

**Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church, Harrisonburg, Va.**  
**Synod Submission to the Diocese of Richmond**  
**Submitted March 28, 2022**

Total Consultations: 46 (30 English, 16 Spanish)

Total Unique Participants: 207 (130 English, 77 Spanish)

The responses below summarize key points of feedback from the parish synodal listening sessions, which occurred in February and March. Both the English-speaking and Spanish-speaking community responses are represented below. Each section was limited to 500 words.

**Theme One - Communion**

- Communion represents an emotional relationship, a strong connection to Jesus.
- We need to stress understanding of the real presence of the Eucharist as fundamental to our faith.
- Emphasize the consecration within the liturgy, don't rush it or make it nonchalant. The celebration of the mass should not have time restrictions.
- True communion with the Church involves mission outside of mass.
- Must foster relationships (fellowship) – families, small groups, friendships – personal connections are key to the life of the Church, while also blending in large social events.
- There is a “checking the box” mentality among many Catholics.
- How do we infuse energy into the Catholic Church while not compromising traditional fundamentals of Roman Catholic faith?
- Homily should better get at the root of our faith by not shying away from uncomfortable topics. Teach the doctrine and match the homily more often to the readings for that week.
- Emphasize welcoming new members and registration. How can all feel welcome without feeling isolated, especially when they cannot receive sacraments. Catholicism is a rigid faith by its nature, but that can make it uncomfortable for non-Catholics to attend or to consider pursuing.
- Our parish is extremely diverse with significant English- and Spanish-speaking representation along with several other ethnic groups. There is also significant diversity of age with all population groups represented.
- English and Spanish communities feel like two different parishes, rather than sub-groups within one cohesive parish. Meanwhile, other minority groups outside of English and Spanish are hardly considered.
- Best blending of English and Spanish communities occurs in religious education; however, classes are only offered in English, not Spanish.
- Challenges with communication, literacy, transportation and distractions during mass inhibit true communion.
- Some feel that families are over-emphasized when planning activities, leaving singles/divorcees/widows on the margins.
- More participatory opportunities for youth would keep them more engaged, such as youth choir and ministry involvement.

- Women do a majority of the work of the parish but are often overlooked in being heard.
- Music is integral to the worship experience, good music contributes and bad music detracts. When music is emphasized, it makes a significant difference. Beyond music, beauty in all things enriches the liturgy.
- Important to mix silence into the liturgy, such as after communion or preparation of the gifts and not feel the need to fill every moment with music. God speaks in silence.
- Sometimes a loud minority can drown out a silent majority.
- There was an appreciation for special celebrations, both in emphasizing critical feast/holy days (Christmas/Easter) and adding new celebrations for particular solemnities (such as the year of Saint Joseph solemnity).
- Enjoy that our parish has had many young priests and visiting seminarians. It is encouraging to see young men taking vocations.
- Physical space limitations at our parish make it difficult to feel truly in communion with one another.
- The church has limited, reasonable efforts to accommodate various disabilities.
- Building a sense of communion would improve with more resources dedicated to communication, adult faith formation, evangelization and marriage prep.

### **Theme Two – Discussion & Dialogue**

- Embrace technology for communication & dedicate resources to communication efforts. Overall, there seems to be limited communication strategy in our parish. There is no communication or advertising within our community (to non-Catholic or fallen-away groups).
- Must better promote resources and use technology for evangelization, advertising access to Formed, pamphlets, helpful web resources, podcasts, social media accounts, etc.
- Social media both powerful and dangerous. Oversaturation of digital communication and tone of interaction can lead to difficulty in identifying reputable sources.
- As technology increases, must still emphasize personal connection.
- How are we sharing positive stories about the life of the church? People need to hear the good that is happening. Parish communication seems solely oriented toward sharing upcoming events.
- We must not align with the ideals of the secular world (we are a people set apart).
- There is much about today's secular world that does not mesh with being Catholic. And how does Catholicism fit into today's short attention span society?
- The current national political climate is divisive and confrontational, which can carry over to how we approach our faith.
- The Catholic Church is not a democracy. Many fail to realize that doctrine is non-negotiable and run when a teaching doesn't align with their desires.
- Church community is diverse – both in demographics and in their desired experience of the Catholic faith. The blend of conservative and liberal Catholics in our parish makes community cohesion challenging.
- Crossing demographic lines can be difficult, particularly generational and ethnic (English/Spanish).

