

Report of St. Cecilia – St. Gabriel Parish of The Diocese of Bridgeport for The Synod on Synodality

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Introduction & Methodology

Under the guidance of Pope Francis's directive to hold a Synod on Synodality to engage in a worldwide listening session at all Catholic parishes around the world, four parishioners were selected from St. Cecilia - St. Gabriel parish to form a team. The Synod team worked to design a process that would give a "voice to the people of God," the parishioners. The voice of the people of God will be heard up through the diocese and the magisterium to Pope Francis. The Synod delegates met in collaboration with our pastor, Rev. John Connaughton, and formulated the following process to accomplish the goal of listening to the people. The Synod delegates met together with the pastor a total of seven times over the course of the year, to plan and implement the Synod outreach activities detailed below.

Our goal was to capture the concerns and the needs of the parishioners through a few different methods of outreach. The methods selected after thought and discussion are the following: (1) inserts in the weekly Bulletin with questions; (2) town-hall style listening sessions at both the parish churches and at the three local Catholic schools nearby; and (3) a telephone outreach to registered but inactive families in the parish. In selecting these methods we were aiming to capture the thoughts of the faithful in the pews, those who were seeking, and those who had drifted due to COVID-19 closures or other causes.

1. Bulletin Questions: Outreach in the pews requiring written response was conducted during the month of December 2021. One or two short questions were inserted into the weekly bulletin for four consecutive weeks supported by announcements from the pulpit as a reminder. The goal was to have parishioners articulate a response to their practice of the faith or raise questions /concerns. Tell us what you are thinking; we are listening! The questions could be answered on the same page and dropped back into the collection basket, anonymity was allowed or they could self-identify. Email response option was allowed with email directed to the pastor.

2.(A) Parish Town Hall Listening Sessions: This style allowed a verbal response in a relaxed setting. Two town hall style sessions were held in December 2021, one at each of the parish churches. The St. Gabriel's session was held one hour before the 4 PM Saturday Vigil Mass and at St. Cecilia's one hour following the 9 AM Sunday Mass. Question sheets were handed out to participants to stimulate topics of discussion. Synod team members facilitated discussion, allowing all members an opportunity to participate with team members listening and recording responses. The priests were not present, allowing parishioners to speak, we hope, more freely.

(B) School Town Hall Style Listening Sessions: The synod team asked the pastor to approach the administrations of the schools first to seek cooperation, which was readily given. The school communities of Mater Salvatoris and Cardinal Kung were held an hour before school pick up time. These school communities have a population which travel a distance in order to attend and we wished to be helpful by holding sessions around pick up time. Catholic Academy of Stamford offered an evening session. Questions were distributed in advance through the schools so parents were able to think about topics, but it was made clear any topic was allowed to be brought forward. Synod team members were present to facilitate discussion and record responses.

3. Phone Outreach: Phone calls were made by Synod team members to registered but inactive Parishioners, we introduced ourselves as fellow parishioners and explained the Pope's outreach to the people during this time of the Synod on Synodality. Using the same questions that were previously used in the bulletin as a starting point, we provided the opportunity to be listened to and heard.

Data Collected & Findings

Below please find a summary of feedback received through the various means of outreach, followed by a discussion of what was learned and conclusions taken away from the process.

Data set 1: Bulletin Questions

The following four questions were offered to parishioners over a period of four weeks in December:

1. Why do you practice your Catholic Faith? Why do you come to Mass?
2. How do you imagine the Church helping you more in your life?
3. Pope Francis has said that “evangelization is the mission of the Church, not just of a few, but my, your, our mission.” In light of this, would you say that you have been evangelized? In other words, have you ever had an experience that brought your Catholic faith to life? Please consider sharing briefly some details of your experience, or your thoughts on why you think you have not had such an experience.
4. If you had the opportunity to have a conversation with him, what would you tell Pope Francis?

Table 1. Summary Of Bulletin Question Responses

Question	Email Responses	Written Responses	Total
#1	15	24	39
#2	15	18	33
#3	6	14	20
#4	1	10	11
In Total	37	66	103

Most Popular Bulletin Question Responses, categorized (count):

#1 A - Why do you practice your Catholic Faith?

Relationship (20)

Obligation / Tradition (11)

Community (6)

Uncategorized (2)

#1 B - Why do you come to Mass?

Obligation / Tradition (15)

Truth (10)

Uncategorized or did not answer the question (8)

Relationship (6)

#2 - How do you imagine the Church helping you more in your life?

