

Synod Report 2022

"What are the most significant signs of the Lord's presence in your life?"

The most common answers for how people deepen their relationship with the Lord were through their families, the priests and their homilies, and the experience of the sacraments. A number of people mentioned parish community and putting their faith in action as helping them grow deeper.

The practices that helped deepen their faith were participating in the sacraments most especially the Eucharist through both Mass and Adoration. Others mention spiritual practices such as fasting, personal prayer, tithing, and silence. Participation in RCIA, using resources such as books and podcasts, and putting their faith into action through living your faith in the community were other ways people used to grow.

People's experience of prayer and discerning the Lord's calling was mostly through spending time in prayer and adoration. Other responses consisted of incorporating prayer in their life at all times, listening to the Holy Spirit, and praying for opportunities to get to know the Lord's voice. When trying to discern the Lord's will it was pointed out that one should examine the fruits of decisions to see if they are bearing good fruit or not.

Participants felt nourished in their faith through a variety of activities. Meditation on Scripture, incorporating prayer in their activities, and receiving the Eucharist were among the most common responses. Some mentioned surrounding themselves with believers and learning in a communal setting through bible studies and fellowship. Going on pilgrimage to the Holy Land and other holy sites around the world was also mentioned. Joy and peace was found in serving others and being in nature and disengaging from the media and business of the world.

Living out the Gospel was accomplished through seeking out opportunities to evangelize, listening to the those around oneself even negative comments, and being a good example in your sphere of influence. Some people mentioned the importance of being honest if one does not know an answer but making sure one follows up with an answer when found. Other things mentioned were praying for and with specific people, making sure interaction are charitable and loving, and being instruments of God's love and mercy.

"What are the biggest challenges or questions you face in responding to the Lord's call?"

The most significant challenges mentioned in our discussions was division. Division in people's families, division in the people of the church (conservative vs liberal), division amongst the bishops and confusing and unclear teaching from the Holy Father. Other items mentioned were a lack of authentic Catholic community relating to the hypocrisy of people acting one way in faith life but differently in the world, distance between churches making it difficult to frequent activities, and the busyness of life finding it difficult to prioritize one's faith. Interesting comments were pertaining lack of support for immigrants, the local church not reaching beyond its borders leading to a diminished witness in the larger community, and the priest scandal. There was also a desire to have more relevance of homilies to current affairs and how the faith applies to them.

Pressing questions that were expressed were: "Does the church really believe what it teaches?", "How do we reach the fringes?", meaning people who only get their information from the media, "What is the responsibility of the laity?", and "Will the church develop a teaching on the addictive nature of social media?". Other thoughts that arose were concerns over the variety of messaging one can experience varying from parish to parish in regards to church teaching and a need to focus on evangelization in the community. There were also concerns over Bishops not being unified on church teaching, not taking action where it appears action should be taken and confusing messages from church leaders.

Challenges people faced in living their faith revolved around the culture's inability to have conversation with opposing points of view, a lack of faith in our schools and families using the church for cultural steppingstones like sacrament reception but not practicing faith in their personal life. Other challenges mentioned were not seeing priests on campus because of their busy schedules, a call to invite more religious orders to the diocese, parents not realizing the importance of their role in the family as first teachers in faith, and not having an affordable alternative to children to public school.

The struggles with being missionary disciples varied but the most significant one was the COVID restrictions. Perception of Catholics as exclusive, a lack of missionary zeal and plan to reach out to the local community, and the church not being visible in neighborhoods were all brought up as issues hindering missionary discipleship. An interesting observation was made about our parish architecturally is that it is focused on itself and not facing outward. One could miss it while driving. Suggestions included increasing our outreach to post high-school youth, young adults and moms, creating an apostolate for families, increasing our outreach to the community in general and setting up outreach posts in neighborhoods.

The biggest observations about our challenges to unity revolved around overcoming fear and how we react to fear, developing strategies to face the "cancel culture", and to work with other groups, churches, even non-Catholic, on service to the community.