- Can't reach those on margins or outside the faith if Catholic adults are not properly catechized.
- Social outreach is done well and serves a large variety of groups.
- How do we share/portray the joy of Catholicism and in being Catholic to the outside world?
- Prayer groups or small groups can be hard to find and/or hard to join.
- Need youth fully engaged in faith and the life of the Church.
- Need men to attend and be active in faith. Studies show a direct correlation between men attending and families attending together with children staying Catholic.
- How to better infuse campus ministries within the life of the local parish.
- No awareness of ecumenical efforts.
- We need to teach "basics" of our faith and the mass both to non-Catholics and to those not properly catechized or who have forgotten. Many parents play no part in teaching their children.
- We forget that we have more in common than different with other Christian denominations. Find opportunities to learn from each other about our respective faiths.
- Some feel shame and then isolated, with no option to remain in the Catholic Church (i.e. divorced, LGBTQ, etc.). They feel humiliated to stay in pew during communion.
- Many respondents perceive that when conflict arises it is not resolved or addressed in the parish. One notable example has led many families to leave the parish in favor of campus ministry or to become disengaged with the parish.

### **Theme Three – Mission & Participation**

- Large percentage of Catholics are not equipped for conversations to defend or share their faith, so there is a need for adult catechesis. Many stop after confirmation, thus many "cradle" Catholics are lacking deeper understanding. In turn, they don't feel equipped to catechize youth and often break away from church. We must help foster a desire for adults to seek continuing formation.
- Many Catholics do not understand the bible and the depth of our faith to be found within scripture.
- Engaging our youth/teens – both social and service activities would attract them to feel part of the church community.
- Families only attending mass when there's RE and/or sending children to RE but not attending mass.
- Promote opportunities for social ministry and share the positive stories of social outreach.
- Evangelization needs to be promoted at the parish level. Multiple programs have failed at our parish.
- RCIA is very well done at our parish.
- How to be proud of being Catholic and be public about our faith? Many Catholics can be private or introverted by nature, keeping faith to themselves. Being Catholic in our community can also be hard as a minority faith, and many are ashamed to admit their Catholic faith due to scandals or fear of negative perception.
- No option for Catholic K-12 education in our area (closest is one hour away).

- Difficult in current secular culture to live counter-culturally according to principles of faith.
- Need to understand that “We” are the church, the body of Christ. The Church is not the buildings or the priests/bishops/leaders. The work of the Church can’t all depend upon the priest/s. But many laypersons don’t know the needs of the parish or how to find out.
- A small percentage of laity carry out the majority of the mission work of the church (internal and external), which leads to volunteer burnout.
- The same can be said of a small percentage accounting for most of the parish financial support.
- What else can we do to encourage vocations and active discernment? Our priests are overwhelmed by the combination of sacraments and administration of the parish. It is increasingly difficult to keep up with both without a significant increase in vocations.
- Are there changes that could empower laity into leadership roles and the administrative function of the parish without compromising the authority of the pastor? And how do we develop those lay leaders?
- While there is a general understanding of the authority of the pastor, there is also disappointment there is not more opportunity for laity to influence decisions for the parish.
- The few lay leaders that do exist are often not known or introduced to parishioners.
- Many feel the “life” of our parish is found in those who have attended Cursillo or Kerygma and wonder if those could be embraced more.
- The parish needs better efforts to welcome new parishioners or visitors on an on-going basis.
- The Catholic Church is losing the battle with competing “gods” (phones, technology, sports, recreation, work or even indifference).

### **Fundamental Question**

How is our parish journeying together?

- Kerygma & Cursillo communities are engaged and vibrant with successful small-group structures.
- Social ministries provide for the community and share our collective resources.
- Liturgical ministries are very active with many parishioners engaged.
- Sacramentally strong with focus on the Eucharist as the source and summit of our faith.
- Religious Education and RCIA.

What steps would help our parish journey together?

- Significant increased emphasis on adult faith formation.
- Improve communication to advertise events, increase reach and share positive stories about the life of the Church.
- As Catholics, we must embrace evangelization as central to our faith.
- More concerted efforts to welcome newcomers and those marginalized, overlooked and outcast.

- Cultivating lay leadership.

### **Final Thoughts**

- There was a genuine appreciation of the synod process itself and the opportunity for the laity to actively participate in something for the good of the Church. Many expressed a desire for more opportunities for such feedback.
- It's going to take real work and concerted effort to dig out of COVID, people who became comfortable with a dispensation and the convenience of virtual worship. The Eucharist is central to our mission!
- COVID also brought ministries to a halt. It is difficult to get activities back in motion.
- Across all three topics, adult faith formation was a real area of need. Many worry about youth leaving the faith, but it's clear that adults are not properly catechized. This is dangerous to the fundamental need for effective domestic churches.
- We need to foster joy and pride in being Catholic while also allowing our Catholic beliefs to permeate all aspects of our lives outside the walls of our parish.
- Building community and relationships is central to a vibrant parish. There is much work to do in this area.
- We are worried for the health of our priests (mental health in particular). So much is asked of them and they are spread thin. We have had many terrific young priests and seminarians at our parish and several have had challenges.
- We need to more actively push for vocations across our diocese. We need more priests and more bilingual priests. Our priests are extremely willing to shepherd their parishioners, but time does not allow participation in the life of the parish at things like religious education or social events.