



DIOCESE OF WILMINGTON
DIOCESAN INTERIM STAGE SYNTHESIS 2024



FINAL SYNTHESIS REPORT
MARCH 22, 2024

At the request of Bishop William Koenig and as directed by the Holy Father for the Interim Stage Synthesis of the Synod on Synodality, diverse representatives from many parishes throughout the Catholic Diocese of Wilmington recently met in two separate parishes in our Diocese: St. Margaret of Scotland in the north and St. Francis de Sales in the south. They were invited through prayerful dialogue under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to identify areas of success and distress experienced within the structures of the Catholic Church both local and universal and to offer action steps to assist the baptized of all ages to respond to the call of evangelization.

Successes within the structures of the Catholic Church

The participants contributed readily and communicated easily within their small synodal groups and collaboratively provided multiple experiences as successes within the structures of the Catholic Church in the Diocese of Wilmington. These areas of success may be grouped by three major themes: **authentic witness; willingness to welcome; and persevering faith-filled determination.**

Authentic witness

Participants identified that the parishes within the Diocese actively engage parishioners of all backgrounds—from young to old, both women and men—to share lived faith experiences during times of worship and times of outreach, including faith-sharing groups, charitable endeavors to the disadvantaged, and evangelization efforts. Participants also noted that the Church in the Diocese of Wilmington promotes active witness in the public forum through engagement in diocesan- and parish-sponsored Sacraments and devotions such as Reconciliation Monday, Adoration, and Corpus Christi Processions.

Willingness to welcome

Participants discerned that Catholics in the Diocese naturally embrace parishioners and visitors, welcoming them in their parish families, where everyone is validated, needed, and included, which hospitality extends to the youth; those seeking to enter the Catholic Church through OCIA; the community at large both secular and faith-based; as well as persons of diverse cultures and backgrounds, such as Black, Korean, Native American, Hispanic and Deaf Catholics. Most noted were the Diocesan endeavors to minister effectively to the growing Latino Catholic community and to encounter persons of other faith backgrounds in ecumenical and interfaith dialogue.

Persevering faith-filled determination

There was a consensus of gratitude and appreciation for the long-standing strong faith foundation that the Church has lived, preserved, and shared for two millennia.

Distresses within the structures of the Catholic Church

While many of the participants recognized numerous successes within the structures of the Catholic Church in the Diocese of Wilmington, they indicated that such successes had, in some sense, also become areas of distress, identified as **inclusivity; catechesis; and the Church in the new millenium.**

The concern for inclusivity

Participants witnessed challenges first-hand in retaining the youth and new Catholics fully-initiated at the Easter Vigil after the reception of the Sacraments. Also, while the Catholic Diocese of Wilmington is welcoming by nature, participants felt that in several—but not all—parishes, there has been less overture to the LGBTQ+ community as well as the capacity to minister sufficiently to the Hispanic community in non-Hispanic parishes. Furthermore, participants recognized that women and the youth are not satisfyingly invited to participate in active roles of parish life. What was perhaps most distressing to many participants is the reality that parishioners are leaving their parish and the Church, because they feel their contributions of time and talent are not welcomed nor their voices heard within the life of the parish.

The concern for catechesis

The participants generally understood that there is a particularly great need for proper and sufficient catechesis in our modern times in order to retain parishioners, engage the youth, and be inviting to non-Catholics. Of special concern are issues that plague the conscience of the long-standing Catholic and that appear antiquated to the modern Catholic, such as the Church's long-standing teachings on marriage, divorce, and birth control. Some participants feel this might be due in part to a lack of compassionate preaching by the clergy at Mass, a lack of engaging yet challenging catechesis of the Sacraments in religious education and adult formation, a lack of effective evangelization efforts, and the lack of clergy unity on those issues.

The concern for the Church in the new millenium

Participants intuited that though the Church has flourished in the past two millenia, modern issues challenge the Church in the current millenium. These issues affect all areas of Church life particularly the cohesiveness of the faithful. Especially distressing is the declining number of Priests available for pastoral ministry within the Diocese of Wilmington, as seen in the number of parishes where only one Priest is available or where one Priest serves at multiple churches. Equally distressing is the retention of parishioners and Catholics in a post-COVID era, where the sensitivity of established parishioners feels devalued by what some have experienced as micro-management in their current parish life. The faithful have subsequently encountered a lack of trust in Church hierarchy, most particularly due to the continued festering of the Priest abuse scandal nationwide. Finally, participants identified that the Church is challenged with engaging the modern era, because She traditionally moves slowly, whereas the pace of modern times is constantly accelerating.

