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Regarding the Synod process on the diocesan level, Bishop Bill received comments throughout the year at various parish and diocesan events and liturgies. Some parishioners communicated their thoughts via email, phone calls or postal mail. The priests on the Presbyteral Council also offered feedback on some of these issues during their regularly-scheduled meetings. Finally, the diocese provided the opportunity to complete a questionnaire via the website. Although we did not host diocesan-wide listening sessions, some parishes and schools did have gatherings where people were invited to reflect on and address the basic questions of the Synod, including:

- What is most fulfilling to you in the Church?
- Thoughts on authority and structure in the Church
- How are decisions made and communicated on the level of the parish, the diocese, and the universal church? Do you feel that you are part of this process?
- How are you personally engaging in evangelization?
- What are your thoughts about liturgy and homilies in your parish?
- What are the voices that the Church may not be listening to?
- Other comments

Admittedly, the Diocese of Pensacola-Tallahassee did not set aside a great deal of time to participate in the formal process of the Synod. The main reason was we wanted to focus as much as possible on the bishop's pastoral letter (*Sharing the Gift*). The pastoral letter was released just as the Synod process was beginning, and therefore it did not get the attention it deserved. However, both the pastoral letter and the questions being considered for the Synod are helping the diocese to reflect more on where the Holy Spirit is leading us as a local church.

Some themes from the comments that have been received, as well as an example of a few direct quotes:

- Liturgy, especially the Mass — This was cited as having the greatest impact on the life of a Catholic. Many noted that the Sunday Mass is what grounds them in their Catholic faith. They shared their experiences in their parishes and in other churches in the diocese. Many were very pleased with the liturgy; some expressed a desire for change (i.e., more reverence, better homilies, more participation by the congregation, less music, more music, more traditional music and devotions, etc.). A smaller number of respondents expressed their love for the Traditional Latin Mass, and they would like to see its offering expanded in the diocese.

"I look forward to participating in Sunday Mass and receiving Our Lord in the Eucharist."

"Sunday Mass is a weekly homecoming for me; I feel safest during the celebration of holy Mass." "Sunday Mass is quite literally what keeps me Catholic and feeds my spiritual life."

“Weekly Mass refreshes and renews my faith and my walk toward Christ. If only I could convince my Catholic-raised grown children to attend where they live.”

“Though I like our Novus Ordo parish, I would rather attend traditional services.”

“Sunday Mass is my guiding light for the beginning and entirety of the week to follow. I have no idea what I would do if masses would not be celebrated in church like it happened at one point during the beginnings of COVID.”

- Devotionals and Prayer — Many people shared that they desire to pray more on their own, and many also said that doing this gives them a lot of joy. Whether it is reading the scriptures, meditating on the readings of the day, praying the rosary, going to Eucharistic adoration, or any number of devotionals or practices, they say that this is what they love about their faith. Some stated that the various groups in their parish had helped them, including Bible study, retreats, adult faith formation, RCIA, youth ministry, That Man Is You (men’s group), etc. Due to the effects of the pandemic, some of these gatherings have been curtailed and even canceled, unfortunately. There is a strong desire to restart these, including adding new initiatives and programs.

“The sacramental life of the Church is what grounds me in my life and decision making.”

“I try to put into practice the words and thoughts of the homily. I pray every day (Gospel, reflection, intentions and usually a rosary); I believe I see God’s will in my actions.”

“Prayer and liturgical celebration are the center of my life. This has been shaped by retreats where eucharistic adoration was the center and through meaningful experiences in confession. My decisions are all based on my relationship with Jesus that has its source and summit in the Mass.”

“Mass inspires me; Renews me; My prayer life needs work.”