Formation (22)

Uncategorized or did not answer the question (6)

Community (5)

#3 – ‘How have you been evangelized?’

Encounter (9)

Witness (7)

Tradition (2)

Uncategorized or did not answer the question (2)

#4 - If you had the opportunity to have a conversation with him, what would you tell Pope Francis?

Ideas on how to fix the church (8)

Gratitude (2)

Gratitude + Ideas on how to fix the church (1)

Notable Responses to Bulletin Questions:

#1 - Why do you practice your Catholic Faith? (and/or) Why do you come to Mass?

(My Kids) I come to mass to pray and learn about Jesus. (Me) Sometimes I'm not sure why I come at all, maybe to set an example for my kids or just because that is what I've been taught to do. I always wrestle with my faith, but as much as I struggled with this, I still haven't quite found a good reason not to believe in God or to come to mass. So I suppose I come to mass because He keeps calling me, and because life without Him would be quite pointless. [written response transcribed]

#2 - How do you imagine the Church helping you more in your life?

To help me learn to better evangelize others. Establish opportunities for unity & being the best versions of ourselves & helping others around us. [written response transcribed]

#3 – ‘How have you been evangelized?’

I have been evangelized more than once as I reflect on the question. In particular attending an event (international organ concert) following the Cardinal's appeal lunch-in attending a presentation by Cardinal Dolan at St Joseph's seminary in Yonkers, a yearning for eucharistic celebration and a call to action as a "missionary disciple" caused an increase in mass attendance and daily prayer in 2019.

More recently participation in a bible study men's group has increased my faith in a form of evangelization. Another "magnet" if you will, seems to be the combination of Bishop Barron's Word on Fire social media outlet along with a daily devotional book from Living Faith.com to feel a growth in my relationship with God growing deeper.

#4 - If you had the opportunity to have a conversation with him, what would you tell Pope Francis?

I would thank him for almost a lifetime of dedication and service in guiding and caring for the Church, the clergy and religious, and parishioners, and reaching out to others, in promoting peace and mercy and aid to those in distress or need, in providing written guidance and interpretation to the clergy, and thus to all members of the Church, and other good works and examples to all. [written response transcribed]

DATA SET 2: Town Hall Listening Sessions

The parish delegates held town hall meetings at the St. Cecilia – St. Gabriel Parish churches and local Catholic schools of Stamford, CT, in an effort to gather further information from participants by opening up

a welcoming, respectful, and honest dialogue. The discussions were all started and guided with several questions provided to participants in advance of the meetings. The guidance questions provided to the parish churches were established around several points of interest, and the questions provided to the parents / guardians of the local Catholic Schools were focused on Catholic education and parish participation.

2A. Parish Town Hall Listening Sessions

The questions provided to parishioners at the St. Gabriel Church and St. Cecilia Church listening sessions were as follows:

Liturgy

1. How can we encourage active participation in the Liturgy?
2. How can we make Mass more engaging?

Mission

1. Who is neglected in the Church's evangelizing mission?
2. What do you see as the greatest challenge facing the Church in her mission today?

Community

1. How can we make our parish feel more like a family? How could the parish welcome more into our family?
2. How could the parish live more fully the social teaching of the Church?

Role of Laity

1. What is your experience of the Church listening to the voice of the people of God?
2. How do you see your own role in the Church?

There were 26 parishioners who participated in the town halls held at the parish churches. This accounts for approximately 2% of active parishioners at St. Cecilia – St. Gabriel Parish. The discussions and information gathered between both churches were consistent with one another. Please see notes below summarizing each category of guidance questions provided.

Liturgy: Music at Mass plays a big role in people's participation and engagement at mass. It was discussed to select songs that are more lively and/or are welcoming for comfortable participation regardless of people's vocal abilities. It was also discussed to have the adults' and the children's choirs back at Mass since the impacts of the pandemic are on the decline.

Along similar lines, with the impacts of the pandemic on the decline, having the laity bring up gifts, ushers, and altar servers back in Mass celebrations is something that parishioners would like to see.

Having a family or a children's Mass once a month could encourage more young families to come back to church and participate in the celebration. Another benefit would be having the kids interact with one another, which could result in the bonding of Catholic families.

Mission: There was a consensus among the participating parishioners that the Catholic church, as a whole, is perceived as being cold and not welcoming. We need to do a better job at welcoming all people to church. This would include people who currently have different beliefs and lifestyles (ie. LGBTQ community and Pro-choice community). It was voiced that people who feel judged and condemned by the church will never change their mindset to see that Catholicism is the answer, even if they have a desire

for God in their life. NOTE: It was not mentioned that the church should change its teachings, only that we do a better job at welcoming all.

