



Diocese of Great Falls-Billings
Second Synthesis Document for the Synod on Synodality
Submitted April 8, 2024

The People of God of the Diocese of Great Falls-Billings came together at two listening sessions during the Liturgical Season of Lent. One listening session was held in each of the see cities of the diocese. Both sessions were relatively well attended and represented a good cross section of the diocese.

Each of the listening sessions was structured in the following way: a period of prayer and silence (especially inviting the Holy Spirit into the time together), an opportunity to hear about how the synodal process has developed over the past three years, and then a time of small group discussion and sharing. The two guiding questions which were provided by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops were used as the parameters for the small group discussion and sharing portions of the gatherings. After the small group discussion, each group was given the opportunity to have a representative stand and present to Bishop Fleming, and the entire group, what had been shared in their smaller groups.

The two guiding questions seemed to produce similar answers, or at least answers which were intimately connected. The second question asked how the “Church can help”, which often resulted in answers which were in response to the “distresses” mentioned in the first question. While there were many specific topics which were shared at each of the gatherings, overarching themes developed which were consistent at both sessions.

The following does not present these themes in any order of priority, but rather is simply a listing of the overarching themes which were brought up at the two listening sessions.

Theme 1: Youth and Young People

Over and over attendees at the listening sessions would rise to voice concern regarding the lack of young people active at the parish and diocesan level of the Church.

- “The Church is losing our youth.”
- “We must allocate and prioritize the youth education.”
- “We must bring back the 20–40-year-olds. We must engage them!”

- “There needs to be defined structures in the Church which support campus ministry and youth ministry.”
- “We must ensure that Catholic youth are being instructed by Catholic adults.”

The concern regarding the lack of active young people in the Church was realized even within the body of the listening sessions themselves. Of the over 100 participants at the listening sessions, less than 10% were 40 or younger. This was not necessarily a surprise to anyone in attendance but was confirmation of the concerns individuals were raising.

As a subtheme to youth and young people, there was frequently mentioned a lack of support for families, and further a lack of catechetical opportunities for parents. It was said that parishes and dioceses need to provide parents with the opportunities to grow in their own understanding of the faith either individually or as a family. Many of those in attendance felt that there are not support structures in place to promote and enrich the family life of all Catholics, especially the young families within a parish or a diocese.

- “Empower parents – teach them how to teach their children to pray. Teach them faith so they can pass it on to their children.”
- “We, as parents, need to be more loving! To show our children (and other loved ones) the Church.”

Theme 2: The Ministry of Laity/Women within the Church

Nearly every small group representative which rose to share with the larger group mentioned a concern for the ministry of laity, especially women, within the Church. There is a concern over clericalism among the laity which, whether real or perceived, has become a bit of a hindrance to the involvement of laity, especially women, in the day-to-day life of the Church at both the parish and diocesan level.

- “Give women and all laity more meaningful roles.”
- “Empower the laity to proclaim the Gospel at all times; not just to hear the Gospel on Sunday. Help the laity understand they do not have to be in a position of authority to effect change and to influence the unchurched or the peripherally church.”
- “Are we, as a Church, inclusive or exclusive of women?”
- “Priests need to be servant leaders and recognize the charism/gifts of the people.”
- “Ministries have stopped since COVID. This creates a roadblock to the Gospel when ministries don’t have the support at the diocese/parish level. (ex. prison ministries, visiting the ill.)



- “We truly do need to look at the role of women in our Church. We do not honor women.”

Among the participants at one of the listening sessions was a group of individuals who shared their belief in the need to expand the ordained ministry to include women. This group did not necessary advocate for a female priesthood but did stress the need to include women in ordained diaconate ministry.

- “It resonates with me that we need to improve the status of women within the Church Sacramentally.”
- “The diocese needs to take seriously what the Synod said that the diaconate be evaluated.”

Theme 3: Clarity of Message from Hierarchy

One of the greatest distresses mentioned by a majority of the small groups is the concern about the clarity of the messages from the hierarchy of the Church. It was mentioned that many times statements seem to be intentionally vague. Individuals then went on to say that even when the hierarchy is asked for clarification it often does not provide it.

- “There is not a clear mission or messaging across the board.”
- “The Church seems at times to be more interested in what others outside the Church think other than what the Church actually teaches.”
- “There is a lack of clarity from the pulpit regarding the social evils.”
- “Priest don’t listen to the laity.”
- “How is the Church leadership sharing the stance on issues? Are we missing ways the Church leaders can tell our Catholic story?”
- “I hear vague statement from the Holy Father, that allow the world to interpret his remarks in various ways.”
- “Teachings of the Church do not change – Must be clear.”
- “The Church needs to be consistent across all parishes and dioceses about its stand on social issues.”
- It is helpful when the Church is morally clear on topics that society presents as morally grey.”

The feeling among participants at both listening sessions was that this lack of clarity brings chaos and division to the Church. It allows Catholics to believe whatever they want



to believe and not necessarily what is actual Church teaching. It also leads to the fourth and final overarching theme, division within the Church.

Theme 4: Division within the Church

From the liturgy to Church teaching, and from social justice issue to right to life issues, there is a sense of great division within the Church. Many of the faithful in attendance at the listening sessions are passionate about the issues of the Church. This passion at times can become unintentionally divisive and can strain relationships between Catholics.

- “We need to work on the unity of the Church around the world.”
- “Catholics are making good progress in turning protestants out of everyone.”
- “People are critical of each other, ‘This is the right way’.”
- “Unfortunately, many, including some clergy, seem to be opposing Vatican II.”
- “The debate on ‘who is Catholic’ or ‘who can be Catholic’, when we turn individuals away/shame them are we being the loving presence of God?”
- “We are divided as a country and as a Church.”
- “Current political divisions and issues over LGBTQ, Pro-life, a president who is Catholic who is pro-abortion – causes confusion in our Church.”
- “We need to conform to the liturgy instead of conforming the liturgy to ourselves.”
- “Social issues can, and do, vary from parish to parish and region to region. How can we achieve greater cohesiveness?”
- “Does being inclusive mean that everyone who wants to come can bring any crazy idea?”
- “Liturgy wars.”
- “How can we proclaim with one voice if the world sees a fractured or divisive Church?”

Conclusion

The two guiding questions for this portion of the Synod on Synodality provided much opportunity for participants to voice their concerns and frustrations with the Church. It also provided a platform for individuals who might have their own agenda for the way they



believe the Church should be moving. At the end of the day though, all of the feedback received from the participants was not negative. As a way of concluding the Diocese of Great Falls-Billings' submission for this portion of the Synod we would like to include some of the positive remarks shared at the listening sessions.

Where the Church is Getting it Right

- “Lay organizations like the Knights of Columbus strengthen our parishes.”
- “The Church has made progress in correcting the wrongs of the past and doing some self-evaluation.”
- “The use of the different kinds of media is helping to spread the Faith.”
- “The Church does funerals and Sacraments well.”
- “Those who promote the common good and service to the poor are fulfilling the gospel mission.”
- “The safe environment programs of the Church are being successful.”
- “The Catechism of the Catholic Church helps to make it very clear what we believe.”
- “Small groups in parishes help individuals to live the Gospel.”
- “Bringing back the diaconate was helpful.”
- “I have had great shepherds since growing up, so I am grateful for the priests and sisters who shepherded me.”
- “Thanks to Vatican II we are able to listen to the different cultures. The Holy Spirit was involved in their culture long before the Catholic Church showed up.”

