

## Synod Report – Diocese of San Angelo, Texas

The reality of our diocese is that it is very large geographically at 37,433 square miles with a Catholic population of 119,935 (12%). There are 4 mid-size cities, and the rest consists of small towns and rural areas. The population is diverse with a significant number of immigrants (Latino, Asian, African).

The Synod listening sessions were held in diverse settings for the comfort of the participants. There were 37 organized listening sessions, as well as individual input received. Eight general parish gatherings were held, including two on Zoom. One Catholic grade school, two campus ministry gatherings, two young adult gatherings, and two high school youth gatherings were held. Two LGBTQ+ gatherings and three gatherings of Coordinators of Religious Education, Youth Ministers, and Directors of Religious Education took place. Organizations that met were Cursillo, Charismatic Renewal, Guadalupanas, formerly incarcerated, and a local Ministerial Alliance. Other sessions focused on Diocesan priests, Religious Priests, Women Religious, Deacons and their wives, seminarians, and diocesan staff.

The theme that was most commonly expressed in the listening sessions related to concerns with clergy. It was mentioned numerous times that the people are suffering from a lack of leadership, direction, and affirmation from the clergy. Times for daily Mass and the Sacrament of Reconciliation do not take into account the availability of the person who works average hours, Monday thru Friday, 8:00am-5:00pm. Sunday Mass times are changed without consulting the people of the community and their needs. Priests do not appear to be willing to make themselves available to visit people in the hospital and anoint the sick. There are some clergy who need to work on communication skills, especially in terms of returning phone calls and keeping set appointments. There is a prevalent perception that clerics are territorial and competitive, rather than working collaboratively with each other for the better of the community. Along the same lines, the bishop and the priests need to be more united in how they approach ministry and implement programs. It would be helpful if the clerics had more formation in leadership skills and how to relate to a variety of people. People want to be known by name, have their gifts recognized, and be invited to use those gifts in the Church. Clericalism has led to a disconnect with the laity and the realities they are facing. There is a need to know the community being served and to base ministry to that community on their needs.

Another theme that was prevalent was the need for true hospitality at all levels. People want to feel genuinely welcomed. In order to help others feel a sense of welcome and belonging, those in ministry need to have a better understanding of their role in welcoming others. Ushers need to have an attitude of hospitality, understanding that being an usher is about more than simply seating people. Staff members need to understand their role is like that of customer service. They need training in how to be courteous, hospitable, and respectful. They need to understand the need for professionalism, which includes making sure information they give is correct and complete, especially regarding sacraments and other pastoral issues. A high turnover of staff members and lead volunteers leads to inconsistency, which further alienates people. We need to promote formation for those in ministry—both paid and volunteer. This includes those who lead music. Music at Mass should be planned and executed by musicians trained in liturgy with the needs of the parish kept in mind.

Included in the need to feel welcomed is a need for community, to belong to something bigger than oneself. It was expressed many times that there is a need for events and ministries that will build community: gatherings after Mass, potluck dinners, retreats, and parish missions were a few possibilities named.

In addition to formation for those involved in ministry is the need for faith formation for adults at the parish level. Again, in many of the listening sessions held, it was shared that adults want to know their faith. They want to understand Scripture, cultivate a relationship with Jesus, and understand the “Why?”

behind the Catholic faith and traditions. There is a desire to live their faith in a more authentic way and not just follow rules.

It was also discussed that the failure for many to know their faith leads to misunderstanding. Issues like justice, compassion, mercy, love, inclusiveness, and outreach to the poor are seen as political issues instead of being understood as Scriptural. Because of this disconnect, there is often pushback on Church teachings in favor of political ideals.

More adult faith formation at the parish level would help with another theme that was prevalent, that being the need to focus more on the domestic church and the role of parents in passing on the faith. By helping adults understand their faith, they will be better equipped to share that faith with their children, grandchildren, godchildren, nieces and nephews, and many others in their lives, further strengthening the domestic church.

Another issue that was mentioned in several listening sessions was racism. There is an obvious divisiveness in the communities between the English speaking and Spanish speaking, especially when it comes to Mass. There is a lack of unity and community among the two groups, thus the reality in many places is that there are two parishes existing in one building. There is a need to bridge this divide and help unify the two groups while still respecting their differing needs.

Many shared about the tension between the Church and society. Not just in terms of morality, but even in areas of scheduling. Sports teams and other extra-curricular activities seem to have practice or games seven days a week, and there is no longer a widely accepted “Church night” in the community. This causes parents and children to have to choose between Church and other activities many times, rather than being able to be active in both.

There is also a tension between the family that the Church envisions and the realities of many families. The reality that a family with two parents at home is not as common. Many times, children miss faith formation classes because they are splitting time between divorced parents, or because a single parent is working multiple jobs and is not always available to take their child to class. Yet, the attendance policies and sacramental preparation requirements of many parishes do not take into consideration the realities many families are facing. Ultimately, the children are suffering, yet they cannot control their circumstances.

It was shared how many Catholics today do not have knowledge of Vatican II documents and the history of the council. Many older people remember how Vatican II breathed new life into their communities. They shared how younger priests who did not live during that time have glorified pre-Vatican II and want to return to those practices. This has led to much misunderstanding, confusion, and division in the Church, especially in the United States.

