



# Synod Preparation: Diocesan Summary of Listening Session Input Diocese of Syracuse, NY

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## **Diocesan Summary of Listening Session Input Diocese of Syracuse, NY**

*Editor's note: this is the report summarizing the results of the forty-two listening sessions held from Fall 2021 through Spring 2022 at sites throughout the Diocese of Syracuse. In total, 2644 people attended, of which 745 people shared their thoughts and wishes. An additional 152 written contributions were also received. This report will be synthesized, along with reports from the other seven dioceses in New York State, and submitted to the national synodal committee for inclusion in what will be sent to the Vatican in preparation for the 2023 worldwide synod.*

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

In the Diocese of Syracuse, Bishop Douglas Lucia personally held and attended 42 listening sessions. The Diocese is divided into Pastoral Care Areas (combinations of parishes in a geographic area), and the sessions were held in the PCAs. All the PCA sessions were open to anyone who wished to attend. In addition, there were a number of "special listening sessions" geared to particular groups: three sessions for those who for whatever reason are estranged from the Church, with a particular focus on the LGBTQ Community; one for women religious; one for priests; one for diocesan employees; two geared specifically to young adults; and four on college campuses. Additionally, Bishop Lucia visited the diocesan high schools; though these did not involve a formal listening session, there was dialogue with students and faculty in each. Total attendance for the listening sessions was 2664. In addition, we received over 150 written submissions as input.

We heard from "every point on the theological/ecclesiological scale" of the hopes and dreams of the people of God throughout the diocese. Our diocese consists of seven counties in Central New York encompassing the North Country and the Mohawk Valley to the Southern Tier. We are a mixture of rural, urban, and suburban parishes...and there were multiple opportunities for people to attend a listening session in their area. In general, the atmosphere of the listening sessions was one of prayerful reflection and respectful sharing of hopes, dreams, and concerns (and some "complaints.") We worked

to establish a context of prayer, reflection, active listening, and bold, courageous, honest speech.

Many of the participants expressed verbally their gratitude to Bishop Lucia for his commitment to the Synodal Listening Process, especially for his personal presence at each and every listening session. We began each session with a brief explanation of the process, highlighting the need for active listening and respectful speaking, and emphasized that “we are all here to listen...for us to listen to one another, for the bishop to listen to us, and for all of us together to listen for the Holy Spirit guiding the Church.” Then we prayed the *Adsumus Sancte Spiritus* (Prayer for the Synod) in common, followed by ten minutes of silent, contemplative prayer, before inviting the people to speak.

One of the surprises was how quickly and how deeply the people entered into the sacred silence. For the most part, the people listened carefully and attentively to one another, and seemed to act just as the Holy Father wished: they spoke freely, boldly, and courageously...and respectfully (with a few exceptions). Many expressed their profound gratitude for the opportunity to speak candidly about their perception of the Church and the need for the Church’s vision concerning society to be more relevant to where people are at, in today’s society. We also offered multiple opportunities for people to submit a written response: via email, a form provided by the diocese, or a letter to the Diocesan Synodal Office or directly to Bishop Lucia.

Certainly, we experienced some difficulties. The time frame for our listening sessions was November 2021 – May 2022. Thus, many were held in the midst of a Central New York winter – limiting attendance for those who do not travel at night or in the winter. Additionally, most of our listening sessions were held in the evening in order that the bishop would be able to attend. Those two factors made it difficult, if not impossible for those who choose not to drive at night or in winter weather, to attend.

A second difficulty was that we found it difficult to reach “those on the margins.” We did not have a good “vehicle” to reach them, given our time frame and other factors previously mentioned. Nonetheless, the effort was made throughout to connect with anyone wishing to share their thoughts and reflections.

A third difficulty might be presented as the “shadow” side of the wide range of theological/ecclesiological perspectives which were represented. Though most people listened respectfully, at times it seemed like there was a bit of “competition” seeping in...people “responding” to a different viewpoint from their own, rather than speaking of their own hopes, dreams, concerns.

A fourth difficulty was that there was a small percentage of people who spoke whose understanding of Church doctrine and/or practices was based on a lack of accurate knowledge or understanding of a particular doctrine or practice, and an even smaller percentage who were quite intolerant of “the other.”

A fifth difficulty that became apparent as some people spoke was that even after almost 60 years of the Second Vatican Council, there was a dearth of understanding of the documents and teachings of the Council. This resulted in some speakers promoting

liturgical practices and theological perspectives contrary to the more expansive teachings of Vatican II.

## **II. IDENTIFYING THE TOP THEMES**

As previously mentioned, we heard hopes, dreams, and concerns from the perspective of “every point along the theological/ecclesial scale.” Though their hopes, dreams, and concerns varied substantially, each person who spoke, spoke sincerely from a “place” of cherished beliefs.