This parish used to have a Welcoming Committee, and it was suggested that this committee be brought back and become more active in engaging parishioners, both new and old. It was noted that this is especially important with so many people straying away from weekly Mass during the pandemic.

The following items were identified by the participants as the church's greatest challenges today:

- Perceived exclusion of people – refer to previous items noted under this topic
- Further divisiveness caused by political views
- Divisiveness and confusion caused by different Masses (ie. Latin mass – “conservative” vs “liberal” Catholics)
- Sports and work activities scheduled on Sunday – made a priority over observing the Sabbath
- Press and media influence over the public
- The Catholic Church not addressing or avoiding discussion on the church scandal
- Relocating of parish pastors has had successes and failures. In our parish, the consensus was that the once thriving parish started to decline when a new pastor was brought in several years ago. It has only just started to recover in the last couple of years under the leadership of the current pastor.
- Retention of Catholics who participated in Mass celebrations and church activities has been a serious issue, especially among young people. This item has become even more of an issue with the COVID-19 pandemic keeping people away from Mass and other church activities.

Community: It was clear that this topic of discussion was the most important to the participants, that the status of the church community within a parish sets the tone for how people engage in their faith, participate in Mass, and interact with one another. The parish participants enthusiastically expressed feelings of nostalgia as they told stories of the events and groups that were active many years ago, when the parish seemed to be healthier and thriving. The following items were suggested during the discussions:

- Monthly Family Mass followed by coffee and donuts outside or in church basement
- More parish events, such as picnics, field days, dances, dinners, etc.
- Doing a better job at informing parishioners of what groups are active (ie. Bible studies, Knights of Columbus, book clubs, youth group, etc.) in order to spark interest of non-participants
- Engaging with and organizing events with other local churches in the community

Role of Laity: Some participants expressed that they do not feel like their voices are heard or considered by the church. However, they were happy that Pope Francis wants to hear from the people through the Global Synod on Synodality.

Frustration and concern were expressed regarding the same group of people doing all of the service work associated with the parish, whether by choice or necessity. There is a lack of people who want to get involved with parish service or groups, but these activities still need to occur. That is part of the reason why the same people volunteer for all of the activities. From the other viewpoint, people may see no need to volunteer if the same people seem to have it under control all of the time.

2B. School Town Hall Listening Sessions

The questions provided to the parents / guardians of children who attend local Catholic schools – Catholic Academy of Stamford, Cardinal Kung Academy, and Mater Salvatoris College Preparatory School, were as follows:

1. Why do you value a Catholic education?
2. How did you come to select the parish you attend?

3. How do you see the Catholic Church supporting your growth as a faithful family?
4. How would you encourage people you know to get more involved in parish life?

There were 10 participants in the school town hall gatherings. All of the participants seemed to agree that providing a Catholic education was important to them because integrating Catholic values in the education of the youth would also help set deeper roots in their Catholic faith. However, it was also expressed that Catholic schools are failing as a whole for several reasons:

- Catholic schools are constantly closing (particularly in Westchester County, NY)
- Catholic schools are not leaning all the way into the faith. Schools are becoming too influenced by outside issues and modern-day culture.
- Loss of sisters and well-formed Catholics as educators
- Lacking a strong connection with the church and mass itself. The kids that attend school together do not attend the same church, receive sacraments together. This is due to the school and the church not being connected with each other.

As a result of this, families find themselves traveling long distances so that the children can attend a Catholic school that holds the strongest Catholic values in the eyes of the parents / guardians.

Many families follow a similar path when it comes to selecting a home parish. They will travel a much further distance from their local church in order to attend a church where the Catholic faith is not waived or lacking, where there is diversity in age and cultures, and where the priests deliver good homilies that hold strong to their faith rather than remaining neutral.

Much like the town halls held at the parish churches, the participants of the school town halls were enthusiastic when discussing the importance of community within a parish. The community can be built through Family Masses, gatherings after Mass celebrations, parish/school events throughout the year, engagement of the children and young adults through groups and activities. Along with these types of activities, which align with the suggestions of the parish town hall participants, the school participants expressed the importance to also encourage Catholic actions. This would include but not be limited to Eucharistic Adoration, regular confessions, and saying rosaries at Planned Parenthood. These participants made it clear that engagement of fun social activities is critical but should never overshadow our responsibility to grow closer as individuals, a family, and community to the Lord.

