



DIOCESE OF GREAT FALLS-BILLINGS

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Synod 2021-2023

For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission

Diocese of Great Falls-Billings Synthesis Document

The Synodal Experience

The Diocese of Great Falls-Billings is made up of the Eastern two-thirds of the state of Montana. Geographically the diocese consists of 33 counties, six Native American Reservations, two primary population centers, and countless rural communities, within 94,000 square miles. The diocese has roughly 32,000 Catholics in 50 parishes and 50 missions, ministered by 42 active diocesan and religious order priests. Great Falls-Billings is blessed to have 20 permanent deacons supporting the Church in Eastern Montana and as of June 22nd, the diocese has one Local Ordinary and one Coadjutor Bishop.

In 2020, the Local Ordinary, Bishop Michael Warfel gathered a small group to discuss the future of the Diocese of Great Falls-Billings. At 72, he was well aware of the fact that his time as the Local Ordinary was approaching the final phase. As any good shepherd would, and moved by the Holy Spirit, Bishop Warfel wished to begin a process to support and give direction to the fast-approaching transitional period facing the diocese. Under his direction, the small group of priests and lay people set out to undertake the exercise of a diocesan synod with the theme; “The Domestic Church in Eastern Montana.”

The synodal decree was to be promulgated on May 14, 2020, the Feast of Saint Matthias, Patron of the Diocese of Great Falls-Billings. As with many things in 2020, COVID-19 delayed this declaration. While the priests of the diocese were informed of the synod in August of 2020, the general population of the lay faithful were not informed until September 2020 when the decree was printed in the diocesan newsletter.

The diocesan synod process began with every parish having an opportunity to provide input to the preparatory commission through their parish councils. The input from the different parishes was then reviewed and combined into a series of questions for consideration by the eventual delegates of the synod (Appendix A.) This list of questions was also made available to the general population of the diocese, so that all were encouraged to pray about and give input toward the discussions which would eventually develop at the general sessions.

Great effort was taken when the list of delegates was being formed. Bishop Warfel wanted a true representation of the different populations of the diocese to be seated as the delegate body. To achieve this, every vicariate was represented by married and single lay people, every religious order had a representative, the different service organizations within the Church in Eastern Montana (Knights, Catholic Daughters, etc.) were invited to send a delegate, minority populations such as Hispanics and Native Americans from every reservation in the diocese had seats, and of course the presbyterate was also represented. The preparatory commission of the diocesan synod went to great lengths to ensure no population of the diocese was overlooked.

Shortly after the delegates for the diocesan synod were seated and the publication of the diocesan synod questions, Pope Francis announced the Universal Synod on Synodality. In response to this, Bishop Warfel called together the diocesan synod preparatory commission to discuss how to move forward. While there was discussion regarding canceling the diocesan synod, and just proceeding with the universal synod, ultimately all agreed that the Holy Spirit had played a part in these two events occurring simultaneously, and thus it would be best to move forward with both synods on parallel paths. Since the diocesan synod delegate body had just been seated and was a thorough cross section of the population of Eastern Montana, Bishop Warfel, in partnership with the preparatory commission, thought it appropriate to invite this group to be the primary source of feedback regarding the universal synod.

The discussions of both the diocesan synod and the universal synod produced much fruit for the Bishop to better understand the situations facing the lay faithful of Eastern Montana, and how the Church can, and should, play a role in addressing some of those challenges. As a product of the diocesan synod, Bishop Warfel produced a Post Synodal Letter to the People of God of Eastern Montana (Appendix B.) This document speaks to the voice of the delegate body and addresses concerns which should be acknowledged by the Church, both Local and Universal. The Post Diocesan Synodal Document is a product of the two general sessions of the diocesan synod, which were held in October 2021.

In March of 2022 the delegate body, with additional invitees, gathered for a virtual meeting to discuss the preparatory documents of the universal synod, and to provide Bishop Warfel with input on how to move forward with a synodal spirit. With little surprise, many of the topics discussed during the universal synod listening process echoed those of the diocesan synod. With the Post Synodal Pastoral Letter as an appendix to this document, below will briefly touch on the primary themes echoed the loudest in the universal synod listen session as well as other forms of feedback which were received by the Office of the Bishop.