Action steps proposed by the faithful

The participants were united in their dynamic love of Holy Mother Church, the outward and interior expressions of their abiding Catholic Faith, and their appreciation for the pastoral ministry of their parish Priests. As such, they were moved by Christian charity to offer the following pro-active solutions for the benefit of both the clergy and the People of God in the Diocese, which focus on the elements itemized in the section on Distresses.

Inclusivity

While ordained ministry is Divinely revealed to be solely for men, women, nevertheless, have myriad gifts and talents that do contribute to the dynamic vibrancy of the Church and they, therefore, deserve to be included in parish and diocesan life in creative and visible ways, including areas of parish decision-making, such as leadership positions on Pastoral Council.

Recommended ways to retain the youth include establishing Catholic recreation centers throughout the Diocese and inviting the youth to participate in the Liturgy and in parish life in diverse ways as they age and grow, such as by serving as Lectors, Ushers, and Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion and participating in parish and diocesan Catholic social justice activities, so that their valued contributions are validated by their visible and active presence.

Of note, while participants did identify the necessity for inclusion of Hispanic Catholics and outreach to the LGBTQ+ community, no recommendations were made as to how to address or implement such outreach, which, therefore, necessitates further review at both the parish and diocesan levels.

Catechesis

While parish life is critical to the lived faith experience of Catholics, there is an increasingly recognized need for parishes to act as a cohesive unit within their respective Deaneries. The sharing of resources within each Deanery is, therefore, necessary for the flourishing of all parishes. These resources include more than just programs and offerings for religious education and adult faith formation; they also include the human resources of the Priests who serve within the Deanery. So that Deanery parishes might benefit from the varied gifts of its Priests, a Priest exchange is proposed, whereby every six months or annually, Priests within their respective Deaneries are hosted at neighboring parishes where they preside and preach at weekend Masses.

Technology and social media have demonstrated their necessary presence in the daily living in our modern age. Their increased incorporation at both parish and diocesan levels would, therefore, prove effective in reaching fallen away Catholics, those interested in the Catholic Church, and those faithfully involved in their parishes. One way to expand the use of technology is for each Deanery to establish a Department of Social Media as a means of sharing catechetical resources, which include, but are not limited to, live or recorded retreats and parish missions. This could be extended to the Diocese offering a series of live-streamed catechetical sessions on teachings of the Catholic Church particularly with an eye to responding to modern skepticism of Church doctrine.

Education is key to catechesis. In addition to an increased presence on social media, person-to-person catechesis is particularly effective. One recommendation to sustain this individualized instruction in the Faith is to build a new Catholic school in the Diocese, particularly in an area that is under-represented by the presence of Catholic education.

Church in the new millenium

To engage efficiently the human person in the modern era, the Church at the parish and diocesan levels must implement or increase its use of social media, as indicated above. Creative and diverse ways may be discovered by establishing a youth-led Ministry of Social Media at various levels in the Diocese.

Given the fewer number of Priests available in the Diocese, allow Pastors to engage more effectively and readily in pastoral and sacramental duties by re-organizing parish business activities and administrative responsibilities to be fulfilled by the laity.

Of primary necessity is the ongoing formation of Catholics to be missionary disciples both within the parish and throughout the Diocese. For this to come to fruition, Catholics must be able to know what the New Evangelization is and what it requires and must also know how the individual Catholic and the parish at large can fulfill this noble call, particularly to a modern culture where individuals are increasingly indifferent to the Faith and, therefore, very unwilling to engage in faith-based dialogue. A Diocesan-wide convocation offering various workshops on effectively engaging the disaffiliated, such as the LGBTQ+ community and the un-churched, as inspired by the Holy Spirit, is highly recommended.

Conclusion

The participants were all grateful to be welcomed and to have their contributions considered and their voices heard. They look eagerly to the implementation of their recommendations at the parish and diocesan levels.