Another area addressed was people with disabilities. One family spoke of feeling unwelcomed at Mass, even when they would go to the cry room, because their child would make noises. Families with members with disabilities want to be included in the parish, but often feel rejected. Many parishes do not offer formation or sacramental preparation for special needs children.

Parish Councils were also a topic of many discussions. They are often seen as ineffective and exclusive. At times, this is due to a lack of transparency and communication from the council. Other times, it is because those on the council are appointed by the clergy rather than voted on by the parishioners, so it is seen as a clique. Either way, it was voiced that it is difficult to be invited to discuss issues, share concerns, or help offer solutions if one is not on the council.

Lack of transparency and communication was one of the topics that was mentioned at every listening session held. Communication and transparency need to be evaluated and improved on every level and in every direction. The lack of transparency and communication has bred distrust, doubt, disbelief, and cynicism among many of the faithful.

When meeting with the youth and young adults, they expressed that faith should be a way of life. While they value traditions, prayer, and Mass, they also recognize that faith is not static, but evolves. The lack of change and lack of openness to change is apparent when their new viewpoints or ideas are met with the response of “We have always done it this way.” They respect the history yet recognize that what has been done in the past is no longer bearing fruit in many ways.

They recognize that while they are told they are a priority, that is not reflected financially. There is a lack of funds for youth and young adult ministries, and often they are tasked with fundraising. They shared that there needs to be more talk about stewardship.

Both youth and young adults shared that worship should be joyous and festive, not somber. They want homilies that address issues they are dealing with in their daily lives and how Scripture relates to those issues. They do not want to jump through hoops when preparing for Sacraments; they expressed that we must stop making God’s grace a conditional thing.

As with the older adults, they want to understand their faith and the “Why?” behind it, rather than just being fed facts. They want faith formation that addresses the hard issues that are relevant to their lives—birth control, same-sex attraction, suicide, mental illness, and divorce to name a few. They do not understand why catechists and other leaders do not want to discuss these issues or explain the reasoning behind what the Church teaches.

One single young adult male expressed that even though he is actively involved in ministry, he still feels alienated because he is not married with children. He feels that one is expected to be married to be accepted. He sees other faith traditions more open to single young adults, where they are given more leadership opportunities.

When meeting with students involved with our campus ministries, they shared that, while they have community and the sacraments are available to them, they see division, selfishness, and a shifting away from service to the community. They are interested in hearing from a variety of Catholic speakers and having more retreats available to them. They, like others, mentioned the need for better communication, stating that they would like to know what the goals of the diocese are and what is being achieved. They reiterated the need for transparency that we heard from others. They also shared the desire for those who are personnel of the Church, and those leading ministries such as RCIA, need proper training and skills. They have a great desire for mentorship to help them transition from high school and college life to adulthood. They also affirmed the need for more faith formation opportunities and for the Church to deal with real-life issues.

When meeting with members of the LGBTQ+ community, they expressed their hurt at being made to feel like they are not accepted or welcomed in the Church. Some members shared that while they are not out publicly, they are active in their parish and still feel uncomfortable. Members of the LGTBQ+ community feel alienated because others in the Church exclude them, tell them they are going to hell, and use language that is toxic or not inclusive. They have a true love of Church and a sincere desire to serve, but they are forced to either keep their sexuality a secret or face exclusion and condemnation. They want the Church to minister to them in a relational way rather than focus on rules, similar to how Christ ministered to others. They did share that the listening sessions gave them a sense of belonging and were grateful they were included.

The group of formerly incarcerated persons were very grateful to be included in the synodal process and have their voices heard. Those that participated shared that they had been involved with the Church when they were younger, before falling in with the wrong crowd. They shared how, when coming back to the Church after their incarceration, they were ostracized. They felt like they could not come back to the Church because they weren't accepted. They discussed what their needs are and how the Church could help. One need is more Catholic chaplains in the prisons, both lay and clergy. They want to be evangelized. They would benefit from the Church helping them to develop life skills upon their release, including how to apply for and interview for a job, among others.

In the listening sessions with the priests, they shared about their isolation and loneliness. There is a need for fraternity, yet many do not know how to build this with each other. They shared that while the seminary provides theological formation, it does not prepare them for the reality of day-to-day life in a parish. They feel a need for more formation in leadership skills and classes in aspects in administration. They also acknowledged the racism that is present in the Church and the frustration people do not want to change. They see that social media and busy schedules hinder a community mindset. They see that people in general have forgotten the need to care for their neighbors, and the recognition that all are our neighbors. The priests find that the ecclesial identity is lacking. People do not understand what it means to be Catholic and live that out in their daily lives. It was also expressed that there needs to be unity between Pope Francis and clergy at the local level; the mixed messages add to the sense of division in the Church.