Discernment of the Collected Contributions

While the discussion of the listening session was lively and produced much fruit, the topics which surfaced can be boiled down into two primary categories: The Institutional Church and The Laity. Much of the discussion on the laity is intimately connected to the institutional Church as it is often the leaders of the institutional Church who permit or deny the ministry necessary for the spiritual growth of the laity. Even though these points are contingent upon the leaders of the institutional Church, at their core the issues remain authentically about the laity and their engagement and involvement with the Faith.

It is important to recognize that this document differentiates between the phrases “The Church” and “The Institutional Church.” The laity play a major part in “The Church” while having limited impact on “The Institutional Church.” At times, this very fact can cause some individuals to be skeptical of “The Institutional Church,” especially in light of many of the challenges which have arisen in recent decades. While a step toward a synodal Church is a move in the right direction, there are still actions which are necessary for the institutional Church to fully regain the trust of the laity.

The Institutional Church

Of primary concern regarding the institutional Church, especially in the United States, is the politicization of the institution of the Church. Individuals, cleric, religious and lay alike, are using the Church as political fodder, as opposed to being unified by the Truth of the Faith. Individuals, both conservative and progressive, have begun to set up camp opposing the “others.” We see this even among the shepherds of the flock. When one looks at the college of Bishops in the United States, instead of seeing a unified Body of Christ, one sees the all too familiar divisiveness which has become the norm of our secular society.

While it is understood that unity in diversity is a cherished characteristic which has been part of the Church from the very beginning, there does come a point where common ground and singularity of voice and vision must be established. There were many comments made during the listening session regarding the lack of a strong unified voice coming from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Additionally, comments were made regarding remarks which have been made by the Holy Father, which also muddy the message of the Church at times. It was recognized that no one is able to control the speech, or phrasing of another, while a desire for clarity and singularity of voice of the institutional Church remained among many of the delegates.

Being highly sensitive to the current environment of the United States, it was also discussed that the institutional Church at times is seen more as an activist organization as opposed to a Faith

organization. All motivating factors of the institutional Church should be actions and evangelization out of love and obedience to God and His commandments. Faith in action can, and at times does, look like activism, but does the institutional Church recognize and differentiate between faith and activism? Even recent items of prominent note, shed light on this issue. Does the institutional Church take an active role in opposing a popular aspect of secular society because of a desire to tell people what to do, or because of the respect the Church has for the dignity of each human person? Of course, the members of the institutional Church would say that the Church acts out of dignity for the human person, but do they express that dignity in ways which are clear and defined so as to reflect the love of God through their teachings and actions? Are these teachings and actions presented to the lay faithful in ways which are easily understood with supporting Church documents?

Finally, one item of particular note which came from the listening session, was the role of Catholic Schools within the institutional Church in the United States. Concern was voiced that there is a trend that many Catholic Schools at all levels of education have lost their Catholic identity. These institutions of the Church have found it acceptable to be used as parochial or private schools as opposed to the Catholic Faith based schools they were established to be. The education provided by many of these institutions is far superior to those of the public system, as it should be. At the same time, if the school is simply providing the educational aspect of the learning experience, and not the Faith based foundation upon which all true knowledge is founded, there is a lack of justice being provided for the students and the teachers. The fear of losing tuition dollars because of being “too Catholic” is real, and yet Catholic Education should not be accidentally Catholic, but rather primarily and unapologetically Catholic at its very core.

The Laity

As was stated above, many of the topics which will be presented in this area could easily fit under the title of “The Institutional Church.” It is the members of the institutional Church who will be the driving force behind any initiatives which may arise from these, or any of the topics presented through this entire synodal process. Yet, the following items are specifically about the laity and their role in and engagement with the Church. This section will have two subsections: “General Lay Engagement” and “Support of the Domestic Church.”

General Lay Engagement

In general, the vast majority of those who presented at the listening session, mentioned the lack of engagement of the laity in parishes throughout the diocese. Even parishes which once were thriving centers of the Faith, have begun to feel the impact of those disengaged or even disinterested in the Church. While this trend was occurring well before the impacts of the COVID-

19 pandemic, it is clear that the closing of public activities at parishes has accelerated this detachment.

Another trend which was present prior to the challenges of the pandemic is that of a decreased understanding/observance of the Faith among those who are of college age or are young parents. This population is the target of a relativistic and pleasure-seeking society. Speaking in broad generalities, this generation is one of the most attacked by society, while being the least equipped for the challenge. The Church must find ways to support and catechize this vulnerable population both emotionally and spiritually. Without addressing the lack of authentic and thorough catechesis this population has received, the Church aides in leading Her children astray.