- Authority in the parish — Generally, respondents expressed gratitude and love for their pastor and priests. They appreciate their sacrifice and all that they do on a daily basis for the parish. Some wished that the clergy were more engaging in their homilies and in how they relate to the parishioners. A few expressed frustration at not being able to understand the priests due to cultural or language differences. While quite a few said they were satisfied with the way decisions are being made on the local level, others were quick to say that it is only the favored individuals and groups that are able to have their voices heard, while ‘ordinary parishioners’ have no say in the way the leadership is exercised. On a diocesan level, many seemed content with the leadership of the bishop, though others were critical of the way that he does or does not communicate with the parishioners. Some wished that the bishop would be more outspoken on matters of doctrine and practice, especially when it comes to politicians who openly support teachings contrary to the Church. A few respondents stated that they wished the laity could be more involved in matters concerning the local and universal Church.

“It is not always clear that I have much say in authority or governance.”

“Our pastor is a strong leader but he is also a good delegator. He is aware that his parishioners are ready, willing and able to help with the many church responsibilities.”

“In our local church I feel the bishop and the priests work together by keeping a line of communication open and meeting one on one when possible.”

“Belonging to the Catholic Women’s Group shows me the great teamwork in our parish.”

“I don’t see [teamwork and shared authority] in the diocese. The bishop exercises the governance. Teamwork is only from a very few no matter where you go.”

“I think the priest pastor carries many burdens that are logistic, financial and may leave him less available for his primary spiritual role. Tasks of management unrelated to the sacraments and catechesis may be delegated more to allieviate the burden. There are many willing to offer time and talents to the church.”

- Children and grandchildren who have left the Church — This issue came up repeatedly — a frequent point of sadness and frustration for many. While some possible solutions were suggested (i.e., paying more attention to young people, making the faith more relevant to their lives, getting young people more involved in leadership, offering more traditional forms of worship and devotion, etc.), most people were resigned to the fact that this is happening in nearly every aspect of society — young people are less and less engaged or interested in “organized religion.” Nonetheless, nearly everyone stated that the Church must focus more and more on engaging young people and keeping them engaged.
- Need for evangelization — In this part of the country, Catholicism is clearly the minority religion. At less than 5 percent of the population, Catholics often find themselves in positions where they feel they need to defend the faith when questioned or “attacked.” Many described how they are trying to evangelize and share the Good News with their extended family through their actions or by inviting them to church. Others say they are not trained to evangelize and perhaps would be open to receiving help in this regard. Almost all stated that the Church must continue evangelizing and invite fallen-away Catholics and non-Catholics to embrace the Catholic faith.

“I share my faith through my actions and the way I live and treat other people.”

“As an older Catholic we were told not to evangelize about our faith. It is going to take time to feel comfortable doing it.”

“We can evangelize better to people who are not Catholic by showing more unity and love among ourselves.”

“Let people know that you are Catholic. Evangelize by example.”

“I share my love of service to the Church and my faith with family and friends and sometimes share scriptures. But most aren’t Catholic or practicing Catholics. I hope and pray, some of my faith rubs off.”

“By Adoration, and by working at the Women’s Clinic (ODWC), I am able to bring the love of Jesus into the community and help women save their lives and the lives of their unborn babies.”

- The Church is still reeling from the horrific sin of abuse by clergy and church leaders and the actions in the past to cover those up or perpetuate it simply by reassigning those who were accused. Although a tremendous amount of work has been done in eradicating the scandal, it is apparent that its effects are still being felt. Some noted that this is what holds others back from returning to the Church or embracing Catholicism. Others stated that they still have questions about how it is being addressed today. Still, others commented that they had not heard about anything that is being done. Clearly, more communication is needed in this regard.

- Many people mentioned social media as something that is both good (for evangelization) and bad (in terms of misinformation and negativity). It appears as though nearly everyone is influenced or affected one way or another by social media. Some participants shared that they use social media to promote and defend the Catholic faith. Others admitted that they probably spend too much time and energy listening to the various voices out there, especially those who are highly critical of the Church. Many are appreciative of the diocese's efforts to communicate via live streamed Masses, podcasts and the posting of various events and feast days, for example.
- When asked, "What are the voices the Church may not be listening to today?" many stated that we need to be more attentive to the needs of the poor and the marginalized. The Church must be attentive to women and the unborn. A good number of people said that the Church is not listening to the majority of parishioners because they are not asked their opinion. Some offered the suggestion that the Church is not listening to young people (which leads to their feeling disenfranchised and unappreciated). A few respondents stated that the Church needs to listen to the concerns of those who prefer a more traditional liturgy.