In listening to what the seminarians shared, they voiced their appreciation the support they receive from the community. When they return to their parishes during breaks, the ability to be involved and seeing the many opportunities to serve gives them joy. They shared their frustrations and disappointments that many priests are still using COVID as an excuse not to offer the sacraments, especially reconciliation. There is dissatisfaction with the fact that many Church buildings are locked throughout the day, except for Mass times. They also affirmed the lack of communication at all levels. Included in this is the lack of uniformity in what is needed to receive the sacraments at different parishes within the same diocese, as well as the fact that how to begin the process for some sacraments is not clear or too complicated. They reiterated what we heard from other groups in that faith formation is lacking and more opportunities are needed, especially for adults.

The seminarians shared that “cookie cutter” programs often do not work. We need to listen to the faithful and learn of their needs and struggles and adapt ministries accordingly. They understand that faith formation must be more than just learning facts, it needs to be well-rounded and help people learn how to share their faith with others from a place of experience.

The seminarians communicated the need for parishes to keep their websites and social media updated so that people have correct information. They shared that keeping pastors in a single parish too long often leads to complacency. They would like to see more youth events and for the young adult community to be fostered.

The women religious discussed how they see a sense of unity and involvement among the laity. They recognize a strong spirit in the community. They recognize a need to accompany young people, especially those preparing to celebrate sacraments.

There was a listening session with a group of people who have left the Catholic Church. They expressed that one of their main reasons for leaving was the lack of formation, especially in terms of not understanding the Mass and not knowing Scripture. There was not enough of an emphasis on developing a relationship with Christ. Rather, it was about knowing the rules and facts. They did not see unity within the community, and they felt people were too judgmental. Other reasons that contributed to their

departure included poor liturgies and poor homilies. They did recognize that the traditions and the structure of the Church are positives.

Some listening sessions were held with those in the faith communities who primarily speak Spanish. They were very positive about the opportunities offered to gather at the parish, including retreats, prayer groups, and celebrations. They mentioned how the Eucharistic Liturgy was enhanced when the use of the vernacular happened. They feel that Vatican II brought life to the young people.

The Spanish speaking community shared that some of the difficulties they have include racism, division, lack of clergy involvement in the community, and jealousy among groups.

They have a desire to strengthen the domestic church, as well as to see stronger leadership from the pastor. They shared that it would be helpful if the pastor were fluent in Spanish, rather than just reading the Mass in Spanish.

One group of Spanish speakers shared that they were very happy that the parish they are involved in is family friendly, but they mentioned there is nothing offered for single parents or for parents of disabled or special needs children.

Another group shared that they were grateful they could serve in the parish as lectors and altar servers and that they can participate in devotions as a family. There is a flexibility in ministry and an open-door policy that makes them feel they belong and are comfortable. They feel this shows that Christ is in the center of the community.

There is a need for better faith formation resources in Spanish. This includes resources that help educate the communities about social issues. Many echoed the needs heard in other listening sessions, including the need for better communication, more authenticity, a greater sense of unity, more inclusiveness, and greater compassion.

One difficulty mentioned was the lack of involvement in a building project that resulted in the demolition of the food pantry building. That ministry no longer exists. They feel there needs to be more organization in the use of space and buildings. Afterall, the buildings belong to all in the parish, yet there is sometimes conflict with sharing space.

When meeting with members of the diocesan staff, they shared about their experience with the Church in general, as well as working for the diocese. Like other groups, they found joy in community and gatherings that contributed to the feeling of community. They appreciate when a person's gifts are recognized. It was shared that they appreciated that their jobs often helped them to learn to relate to others in a variety of ways. Some shared how working for the diocese helped them to see a positive and professional side of the Church they had not encountered before.

Some of the difficulties mentioned echoed what was heard from other groups. The staff shared there is a need for more responsible leadership and a need for follow through from the current leadership. They see a division among departments. Departments need to adopt a spirit of collaboration and unity rather than each department being a silo among themselves.

Another point that was heard shared by the staff that confirmed what other groups said was the need for improved community, both vertically and horizontally. The staff shared the need for there to be a clear mission of the pastoral center and more direction in carrying out a shared mission.

In listening to other faith traditions, they shared that COVID affected all churches, regardless of denomination or affiliation. Not being able to gather weakened the Ministerial Alliance. There is a weakness in the lack of collaboration among the different churches. Faith communities don't trust one another. It was shared that a big issue in San Angelo is homelessness. The Ministerial Alliance could unite and work together to form an organization like what is seen in San Antonio to help end homelessness, but we have to work together. We must stop focusing on our differences and rather focus on our common goals.

In summation, people find joy in their experiences with the Church when they gather to build community and when they feel welcomed and a sense of belonging. They appreciate the richness of the traditions, devotions, and prayers. They want to contribute to the community, to have their gifts recognized and used in productive ways.

The three needs that were most prevalent throughout all the listening sessions were the need for strong, united leadership, more formation opportunities, especially at the parish level, and the need for opportunities to foster community. They are frustrated by the prevailing clericalism, the lack of communication and transparency, and the growing division they see in the Church.

We are challenged to identify, invite, and educate potential leaders to help strengthen parish life. We need to cultivate a lifestyle of welcome among all members of the Church. Rather than always expecting others to change, we each need to be willing to change ourselves. God is a God of unconditional love, and we must stop making his love a conditional thing.