One way to reach this population, and all populations, is tied directly to an item mentioned under “The Institutional Church.” A strong unified voice coming from the shepherds would go a long way. When there is a lack of unity in voicing the teachings of the Church, there naturally follows a lack of understanding and living the teachings of the Church in one’s daily life. The laity are being draw deeper and deeper into relativism and a “good person mentality.” The Faith is not important to a population which believes that as long as they are good people, they can believe and act in whatever way they see fit. This disconnect with objective Truth leads to a rejection of any authority outside of oneself. The shepherds must find a way to unify their voices so as to show the lay faithful the reality and relevance of the objective Truth of the Faith in the messiness of daily life.

Of course, one of the most obvious ways this relativism and “good person mentality” is on display in the current society of the United States is through the LGBTQ community. Many Catholics have embraced a platitude of “love is love.” These Catholics hold to a belief that if someone is not harming others, why should we not support that person in what makes that person happy? Clearly this mentality does not give proper attention to the authentic meaning of the word “love.” The teachings of the Catholic Church regarding individuals of this community are not clear to many of the lay faithful. Even some of the “every Sunday church-goers” do not understand the authentic love the Catholic Church has for individuals who struggle with the challenges of the LGBTQ lifestyles.

What is important to note though is that the issue is not just about LGBTQ, but rather would be more accurately addressed in a better understanding of the gift of sex and sexuality. Even those who do not find themselves as part of the LGBTQ community struggle with misunderstandings of and addictions to sex. These “pleasures of the flesh” are not new to our day and should not surprise us as some of the most public challenges the lay faithful (and some clergy and religious) are facing. The Church would do well in having courage to not shy away from ministering to all people regarding God’s gift of sex and human sexuality.

Sexual addiction, while it seems to be a prevalent issue in today's society and Church, is not the only issue which was brought up during the listening session. Every person has their own challenges and struggles which determine how they interact with and view the Church and the world in general. It was important for many of the participants to stress that the Church must find a way to present Herself more as a home for the wounded, instead of an institution for the perfect. Great attention was given to the perceived hypocrisies of clergy, and other prominent lay people, who publicly present themselves as pious while privately behave in ways contrary to the Faith. All faithful, cleric and lay alike, are wounded, and thus need the healing balm of the Church. This aspect of the Faith must become more publicly evident moving forward.

Finally, many participants voiced a desire for clearer understanding of the role of women in the Church. While some voiced strong support for continued exploration of a potential historical female diaconate and a return to the practice, others voiced strong opposition to any form of female ordination. Ultimately though, the issue is not solely about Holy Orders. This topic is much broader than the reception of the Sacrament and is more accurately about where and how women have a voice in the Church.

Throughout Salvation History, God has used women as leaders and guides within His Chosen People. Both the Old and New Testaments speak to the powerful women who gave voice to God's Will when men remained silent. Without the active participation and support of women, today's Church is lacking. The Blessed Virgin Mary gave consent to be used as the primary vehicle through which God became Incarnate. It is clear that God's design is for women to have a place at the table. While the Church has made strides in this area in recent decades, the topic still has room for further development and understanding.

Support of the Domestic Church

The use of "the domestic church" in this section is meant to be understood as "a household," no matter the makeup of the individuals. While most commonly the domestic church is in reference to a family unit both immediate and extended, it is important for the Church to recognize that individuals are marrying later in life, if they are choosing to marry at all. Single individuals face their own challenges in living out the Gospel call, and thus great effort in ministering to these individuals is necessary while also ministering to those who live in family units. While the remainder of this section will speak broadly about family units, the same concepts are meant to be understood to include single individual homes as well.

Pope St. John Paul II said, "Catholic parents must learn to form their family as a 'domestic church,' a church in the home as it were, where God is honored, his law is respected, prayer is a normal event, virtue is transmitted by word and example, and everyone shares the hopes, the problems

and sufferings of everyone else. All this is not to advocate a returned to some outdated style of living: It is to return to the roots of human development and human happiness!”

It should be no surprise that supporting the development of the Faith within the household, was a major discussion during the listening session within the Diocese of Great Falls-Billings. During the diocesan synod it was clear that at this time the major concern of the People of God of Eastern Montana is support for the family. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says that the “Christian home is the place where children receive the first proclamation of the faith. For this reason the family home is...a community of grace and prayer, a school of human virtues and of Christian charity (CCC 1666.)”

