical projects
- Celebration of the Sacraments with children/young people
- Renewing older traditions
- Professional sharing that is energizing

Hopes:

- Learning to let go and let God, especially during pandemic
- Seeing parishioners as trusted adults who can be real models/mentors in faith
- Church can be a home, a place of welcome
- Activities that foster community, e. g. ministry with the poor, “Name-tag Sunday” to get to know one another

Disappointments:

- Apathy of parents – not responding; not making Mass/faith formation a priority
- Frustration with expectations of families
- Lack of (younger) volunteers
- Sharing facilities with other entities and not giving faith formation priority in usage
- Obstacles to people receiving the Sacraments, especially diocesan policies
- Loss of connection with fellow ministers
- Competition from evangelical churches

Where in these experiences do you hear the Holy Spirit inviting us to grow?

- Grow in understanding those who feel marginalized and those who hold differing opinions
- Making **our** parishes social centers for the community where people are cared for and supported
- Reach out to other cultures and provide service to the community and involve youth in this
- Minister more creatively in post-Covid world – not business as usual, embrace new ideas
- Recognize “parental fatigue”, dialogue with them, show them the “maternal face” of the Church
- Offer more retreats and other ways people can share their experiences of life & faith
- That the Diocese be less isolated from parishes
- Pay attention to the amazing comments we hear from faith formation participants

Welcoming Diversity with an Inclusive Spirit

There were many consistent themes from the LGBTQ+ listening session. The first and most prevalent one was the need for more LGBTQ+ ministries. The parish where this session was held has a ministry called Kieran’s Light. According to the website, “It’s a ministry rooted in love, welcome, and respect for the LGBTQIA+ community, their family, friends, and loved ones.” Many said that this ministry makes them feel accepted and provides a positive experience and a safe space. They hope that more ministries like this one can be initiated in each Vicariate of the Diocese of Albany.

Another consistent theme was acceptance. Many believe that if churches aren’t accepting of all communities, pews will continue to empty. One participant said, “It’s difficult to be LGBTQ when you feel rejected.” Another participant said, “Learn where you are welcome and attend where you are welcome.” Everyone at this event agrees that the Church should just accept and be understanding of everyone regardless of background. The final reoccurring theme is a lack of understanding of the Church’s stance on the LGBTQ community. Some are unaware of what the Church’s “rules” are, while others are hopeful the Church can change, in that it is much different from the 1950s. Another participant hopes for clearer teachings from the Church, since Jesus was a teacher, too.

Participants expressed the importance of the Church being a welcoming place for

- LGBTQ people and concern that they feel rejected, along with others in solidarity with them;
- People of color, and a Church with more diversity reflecting the environment.
- Divorced people that includes receiving pastoral care and knowing they belong.

In other listening sessions, some felt the church should be more aggressive in taking stances, while others cautioned against becoming overly political. There was an emphasis on a catechetical reset focusing on tradition and Catholic devotions, including the Latin Mass, which there was consistent support for from some people around the Diocese.

- If not welcoming and inclusive, the pews will continue to be empty. It’s self-destructive
- With a partner for 36 years, doesn’t want a Justice of the Peace to perform [a wedding], wants it in Church as a sacrament
- Our youth are leaving in droves
- We as a Church exclude too many people
- Jesus would join our group. We struggle with fear and anxiety about your relationships with our Church but not our relationships with God

- We take action every day by loving our students [in Catholic school]. They know that no matter where they go in our building, they are safe, and loved, and accepted for who they are.
- ALL members of the Church, regardless of role, should participate in the conversation and hear the stories of the people who ARE the Church. BE A DO-ER AND NOT JUST A HEAR-ER!

The Experience of Synodality

Listening session participants were enthusiastic about the opportunity to connect with each other, reflect on their faith, and explore ways to learn more about their fellow Catholics' hopes, joys, disappointments, and fears. There is a great emphasis in more rural communities on interfaith and ecumenical communities where there are no other Catholic churches to partner with, key to delivering services to the poor and others in need.

- Welcoming atmosphere
- Personal invitation
- Journeying with more people
- Family-based experiences
- Gathering in small and large groups
- Events where parishioners came together at events sponsored by the Church
- Outreach and connection with those serving the poor in the community
- That is the best 45 minutes I have spent as a Catholic in a long time

As one participant put it so well, "Today, we are meeting the faithful where they are physically and spiritually. It is so important to be with them."

Next Steps

In the Diocese of Albany, we are aware that this is truly a journey; while we have reached the end of this phase, we seek to continue the work begun here in pursuit of listening better and listening together to bring the Kingdom of Christ in all His glory to Earth through prayer for and engagement with the world. Ongoing review and evaluation of table scribe sheets offer the opportunity for better-informed decision-making. We will provide a summary of each listening session from each vicariate and a scan of the scribe sheets. Our continued listening sessions signal a commitment to embracing the ongoing nature of the journey and allows us reminders of how important it is to accompany each other on the path.