DATA SET 3: Phone Outreach

As previously noted, the synod delegates made phone calls to those parishioners who have been inactive in the parish in an effort to hear more voices and gain further perspectives. There were 224 phone calls that were made to these listed parishioners. The results of those phone calls were as follows:

- 73 or 33% of the phone numbers were inactive or out of service
- 113 or 50% of the calls were not answered, and voicemails were not responded to
- 38 or 17% of the calls were answered

Of the 38 people that answered the call, 21 were willing to answer some of the questions that were presented. The questions included:

1. Are you an active member of St. Cecilia – St. Gabriel Parish?
2. Do you attend Mass weekly?
 - a. If yes, why do you attend Mass?
 - b. If no, why did you stop attending Mass?
3. What can the church do to help strengthen your faith?

In response to these questions, several people informed us that they were still active in the church, but they had relocated with their families outside of this area of Stamford and changed parishes. They and a

few of the other participants provided similar responses to those parishioners who responded to the weekly bulletin synod question asking why do you attend Mass. They attend Mass because:

- That is the way they were raised
- The message they receive from the homily
- The sense of community, family, friendship, and peace they feel there

There were a few people who responded that they have not attended Mass in many years for personal reasons. A couple of suggestions that they provided for bringing people back to the church included:

- Stop leading discussions with money
- While the church requires some growing with the times and culture, the faith should not be compromised. The pope's recent comments regarding woke culture were totally out of place.

Lastly, more than half of those who provided responses to these questions said that they stopped going to Mass because of the social distancing and quarantining measures they were following since the COVID-19 pandemic started to seriously impact Stamford, CT, in early 2020. While most everything has since resumed normal operations since that time, these particular people never returned to attending Mass and participating in the church because they had fallen out of the habit or lost interest. There were five people who did say that it was time for their families to come back to the church, that they could no longer justify staying away.

While the synod delegates were active listeners during all of these conversations, all callers who no longer came to church were provided with a loving welcome and gentle encouragement to come back to Mass.

Conclusion

The Diocesan Synod on Synodality gave the Parish of St. Cecilia - St. Gabriel an opportunity to consult the people of God on their experiences as members of the Body of Christ. The Synod delegate team, in conjunction with our pastor Rev. John Connaughton, made a concerted effort to solicit the feedback of both active and inactive members of our parish community, in conformity to the wishes of the Holy Father. We also strove to solicit feedback about specific areas of interest listed in the global and diocesan Synod documents: Liturgy, Mission, Community, and the Role of the Laity. We found that our parish community reflects many of the broader features of Catholic Church in the United States today. Religious practice is often an inherited custom from early education or family upbringing. The people are eager for community yet are only partially engaged in parish life. Participation in the liturgy is understood chiefly through assigned roles and musicality rather than with a theological lens or with any sense of mystagogy. The people of the parish have some sense of mission towards the broader community but need better formation to better understand the meaning and direction of that mission.

Our parish Synod outreach resulted in 177 points of contact with both parishioners and community members. This included 129 points of contact with active parishioners and 48 points of contact with broader community members, in this case the parents of Catholic school children and inactive members of the parish. Overall, bulletin questions and town hall meetings managed to solicit feedback from about 5-10% of all active parishioners, a significant success. Feedback from the broader community accounted for 27% of all points of contact, indicating that the methods outlined above also successfully reached those more on the margins of parish life.

While the parish Synod outreach resulted in many specific, concrete ideas about changes for parish liturgical and communal life, perhaps the greatest benefit of the process was to bring parishioners together again after months and years apart during the era of COVID-19 pandemic and enforced social distancing. The Synod delegates hope, in conjunction with the pastor, to make the fruits of this report available to our parish community as a whole, to best discern how to move forward with specific suggestions made pursuant to our parish life. We expect to release some or all of this report to the parish and to announce parish opportunities, deliberations, and actions taken in response to the Synod process

feedback. We also hope to review the Synod reports of neighboring parishes and to compare notes with delegates at peer parishes about their findings.

The Parish of St. Cecilia - St. Gabriel of the Diocese of Bridgeport, in her efforts on behalf of the global Synod on Synodality, successfully demonstrated the utility of three methods for soliciting feedback from the people of God: bulletin questions; town hall listening sessions; and phone calls. These methods could be honed and used again in the future to gather information for parish or diocesan activities as needed. We hope our humble efforts have contributed to a stronger culture of discourse and openness in parish life and indeed in the Church universal as she strives to listen ever more attentively to the voices of her many children.