"What steps is the Holy Spirit suggesting to you and your community to respond more fully to the Christian vocation?"

Responses to how participants felt the Holy Spirit was calling people to grow closer to God included building Christ-centered relationship and shifting friendship to ones that support one's growth. Seeking accountability in the community and prioritizing prayer time to seek God more were also mentioned. Seeking humility and engaging people where they are as well as working on loving people because they are people and not because of their behavior, or agreement with one's position on particular issues.

The Holy Spirit was inspiring this group to live out the Gospel through engaging with people with differing viewpoints, beginning conversation from a place of common ground, and speaking the truth in love. Post-Covid, one participant really felt the Spirit calling them to go out and interact with the community.

In responding to the circumstances the Lord has given, some felt the size of our parish was a deterrent to participation in its life. A few people mentioned trying to share activities with other faith communities in our area and providing resources for the community for both their physical and spiritual needs. A challenging factor was trying to live in a world where life seems to be split between virtual and reality especially dealing with children. The importance of loving the community as an important factor in being able to evangelize the community was noted. Some suggestions were creating liaisons to the neighborhoods in our area to assist in disseminating information and help create relationships between neighbors, increasing volunteers at local college campuses, and to help bridge the gap between the Catholic life and life in the workplace.

The discussion about living out unity with one another included suggestions to focus on Christ and be attentive to what the Lord is calling the community to, being aware of complacency in our attitude and striving for greatness rather than just being good. Suggestions included reaching out to single non-Christians, bring school life and parish life closer together, and using older more experienced members to mentor youth, young adult and young married couples.

Participation in the life of the Church discussion included thoughts on the dynamics of parish life in such a large parish. It was observed that many of the smaller groups and communities may not reflect the whole of the parish. In parish life, it is a challenge to address the multiple levels of faith development. It was also pointed out, the importance of the parishioners understanding the vision of the parish and being able to articulate it. One interesting suggestion was finding a way to link families in neighborhoods with other families in the same neighborhood in an effort to get families more involved in parish life.

Growing in participation of our Christian vocation discussion included being holy in your sphere of influence, making an effort to build the domestic church and bring faith into our homes. A suggestion was made to create resources for kids as well as parents such as a library of materials that can be used. When entering dialogue with others especially those who differ in point of view to identify grains of truth in their thinking and expand off those. Focusing on beauty as a starting point instead of negative reinforcement in conversations can also be an important tactic

to finding common ground. Another point was the importance knowing the Lord through relationship versus just knowing about him.

Reflection

The process of the listening sessions, although initially met with much skepticism, seemed to be a positive experience for all who participated. It helped to increase the understanding each other within our community and be a good way to identify the needs of the community. The biggest downfall was the lack of overall participation from the greater community. This can be attribute to factors including a general skepticism of the process, ignorance of what the process was, inadequate time for preparation and formation in what this process was intended for, and lack of resources to implement such a large undertaking.

As a parish our response to the information gathered will be ongoing. We are constantly searching for our gaps in service to the community and how we might be able to respond to these needs. Wanting to bolster opportunities for the Catholic community to grow and deepen their relationship with Jesus Christ we are seeking ways to reach much of our community that is non participative in the parish life. As a Christian community we are also exploring our opportunities to evangelize the unevangelized both in our community and beyond its walls. Many of the responses in our survey were very supportive of the parish. People felt well served and spiritually fed. Other identified areas of opportunity in our outreach and attitude or the perception of our attitude as a community towards others. As a church we are constantly being called to deeper love and relationship with our Lord and our neighbor. We are evaluating our points contact with the greater community and those new to the community and identifying ways to bolster that relationship and bring Jesus to more than those within our parish.

This will be an ongoing effort constantly in need of reevaluation and correction. As a parish we are becoming more aware of our need to evangelize the community within our parish and those who are not. A concerted effort is being made to let parishioners know how we create missionary disciples in our Church who will got out and seek the lost. The format of this information gathering in the form of the listening session may be used in the future to gather information and identify opportunities for our parish.