The “top ten” themes which emerged (in alphabetical order, not priority) were:

1. Catechesis and lifelong faith formation
2. Concern regarding the shortage of priests and concern for the well-being of priests who are ministering in many cases to multiple parish communities
3. Evangelization
4. Images of Church (including the Latin Mass (Extraordinary Form) vs the Novus Ordo, the teachings of Vatican II, the hierarchical structure, a desire for a more inclusive Church)
5. The Role of the Laity, especially the role of women
6. The LGBTQ Community
7. Liturgy (including a concern for a perceived “lack of reverence” in the Novus Ordo, desire for good homilies, the Latin Mass (Extraordinary Form), and a concern surrounding declining church attendance)
8. Parish Vitality (including a desire to be more welcoming to all, especially the young, those with different abilities, mental health services)
9. Prayer and Devotions
10. Youth and Young Adults

## **III. SYNTHESIS**

We used three basic questions to guide those wishing to offer their thoughts.

I. [From the Holy Father in the Preparatory Document]

“A Synodal Church, in announcing the Gospel, ‘journeys together.’ How is this ‘journeying together’ happening today in your particular Church? What steps does the Holy Spirit invite us to take in order to grow in our journey together?”

II. [From Bishop Lucia, in his March 2021 pastoral letter “In the Name of Jesus”] “Though we are many parts, how can we better reflect the presence of the Risen Christ – as his body – in the 21st Century?”

III. “What else would you like to say to Bishop Lucia?”

We also provided “focus questions” for each of the three main questions:

- What has been your experience of Church in your parish and diocese?
- How have you experienced “journeying together” in your parish, with other parishes, with the Diocese, as part of the Universal Church?
- What could be improved in your parish? Diocese? Universal Church?
- What do you hope for in your parish? In the Diocese? In the Universal Church?
- How do you understand the Church’s belief in the Risen Christ?
- How do you “encounter” the Risen Christ in your life?

- What would help you to understand what it means to say that “Christ is Risen?”
- What would help you to live your belief that “Christ is Risen?”

In general, many people who spoke – or submitted written responses – spoke very positively of their parish experience and exhibited profound respect and concern for their pastors and parish priests. In general, the concerns revolved more around concern that the Church be strong and courageous providing moral teaching in today’s world, without apology. At the same time, there were very different understandings of what those teachings should be, and there were concerns about ministering to the People of God in the situations within which they are trying to live their lives faithfully, but in a very different world than the world in which most of us have grown up.

There was 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 would speak about their heartbreak that the children whom they raised in the faith, now as adults no longer participate actively in the faith.

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

Using, then, the ten themes previously identified, again, alphabetically, here is some of what we heard:

- **Catechesis**

We heard:

Adults “don’t know their faith” and thus do not pass it on to their children.

Children who are not being taught “the basics” such as prayer, attendance at Sunday Mass, devotions.

A desire for catechesis for adults, and for those with different abilities, as well as better catechesis for children and youth in our parishes and schools.

A concern that the Church not “water down” its teachings.

A desire for consistency in what is taught in parish and school catechetical programs.

We also heard:

Appreciation for the greater emphasis on family catechesis and programs for adults such as Formation for Ministry.

Appreciation for Catholic School and Parish Catechetical Programs who are trying to provide those “basics”...as well as opportunities for a personal encounter with Christ.

Catechists who spoke of their love for the ministry, and their desire to truly engage adults, teens, and youth in a personal encounter with Christ.

- **Evangelization**

We heard:

Some noted that evangelization has been a part of the mission statement of the diocese.

But there was a sense that “we don’t do it well.” There was a desire to reach out to those who have left the Church, as well as those who are not Catholic.

There was a desire on the part of many who want to share their love of Christ and the Church, but in their words, “don’t know how.”

We also heard:

Some voiced the idea that we “neglect” those who are already in the Church.

Some said: “We forget that the purpose of the Church is to save people from their sins And to lead souls to heaven.”

Some felt that the Church is too influenced by modern culture, and too timid to proclaim “the Truth” no matter the cost.

- **Images of Church**

We heard:

Some felt that the Church was not welcoming to many groups, nor “relevant” to people struggling to make sense of life in our world beset by such division, hatred, and violence. Others stated that the Church is welcoming...but that image is not being communicated well.

We also heard:

Some felt that the Church was too afraid to stand for Truth in our world today, that the Church is “too welcoming. One speaker stated simply, “There’s not a damn thing wrong with the Church.”

A common theme was “Why are we allowing politicians who “support abortion” to receive communion?”

- **Concern for Priests and Deacons**

We heard:

Deep love and appreciation for their pastors/priests and for their parishes.

Priests are being “overworked”...

It is hard for priests to be present to their people when they are ministering to multiple parishes.