If the Christian home is the place where children receive the first proclamation of the faith, the Church would do well to focus a majority of Her efforts in supporting parents, grandparents and others in their roles as leaders of the domestic church. Currently, the foundation, the place of first proclamation, is being led by individuals who do not themselves understand the Faith. If parents and grandparents do not have adequate knowledge of the principles of the Faith, it is impossible for them to be the first catechists they are called to be.

To start, a primary discussion during the session was regarding the understanding of the Sacraments. Many Catholics, even some of the most faithful, do not have a clear and accurate understanding of these mysteries of the Faith, especially of Baptism and Holy Eucharist. Programs which help to educate parents and grandparents regarding their own Baptism would be helpful in their understanding of the role they play in the Faith and in the faith development of their children and grandchildren. Further, catechetical programs should be required of parents and grandparents who ask the Church for Baptism for their child or grandchild.

A misconception of the Sacrament of Baptism exists among many parents and grandparents. A misunderstanding not only of what is being done to/for their child or grandchild, but also what was done to/for themselves at the moment of their own Baptism. Instead of understanding the Sacrament as a commitment, it is viewed as something done to an individual which only has implications in that moment. The Sacrament, like many Sacraments, has simply been used as a “rite of passage” instead of the source of graces and foundation of Faith, which it is meant to be. Equipping and empowering all parents and grandparents to better understand this primary Sacrament, and all Sacraments, is essential.

It is impossible for the Church to speak about the domestic church without acknowledging the frequency and challenges of non-traditional homes. Domestic churches which have only one parent, or potentially no biological parent. Domestic churches made up of blended families. Domestic churches which carry the mark of divorce or separation. The reality of the domestic church today is very different from even the time when Pope St. John Paul II made his remarks

(above.) And so, the Church must find ways to minister to those who find themselves in less-than-ideal situations, especially those who are in irregular relationships.

All ministry to families should be rooted in a sense of community. Families should be supported in their efforts to be countercultural. Families should be connected to the parish community by more than “mom’s groups.” Dioceses should make intentional efforts to provide programming for entire family units, and not simply stop at men’s retreats, women’s retreats, or teen retreats. The institutional Church should take steps to connecting families nationally, so that Catholics feel part of the larger community of the Church.

Finally, families must be taught how to pray. Family prayer in the home is a crucial element of the domestic church which is currently missing. Excuses of lack time due to work or extracurricular activities are common. When honest though, many families, many adults say that they do not know how to pray or how to lead prayer for themselves let alone for their family.

Next Steps

This synodal process has shown that there is a lot of work to be done in order to move forward in unity. Scandals have damaged the authority of the institutional Church while a lack of sound catechesis has damaged both the institutional Church and the domestic church. The laity do not know where to turn for the support for which they are searching and for which they desperately need. Yet, the desire to move forward is strong. Those who participated in the process of both the diocesan and the universal synod were energized by the experience. Even when differing ideas were shared, there was mutual respect and positive progress made in the name of the Church.

It is clear that there are some areas where the institutional Church must continue to evaluate itself in order to engage the faithful and to move according to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. One such area is the ability to acknowledge shortcomings and failings as an institution, without excuses and with authentic heartfelt sorrow. This statement was not made simply about the sexual or financial scandals of recent note but was also in reference to the shortcomings of supporting the lay faithful in understanding the authentic Faith of the Church.

For too long catechetical programs throughout dioceses in this country have gone without proper oversight and guidance. A unified voice and approach on topics crucial to the Faith has been lacking from the top down. The lay faithful do not know who to listen to, and where to turn for sound catechesis. Sadly, when finances at dioceses or parishes get tight, some of the first positions to disappear are those of ministry and catechesis. The unspoken message of such actions is that these areas are no longer important to the mission of the Church. This perception must change.

If the laity do not understand the Faith, they cannot be expected to be engaged with parishes or dioceses. Disenfranchised laity cannot be expected to just return to the Church without the Church first reaching out to them. Trust cannot just be expected from the laity without them first seeing that the institutional Church is serious about listening to the promptings of the Holy Spirit and correcting the institutional errors which broke the trust in the first place.

As the Church looks towards the journey of synodality, the Diocese of Great Falls-Billings wishes to end this feedback with a quote from one of the participants of the listening session held on March 19th. When asked about the path of synodality and the journey which the Church is undertaking through this process, the participant said; “The only authentic journey is the one which takes us deeper into the pascal mystery.” It is the hope of the People of God of Eastern Montana that this synod does just that, draws all members of the Church into a deeper relationship with the pascal mystery.