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Diocese of Colorado Springs

Synthesis Report

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Introduction

As the Diocese of Colorado Springs determined how to implement the next stage of the Synod, it became clear that there were some key segments of the Church whose voices were not represented from prior synod sessions in 2021: clergy, diocesan and parish staff, Catholic school teachers/parents, and young adults. A special invitation was offered to these groups. We estimate that 80 people in total attended the listening sessions, offered on separate occasions at two different locations in our diocese. Attendance at both sessions primarily consisted of priests, deacons, deacons' wives, parish and diocesan staff, and young adults. Each listening session began with an introduction to the concept of "Conversations in the Spirit" by Bishop Golka. Before commencing discussion, participants were asked to meditate on a reading from John 14 and to share what stood out with their fellow participants at each table. Each table was asked to designate one person to take notes, and another to synthesize the fruits of the conversation and prayer from each question to present to all participants at the session.

Successes within the Church

Participants reported signs of hope in their parishes in several key areas:

1. New converts and the Church as sign of hope
2. Increased engagement
3. Healthy parish leadership

New Converts and the Church as a Sign of Hope

The number of new converts coming into the Church was discussed as a great "sign of hope." In an increasingly chaotic society, participants noted that the Church is a "beacon of hope, peace, and direction." Participants felt that when the Church brings "clarity of mission," the greatest successes were experienced in their parishes. The Church is a "path of holiness" for the world.

Increased Engagement and Building up Catholic Culture

Some parishes noted signs of hope in increased numbers of people receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Others noted that the opportunities for prayer and formation within their parishes have been well-received. “Our church has come alive and continues to have success in our various offerings with extra times for confession, retreats, and convenient opportunities for formation.” Many reported witnessing faith-filled people in their parishes who are “really involved,” “in love with the Lord” and who are building up parish cultures that are “welcoming” and “collaborative.” People feel that they are part of something greater than themselves and that their work is valued. Some reported particular success with their outreach ministries to the elderly or the hospitalized. Others commented that they see success happening when they meet people in their need or in times of crisis, which is an opportunity to invite people into or back into the Church. Efforts related to the Eucharistic Revival have been well-received.

Healthy Parish Leadership

A key takeaway from the feedback we received from this question was the importance of parish health and good leadership as essential to creating a good culture where both priests and laity thrive. Participants noted success in how parishes are living out “subsidiarity” and how they are handling problems “Biblically, at a local level.” Another staff member noted: “I have seen the most successes in parishes happen when pastors embrace spiritual fatherhood and good leadership. The closer a priest models Christ, he helps his flock to grow closer to Christ and to see His love for them.” Empowering the clergy and the laity to take ownership of their distinct roles builds healthy parishes, supporting both the work of the laity and the ministry of the priest. Healthy parishes with good leadership are better able to serve the people of God and to meet the challenges of the present time.

Distresses within the Church

Three key themes came up during the separate listening sessions as participants explored the distresses they have experienced in the Church that have hindered the mission:

1. Lack of leadership and leadership formation
2. Loss of credibility
3. Struggles with catechesis and evangelization

Need for Better Leadership and Leadership Formation

The need for solid, holy leadership and leadership formation was heavily noted in both sessions. A pastor noted that “we seem not to be doing a good job of giving our own people

good formation to be leaders. And either in the Church or outside the Church that, you know, we have all these resources that could be really forming people for leadership. It seems like we're falling short of that too often. And we often have seen what seems to be different layers of the Church substituting their own wills or ideas instead of true discernment of God's will. ... Sometimes, we seem not to even know really what the model framework should be. What should a parish look like? What should a diocese look like? How should that be structured? What role does the pastor have in that leadership? ... Church leadership sounds corporate and isn't forming leaders in or out of the church. Church leadership is subbing its own ideas for discernment. There is no model framework for a parish, which is confusing for laity and pastors." One person noted that poor leadership "can sometimes cause dissension, discouragement, disengagement, lack of accountability, or even spiritual harm within a parish." The demands of administration for pastors also presents a challenge: "To be honest, sometimes, management of a parish takes up a lion's share of a pastor's time, and he feels like he needs to delegate a lot of what we call 'pastoral care' to associates or lay leaders. Is that good or healthy?"

Loss of Credibility

Participants observed that the Church is experiencing a loss of credibility in the world for a variety of reasons. A pastor commented that the Church is dealing with a "huge loss of credibility because of scandals, especially the sex abuse scandal. And that loss of moral authority, tragically, has led to a loss of Church's ability to have a prophetic voice, because people just don't want to listen anymore." He further noted that the Church is often "just as polarized" as the world, and how that polarization "seems to lead to a loss of moderate and especially humble, and therefore most likely some of the holiest voices, because they aren't on one of the two bands that are screaming at each other." The internet has also been a factor in this loss of credibility, as "people can just appeal to some authority somewhere online and find justification for their point of view, [which] makes it hard to tell people what the Church teaches."