How can we invite/encourage young men to consider priesthood and diaconate?

We also heard:

Deacons are under-utilized; might they be able to do more?

Allow deacons to “say Mass” or to administer the Sacrament of the Sick.

Some acknowledged the need to close more churches (as long as it wasn’t theirs!)

Let lay people manage the administrative duties related to the parish so that priests can be freed for pastoral duties.

- **Role of the Laity, especially Women**

We heard:

Many people spoke of the desire for a more inclusive Church, one which acknowledges and affirms the gifts of the laity, including the desire that women be allowed to preach and to be ordained.

A small but significant number of women spoke movingly about their own sense of call to ordination. Some “found other ways to minister in the Church” ... but never lost that sense of call.

Many expressed the idea that laity can perform the administrative roles in a parish, and should be trained to be parish administrators/parish life directors.

We also heard:

Some spoke of faithfulness to the present practice of ordaining only men, and some saw women’s role as complementary, not equal. Sometimes, that included an affirmation

of the hierarchical model of Church.

- **The LGBTQ Community**

We heard:

Some people spoke very movingly about their concern for their LGBTQ children, who do not feel welcome in Church.

At one of our special listening sessions geared to the LGBTQ Community, several gay people spoke of their experience of being considered “possessed” or “mentally ill.” Their stories were heartbreaking.

A few of our parishes make a concerted effort to intentionally welcome the LGBT Community. In those parishes, they are welcomed and are a vital part of the faith community.

We also heard:

As one person put it: “Why are we catering to the LGBTQ Community? They are sinners!”

- **Liturgy**

Here, there was a real dichotomy in what we heard.

We heard:

Many expressed love for the Mass as it is celebrated in their parish.

Some concern about a lack of consistency in the way Mass is celebrated in different parishes.

Some believe that we need better ritual, better homilies, better music...or no music at all! Regarding homilies, some wanted more scripturally based homilies, others wanted more “teaching,” and others wanted the homilies to relate more directly to their daily lives. Some questioned the fact that the 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.

We also heard:

Those who advocated for the Latin Mass (Extraordinary Form) 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.

Some thought that the Latin Mass (Extraordinary Form) should be the only rite offered.

- **Parishes/Community**

We heard:

Many expressed a love for their parish community and commented that they felt their parish was warm and welcoming, committed to justice, and led by a pastor who was engaged with parishioners. An appreciation of parish priests and deacons was expressed.

We also heard:

Others felt that their parish was not welcoming, and that there was little sense of community outside of the Sunday gathering for Mass.

Some thought that the homilies in their parish were “over their head” and not helpful to their daily lives.

A very few criticized their pastors.

- **Prayer**

We heard:

Many expressed a love for prayer and for traditional devotions such as the rosary, adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, novenas, First Friday and First Saturday devotions, 40 Hours, etc.

We also heard:

The issue of the lack of knowledge by children (and adults) of the “traditional prayers of the Church,” as well as Church doctrine, was raised quite often.

- **Youth and Young Adults**

We heard:

Many spoke of the “aging demographic” they see in Church. “Where are the young? Where are the families?”

The youth are our present and future; we need to reach out to them, to welcome and include them .

We also heard:

Some noted the Youth and Young Adult Ministry in the diocese, and spoke about personal moments of conversion they had experienced.

## **Conclusions**

The experience of the Listening Sessions was very positive. We found that the ten minutes of silent prayer at the beginning gave participants an opportunity to pause and create an inner space enabling them to listen deeply, as well as giving them the courage and freedom to speak from their heart. Many people spoke of their gratitude to Bishop Lucia for his presence, and for the opportunity to speak of their hopes, dreams, and concerns. 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. They longed to be welcomed in the Church, and to have their spiritual needs and desires met by a loving community of faith. Many were amazed that they were being asked to share their thoughts and opinions. At the same time, a few questioned “whether anything would come of this.”

Much of the feedback “seems negative”...especially in written form. But the persons who raised concerns were not angry nor belligerent; they spoke respectfully and hoped that their contributions could lead to a renewal of the Church they love.

In the Diocese of Syracuse, Bishop Lucia has already acted on some of what he has heard.

For example, he has continued a process of pastoral planning that has been part of our diocesan life for years. He has revised the structure of the Pastoral Care Areas to ensure greater collaboration among parishes and clergy. He has also authorized a restructuring of Diocesan Offices in response to the often expressed need for enabling all of us to know and live our faith. In addition, he has already set in motion plans for a Diocesan Synod sometime in 2024, and the Diocese of Syracuse will participate enthusiastically in the National Eucharistic Revival.

It is clear to us that the process itself was a gift of grace!

We have felt the Spirit among us, calling us to be missionary disciples.

*Catholic Sun June 6, 2022*