"The voices of the homeless are definitely not being heard and the mentally ill are not either." "Our young people's needs may or may not be heard. We need a leadership council at the church for them."

"I don't feel the Church is ignoring anyone – and, if anything, I feel that the Church is being too complacent and too accommodating to the world in an attempt to please everyone."

"Minority is being heard; the majority is silent."

"The poor."

"The voice of orthodox, traditional Catholics are not being heard."

"We do not fully appreciate the value of silence, which allows us to hear any of the voices bringing us closer to God's word."

"Singles, I would think, are underserved."

"The voices not heard are of the unborn."

"I can say that my daughter with autism and other children in the parish whose spiritual needs are being completely ignored."

"For years I have been very keenly aware that our church, Catholic Church, does not have any room for those of us divorced; followed by those that are widowed."

- The topic of homilies comes up quite often. The ones who responded to the questionnaire or who were invited to speak at a listening session spoke about the desire for excellent homilies, ones that challenge and engage the congregation. They want to grow in their faith through the Word of God and well-prepared homilies. They want to hear more about how to apply the Word to their lives and less about an amusing anecdote or personal story from the homilist. A majority of respondents noted that they appreciate most of what they hear in their parishes, while some were very critical of what they called "dull and uninspiring homilies." As mentioned above, some parishioners expressed tremendous frustration at not being able to understand a homily due to a heavy accent and/or poor acoustics.

"I am inspired by the readings and homilies by our wonderful priests and deacons."

"Homilies need to be more relevant to everyday life, applying the Gospel to today's life."

“I am inspired every time I hear the Word of God and receive the Body of Christ in communion. My prayer life is not where I want it to be, but I am a work in progress!”
“Scriptural readings and the homily always contain words of wisdom to guide me through my day and influence my personal decisions.”

- Along the lines of authority in the Church, the ones who spoke up on issues concerning Pope Francis were critical of his handling of the Office of the Papacy. A few respondents expressed concern that the Holy Father was leading the Church in the wrong direction, focusing more on climate change and immigration than church doctrine. Others stated that they appreciate that he is helping to usher in some much-needed changes in the Church. A few respondents expressed disappointment that the Holy Father is not making enough changes right now. On the diocesan level, many people said that they trust that things are being handled well, although they expressed ignorance about the process of decision-making. Some would like to see the laity asked to share in the decisions that are made on all levels.

Over the last couple of years, Bishop Bill met with each of the priests and spoke to them about their health, prayer life, experiences as a priest, and thoughts on where we are as a local church and where the Holy Spirit might be leading us. He found that the priests are generally very happy in their vocation and ministry. The pandemic has brought about many challenges and hardships, but even in the midst of that, our priests continued to serve with great love and devotion. Many of the priests expressed the need for more fraternity among the brothers. That is, there is a desire to support one another more through frequent gatherings, retreats and convocations, and in some cases living in a community-type setting. Although they are completely dedicated to the parish, many feel isolated from their brothers. They would also like more assistance with the administrative tasks of the parish. This was a frequent topic: a majority shared that they would much rather focus on celebrating the liturgy and preaching than on the administrative needs of the parish. Some also expressed a desire for more shared decision-making at the diocesan level. In addition, many of the younger priests spoke of the need for more education and formation, especially regarding administration. Perhaps we could better prepare a priest to move from being a parochial vicar to a pastor? Some would also welcome continuing education regarding theology, spirituality and preaching.

(Personally, Bishop Bill offered what has been on his mind lately: Concern about the (smaller) number of priests to serve in the diocese. How to best support the priests? Where to focus the bulk of his time (i.e., in administration? Doing email? In the parishes and schools?)? How to receive feedback from parishioners and the wider community. And just as the priests sometimes feel isolated, Bishop Bill expressed his desire for more fraternal gatherings with the bishops and priests, as well as healthy friendship to keep him grounded and accountable.)