Others commented how recent magisterial documents or experiences of inconsistent application of Canon Law over the past few decades have caused disunity and confusion among the laity. Another problem related to credibility that participants noted was a perceived lack of communication and an operating mindset that each parish is an "island." Many participants expressed that the Church needs to meet the needs of those they serve, in addition to expressing a desire for unity and clarity in the mission (including faithfulness to Church teachings and improved communications).

Catechesis and Evangelization Struggles

A number of participants have experienced difficulty in getting people to attend ongoing formation at the parish and shared their struggles of competing with a "consumer culture," sports, and entertainment. They are observing a "lack of true foundation and teaching" in the younger generations. One group concluded that "many young people are

giving up on the church because of a lack of foundation, either in their families or in their community. Even in the church, they're searching for an identity." Others discussed their struggles with poor formation of parents, noting that "the structure of the church is set up that evangelization and proper teaching from the parents is a given in the current rites. This doesn't happen; teaching and evangelization from the parents is not happening, so maybe [we need to] look at this structure and change it." A need for improved hospitality and a lack of authentic friendships was also a common theme among distresses experienced in evangelization efforts.

Ways of Helping the Baptized

Some key themes emerged from conversations about the second question of how the Church can help the baptized to live out their baptismal calling:

1. The Church needs to regain a sense of her identity and mission.
2. We are entering an Apostolic Age and the laity needs to be formed for mission and evangelization. They are told to go make disciples but they do not know how.
3. Need for hospitality and authentic Christian friendships

Need for Church to Regain a Sense of Identity and Mission

Some common observations were that the Church seems to have lost a sense of her identity and mission. A priest observed that "the parish used to be the center of social life. How can the church structure serve people and help them be known? A consumer mindset is where people are being formed. There is communion in relationships. Are the catechists being truly formed or is the structure just lending the appearance?" One deacon commented that "one of the big structural issues is dealing, I think, with a culture, and people in our church, who simply find it difficult to accept that they have the dignity, first, to be loved by God, and then to share God's love with others." One group remarked on the necessity of the hierarchy to the sacramental life, while also noting the critical need for servant leadership, saying that "the hierarchy gives us the sacraments, which gives life. The hierarchy has to be where the sacraments come from. But it has to be at the service of the laity, rather than thinking that the laity are the servants of the hierarchy." Participants also felt that it was important for the proclamation of the Kerygma to be incorporated into catechetical and evangelization efforts.

Emphasis Needed on Practical Skills for Evangelization

Referencing the book *From Christendom to Apostolic Mission*, several participants noted that as the Church is entering an "Apostolic Age," there needs to be a stronger focus on equipping the laity for evangelization. Some proposed a "school" for evangelization, giving the faithful practical tools to engage with the culture. Several other participants noted the

need for solid catechesis, developing authentic relationships in small communities, and most importantly “learning how to pray,” because “we need to be before we can do.”

Need for Improved Hospitality and Sharing Life with Others

Many participants observed the necessity of hospitality and developing authentic friendships with others. One table commented on the power of reaching out one-on-one, saying that parishes should be “full of family, familial assistance, helping one another within parishes, and always evangelizing to people in the parishes themselves, and to the world. And this typically happens in our parishes, but it doesn't always happen on a one-on-one basis. And so reaching out to people where they are in the community, people should be able to come into a parish and say, ‘I feel welcomed here.’ We had one instance where somebody said that they introduced themselves to somebody and they said they had been in the parish for many years. And they were the first person that came and said hello to them. So it's important to reach out one-on-one to people.” A common theme also arose about how authentic friendships are a form of evangelization and spiritual growth. Spiritual mentoring can be an aspect of this, as one participant noted that “spiritual fatherhood and spiritual motherhood needs to be modeled and taught so people can take ownership of helping others along the way.” Encountering God and seeing His action in one's life enables parishioners to build up each other's faith, as noted by one table: “If people can see what God is doing in their lives, so seeing God as the one that's active and sort of taking God as the protagonist, that experience allows you to then share that with others and has a cumulative effect.” Participants also noted how newcomers should feel like they are incorporated into the culture of the church, “like a part of what's going on.”

Conclusion

There are many challenges and distresses facing the Church, not least of which are the damage caused by the sex abuse scandals, a crisis of leadership, poor catechesis and struggles to form families who have been formed by the culture at large. Participants noted that the Church, “ever ancient and ever new,” has the authentic answers to the big questions that people have in their lives. In order for Catholics to fulfill their baptismal call to go and make disciples, the Church needs to be authentically faithful while discerning creative ways to evangelize the culture, including a need for leadership formation among the clergy and laity, hospitality, the development of authentic Christian friendships, solid catechesis, and practical formation on the art of evangelization.

Submitted by:
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4/8/24